

**The Value Of Autonomy:
Christianity, Organisation And Performance
In An Aboriginal Community**

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Ph.D., that the contributions of others are duly acknowledged in the text, and that this thesis is less than 100 000 words in length, excluding Maps, Diagrams, Pictures and Tables.

Rosemary S. O'Donnell

March, 2007

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ABSTRACT

This study traces a particular instance in the evolution of Indigenous organisation at Ngukurr, as it developed from mission to town. It is framed in terms of a contrast between centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation, as characteristic modes associated with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. It is also framed in terms of a contrast between orders of value indicative of centralised hierarchies and laterally extended forms of organisation. Central to this account is the way in which evolving social orders provide different foci for the realisation of authority and autonomy in people's lives at Ngukurr.

I trace the ways in which missionaries and government agents have repeatedly presented autonomy to Aboriginal people at Ngukurr as a form of self-sufficiency, both in the course of colonial and post-colonial regimes in Australia. I also trace a failure in Aboriginal affairs policies to recognise forms of sociality and organisation that do not operate to locate the autonomous subject in a hierarchy of relations, premised on the capacity of individuals for economic independence.

I also address Aboriginal responses to non-Indigenous interventions at Ngukurr, which have largely differed from missionary and policy aims. I show how Aboriginal evangelism emerged as a response to assimilation initiatives, which affirmed an evolving Indigenous system of differentiation and prestige. I also show how this system has been transformed through dynamics of factionalism associated with the control of resource niches, which has been playing out since the 1970s at Ngukurr. By illustrating how centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation engage each other over time, this study reveals the highly ambiguous values now attending varied realisations of autonomy and expressions of authority in the contemporary situation. There is then a pervasive tension in social relations at Ngukurr, as the dynamism of laterally extended and labile groups continually circumvents the linear pull of centralised hierarchies.

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ACRONYMS

| | |
|---------|---|
| AACM | Australian Agricultural Consulting and Management Company |
| ABS | Australian Bureau of Statistics |
| ACF | Aboriginal Capital Fund |
| AIATSIS | Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies |
| AIAS | Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now AIATSIS) |
| ATO | Australian Taxation Office |
| ATSIC | Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission |
| BRACS | Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme |
| CDEP | Community Development Employment Project |
| CEC | Community Education Centre |
| CMA | Church Missionary Association |
| CMS | Church Missionary Society |
| DAA | Department of Aboriginal Affairs |
| DEWR | Department of Employment and Workplace Relations |
| FCAATSI | Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders |
| HREOC | Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission |
| ICCPR | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights |
| ICESCR | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights |
| ICGP | Indigenous Community Governance Project |
| ISCCI | Institute of Social Change and Critical Inquiry |

NLC..... Northern Land Council
NTA..... Ngukurr Township Association
SEALCPSouth East Arnhem Land Collaborative Research Project
SILSummer Institute of Linguistics
UAICCUniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress
YCC.....Yugul Cattle Company
YMCGC..... Yugul Mangi Community Government Council
YMCGS..... Yugul Mangi Community Government Scheme
YMRC Yugul Mangi Resource Centre

INTRODUCTION

When I arrived at Ngukurr in 1999,¹ I had in mind a different study to the one presented here. I had aimed to analyse a women's domain and the impact on community life of the settlement's history as a mission station. Soon it became apparent, however, that 'community' was something of an elusive focus in the context of Ngukurr life. What I found was a range of competing social projects reflecting various forms of value pursued by people, male or female, Indigenous or non-Indigenous, that were not always compatible to each other. At Ngukurr I found a sociality that was often contested and always negotiated in some degree.

In those first few months, I took a kind of 'vacuum cleaner' approach to fieldwork – visiting community facilities and families, camping out bush with the latter and attending any social gathering (ceremonies, funerals, sporting events and rock band performances) where my presence was welcomed. In addition, I became a regular participant at nightly Christian Fellowship. It was at these meetings that I gained some significant insights into current forms of social process at Ngukurr – and this changed the course of my research.

Being a nightly and public affair, Fellowship provided me with a regular forum for sustained engagement with Aboriginal people. It became thereby a considerable dimension of my fieldwork experience. As a town of 900 people, Ngukurr did not present many readily accessible routes into direct and sustained engagement either with individuals or groups. Finding how to interact with families and engage their lives was in fact a challenging task. Contemporary life seemed to me far more privatised than I had expected or been led to believe in my reading of more classical ethnography. Fenced yards and enclosed verandas were a symbol of this – even if houses were overcrowded and yards a locus of social life. I was in addition very taken by the fact that after years of initiatives in self-determination,

¹ I pursued my research as a doctoral student with the South East Arnhem Land Collaborative Research Project (SEALCP).

Christianity was still a vibrant force. Moreover, this was a force regarded as an integral part of Aboriginal tradition, part of Ngukurr's history. In fact, Fellowship had grown into the space assigned to it by Aboriginal people; a respected part of Ngukurr life kept separate from traditional rite. It therefore offered a forum in which participants could develop their own faith. It was also though an activity focused on public space that encouraged more sporadic involvement: individuals might show up on occasion to 'help' by singing a song-set, or request a healing at a time of 'trouble' in their lives. This variable participation over time also gave me insight into the ebb and flow of social relations. It was these dimensions of Fellowship that I found intriguing, resonating as they did with a general propensity among Aborigines at Ngukurr to realise sociality as relatedness through reciprocal interaction with others. Finally, I found it especially interesting that dynamics of an Indigenous sociality premised on nurturance ('helping') and reciprocity, and very evident at Fellowship (but also in local basketball competitions and in the mentoring of rock bands), were entirely lacking at the church. Nightly Fellowship and the formal church liturgy enacted on Sundays seemed to present quite different forms of value in Ngukurr social life. A focus on Christianity then proved useful to my research.

This focus allowed me to consider the nature and significance of an Indigenous sociality sustained in numerous domains of life. Even in this company though, Fellowship was particular. I found it noteworthy that people chose to invest a good deal of their time engaged with others in activities that involved singing, dancing, displays of prowess and reciprocal exchange. The vigorous exuberance of these activities marked them as favoured ones. It was equally obvious that these dynamics of association did not articulate well with an organisational inclination to centralisation and hierarchy, evident both in the church and secular administration. I refer here briefly to the fact that centralised organisations, which maintain continuity through impersonal statuses (the hallmark of bureaucracy), also render irrelevant forms of sociality premised on nurturance and exchange. This in turn promotes concomitant forms of authority, autonomy and prestige that do not sit easily with the reciprocity of nightly Fellowship. Two socialities, ostensibly off-stage at nightly Fellowship and on-stage in the church's formal organisation, seemed to mark

Aboriginal life. There was, therefore, a pervasive tension in Ngukurr social relations, with families contesting control by others and, more generally, practices that impeded the reproduction of an egalitarian autonomy. In this regard Aboriginal people did and do continually struggle to sustain a ‘wei’, a distinctive sociality, in the face of the church and other administrative orders.²

This thesis is concerned then with issues of social organisation and forms of value at Ngukurr that pertain respectively to an Indigenous sociality and to European social forms brought by missionaries and government agents. Within this subject area the study has three aims.

The first is to trace the transition from mission to church at Ngukurr as an instance of the evolution of Indigenous organisation. In doing so I address a gap in the anthropological literature on governance, which largely ignores mission and church as forms of organisation that can be instructive in researching intercultural engagements. Though Martin (2003, 2005), Dodson and Smith (2003) and Finlayson (1998), among others, have written at length on problems of governance in Indigenous communities, generally they have not addressed the subject historically.³ This literature provides a relatively limited sense of how issues concerning organisations and governance structures have evolved in remote Indigenous settlements. Hence they do not take account of the ways in which patterns of leadership have been transformed or the implications that such change has for reforming Aboriginal organisations. My first aim then is to take ‘the mission’ seriously as an organisation and trace its various transitions involving Aboriginal people from settlement through to the current period of secular self-determination.

A second aim of the study is to compare and contrast some forms of organisation that have been characteristic of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians at Ngukurr. The type of contrast I have in mind here is one that Rumsey (2001) makes between centralised hierarchical regimes and rhizomatic organisation.

² The orthography used here was developed by Sandefur (1984) – Summer Institute of Linguistics.

³ Rowse (1998) possibly is the closest to an historical study of organisation.

He derives this contrast from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987). Hierarchical regimes are centralised systems with a ranked or ‘boxed’ ordering of units that produces linear forms of both territorial organisation and social relations. An example might be the diocesan organisation of the Anglican Church and the Church Missionary Society (CMS), or the system of regional and town-based offices through which the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) organised CDEP while I was at Ngukurr. Both these hierarchical forms place a value on administrative efficiency. By contrast, rhizomic forms of organisation involve a multiplicity of roughly equal and linked groups, which I describe as a ‘lateral’ or ‘laterally extended’ arrangement. Lacking a centre, rhizomic organisation rests on a multiplicity of agents and locales of equal rank; a relatively egalitarian autonomy among numerous inter-linked groups that allows for various forms of engagement within any one performative space. This type of organisation, that is always extendable, was spatialised in traditional Indigenous life. It is also enacted by families participating in Fellowship. Rhizomic organisation tends to refuse hierarchical order and transcends the demand for bounded administrative wholes.

In addition, I have in mind a contrast between orders of value that revolve around two different notions of ‘autonomy’. The corporate forms employed by church and local governance justify centralisation and hierarchy in order to encourage individuals towards economic self-sufficiency and its responsibilities. This self-sufficiency comes through individuals’ roles in viable organisations – be they a church, small enterprises or local government groups. Non-Indigenous Australians see these types of participation as a route to ‘individual autonomy’ and as a powerful means of directing collective action to social, political and economic ends. However, Aboriginal people at Ngukurr strive for an autonomy that comes through relatedness and entails the management of diverse forms of exchange. In this mode of sociality, described by Myers (1991), even authority and power are rendered as ‘helping’ so that hierarchy, taken for granted in church and state, is camouflaged or denied. Moreover, Indigenous groups expect reciprocation for service, augmenting and surpassing individual capacities through widening networks of support that have the potential to bring a multiplicity of value (see Austin-Broos 2003a:124; see also

Redmond 2006:99). One form of autonomy requires an individuation that comes through the overt initial subordination to organisation. The other, which also has hierarchical dimensions, nonetheless fosters indirection and the expectation that anyone is a shifting node of multiple and equally important relations.

In the course of this thesis, I provide both contemporary and historical accounts of this tension in forms of social organisation and value at Ngukurr. My study then is a hybrid form. It integrates ethnography and forms of documentary research in order to focus on the particular tenor of social relations both among Ngukurr residents and between Aboriginal people and an encapsulating society.

Consistent with this, the study's third aim is to consider these tensions at Ngukurr against the backdrop of changing government policy towards Indigenous Australians. I note three types of policy approach characteristic of (i) the colonial mission, (ii) the assimilation period, and (iii) more recent attempts at self-determination.

In the first two periods Aboriginal people were characterised mainly in terms of lack and pathologised. Europeans were unable to recognise an Indigenous sociality realised through spatiality and service exchange. Hence it was assumed first that, as 'nomads,' Aboriginal people could not adapt to a 'civilised' world. Later, it was presumed that re-organisation was required to assist Aboriginal people with sedentarism in view of the manner in which fringe-dwelling life had allegedly corrupted them. I provide evidence that in the course of these periods, Aboriginal people at Ngukurr operated on a model of reciprocal service. They co-operated 'on the working side' with missionaries hoping, or else expecting, that their own forms of autonomy and interdependence would be recognised. In this, they would be disappointed.

The third contemporary period has been framed by policies of self-determination. The assumption in this period has been that centralised and hierarchical forms of management are the only ways to run a town – or a Christian organisation – and achieve a 'community' form of autonomy. In this regard a long

history of seeing only lack has had an impact on ‘self-determination.’ I refer here to the way in which failures in local governance in Aboriginal communities, for example, are frequently interpreted as indicative of an Aboriginal incapacity to utilise the tools that have been presented to them to achieve self-determination. An irony of this policy era then, whether in local government or the church, is the lack of reflection on the history of Indigenous organisation as manifest in settlements. The implications of this form of study are profound if, as I contend, the organising logic of centralised administration does not reflect the orientations of the majority Aboriginal population at Ngukurr.

In this thesis, I use ethnography to frame my documentary research. Chapters 3 to 5 provide a document-based account of Ngukurr in three periods of colonial mission life, assimilation and self-determination. In Chapter 2, however, I introduce Ngukurr and the issues of organisation that inform this thesis. I sketch some characteristic forms of tension in social life, and the way in which Aboriginal people tend to rebuff non-Indigenous hierarchy. I trace these issues from the mission’s early days up to the initial years of self-determination. In Chapter 5, on self-determination, I re-introduce contemporary ethnography and re-state the issues concerning social organisation. Then in Chapters 6 and 7 I pursue these themes through a detailed account of contemporary Fellowship and the church; a case study if you will of some more general themes in social organisation.

In tracing this instance of organisational tension, as Ngukurr developed from mission to town, I demonstrate the ways in which resource struggles and centralised administrations, including the church, operate to transform the social field. I propose moreover that both produce characteristic dynamics leading to the control of resource niches and deflections of hierarchy among Aboriginal people. Within the very structures of administrative hierarchy, Indigenous dynamics tend to reproduce laterally extended forms of organisation. In short, a number of relatively equal family groups have controlled over time a range of resource niches at Ngukurr.

I begin my account with a discussion of the literature that has been most helpful in the formulation of these themes.

CHAPTER 1:

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I discuss three types of literature that helped me frame this work. The first of these literatures pertains to the region of southeast Arnhem Land and its ethnohistory. Where the latter is concerned, there were many Australian works, and historical accounts from other ethnographic regions, I might have chosen. However, in focusing on the studies of Bern, Cowlshaw and Merlan I also seek to clarify the contribution that this study makes. The second literature I address pertains to relevant accounts of Christianity and Christian missions among Aboriginal Australians. Here I contrast a focus on the mission as disciplinary institution favoured by some historians and anthropologists, and a focus on issues of cosmology and ontology of the type that Magowan adopts. As my own interest lies in issues of social organisation and value, I found it useful to compare and contrast my approach with both of these. Finally, a third body of literature central to this study includes some notable accounts of Indigenous sociality both within and beyond forms of ritual practice. Here my central guides have been Myers, Rumsey and Keen although numerous other anthropologists have influenced my approach.

The Locality And Some Ethnohistories

Southeast Arnhem Land has sustained a long history of engagement with Europeans, beginning with the explorations of Leichhardt in 1844-5 along the Roper and Wilton Rivers in the Gulf country of the Northern Territory. Moreover Ngukurr, situated on the north-eastern bank of the Roper River, has one of the longest mission histories in Australia.¹ It was founded in 1908 by the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which is only predated (in the Northern Territory) by the Lutheran mission at

¹ Ngukurr is the name chosen by Aborigines for the settlement previously known as Roper River Mission.

Hermannsburg.² Though Arnhem Land has attracted the attentions of anthropologists, historians and linguists among others, there has not been a study of southeast Roper River that integrates ethnographic and documentary research.³ This study, with its focus on evolving forms of social organisation and values at Ngukurr, seeks to address this deficiency.

The way in which I approach the task of integrating ethnographic and documentary research is to begin with the understanding that quotidian practice is constituted in large part through a particular genre of historical experience. I am mindful here of a proposal made by Comaroff and Comaroff (1992:14, 22), that anthropology needs to attend to more than the ‘intention and action’ of individuals in ‘local systems’ in order to grasp the constitution of social forms and values. Historical anthropology seeks to address the interplay between internal forms and external conditions, illuminating the complex processes of local reproduction and its transformative engagements with wider social and political worlds (ibid. 22, 24).⁴

My study draws from a broad range of documentary sources throughout chapters 3 to 5 of this study, hence a few observations about the way in which I employ them are in order. Primary sources, specifically archival material generated

² Schwartz and Kempe found the Hermannsburg/Ntaria site in 1877 in Central Australia, but abandoned it in 1891. Strehlow arrived in 1894 and had established the mission as a viable enterprise by the early twentieth century (Austin-Broos 1996a:226).

³ Burbank’s work (1980, 1988, 1990), based on a remote Aboriginal community to the north of Ngukurr focuses mainly on female development, aggression and the biological and social bases of male dominance. Turner (1974) provides an account of tradition and transformation at Groote Eylandt lying to the east of Ngukurr. His account attempts to assess whether Aboriginal social organisation and religion had been transformed as a result of a missionary presence on Groote, but he does not address relationships between missionaries and Aboriginal people. Spencer (1913, 1914), Capell (1959, 1960), Elkin (1971) and Heath (1978, 1980, 1981) among others have contributed to the large body of anthropological and linguistic research on southeast Arnhem Land.

⁴ This does not assume that a capacity for transformation is alien to local systems. See for example Austin-Broos (2002), who addresses through an account of Western Arrernte history and contemporary features of life some of the ways in which settlement intervened in a pre-existing dynamic of diversification and consolidation.

by CMS and the Northern Territory's administration of Aboriginal people, are used where possible and relevant to the tasks of chapters 3 to 5.⁵ I note, however, that archival documentation concerning Roper River Mission is scant and insubstantial for the period 1901-1931. Those available at Northern Territory Archives Service (Darwin) and at National Archives of Australia (Darwin) begin in the early 1930s. This reflects the way in which administrative responsibility for the Northern Territory evolved, particularly the lack of Commonwealth involvement in Northern Territory affairs up to 1911.⁶ Other researchers have noted the difficulty of locating material about the early mission.⁷

I note, in addition, that I do not draw from CMS and government records pertaining to Ngukurr from 1970 onwards. This is due to the '30 year rule' in force at both National Archives of Australia and Northern Territory Archives Service, which denies public access to its 'current' records. It is necessary for this reason to supplement archival sources for both these periods in order to construct an ethno-

⁵ Citations for CMS and government archival material are given in footnotes throughout this thesis. Northern Territory Archives Service (Darwin), where CMS records are housed, has prefixed documents pertaining to all CMS missions in Arnhem Land and the Northern Territory with the code "NTRS" (Northern Territory Record Series) followed by a numeric box number. National Archives of Australia (Darwin) has prefixed government records pertaining to Roper River Mission with the code "CRS" (Commonwealth Record Series) followed by an alpha-numeric series number.

⁶ Government and CMS records pertaining to the Roper River region are widely dispersed, being held at Darwin, Canberra, Victoria and South Australia. This is due to the fact that the Northern Territory was under the administrative control of South Australia (1863-1911) and later the Commonwealth of Australia until it became self-governing in 1978. CMS records are also dispersed due to the fact that the Church Missionary Association of Victoria (formed in 1892) was responsible for Roper River Mission from its inception until 1937. After the Victorian and NSW branches reformed as the Church Missionary Society it subsequently bequeathed the bulk of its records pertaining to its missions in the Northern Territory to the Northern Territory Archives Service (Darwin).

⁷ Pers. comm. Dr Victoria Burbank; pers. comm. Dr Jennifer Munro. See also Harris 1990:736, 764 fn124 and 1998:226-7; See also NTRS 1102 Vol 2. 1955-73 *Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River*, Chaplaincy report February 1968:2, Rev Woodbridge states: 'the short history that Dr Cole is writing is most timely ... especially as there are VERY FEW records of the old days' – emphasis in original.

history about the form of life sustained at Roper River Mission and its evolution. But it is also necessary in my view to go beyond the recorded history of archival sources to retrieve typifications from both Aboriginal and Europeans accounts about black/white engagement, how it proceeded and how each viewed the other and themselves in the process. Hence I draw from Aboriginal narrative (oral and published), mission and pioneer histories, ethnographic reports produced for government and anthropological ethnographies to construct this account of mission life. In doing so I critically interpret, through juxtaposition, how a project of Christian mission located within the larger project of colonial settlement, brought to Ngukurr a definition of autonomy as a capacity for self-sufficiency.

I do not however take this definition of autonomy for granted. Rather I develop an account of the way in which missionaries gave form to this concept as routine manual labour through which moral being was realised. I therefore subject to a close examination records pertaining to CMS and government activities at Ngukurr and elucidate the ways in which they sought to explain their project to themselves, to each other and to Aboriginal people. I also retrieve from these records, from CMS and ethnographic reports (e.g. Spencer), and from Northern Territory and Aboriginal narrative histories, how missionaries could not recognise another form of sociality realised through the integrated activities of hunter-gathering and ritual. In drawing from such sources, I trace the transition from an Aboriginal autonomy sustained in overlapping networks and ritual exchange via the way in which such practices are repositioned and revalued relative to the demands of permanent settlement in European milieus. I therefore seek an account of social history that foregrounds the ways in which Aboriginal people interpreted their situation and acted to sustain themselves in their new relationships with missionaries (cf. Brock 1993:2-3, 162-66). Hence I attend to an observation made by Sahlins (1985:138; 2000:476), that the transformation of a culture is a mode of its reproduction.

Anthropological ethnographies of this region have also been fruitful sources for an historical study of Ngukurr. Bern's doctoral thesis (1974) on the structure of relations of domination and subordination at Ngukurr is one such work. Bern does not ignore the fact of Aboriginal people's encompassment within a dominant white

society. He therefore analyses both ritual and settlement politics (the latter being the locus of black-white interaction), but treats them as separate arenas of activity because the structures of domination in each are not interdependent (ibid. 2). He argues that the goals of competition in settlement affairs at Ngukurr are directed to realising political autonomy, being aimed at ‘altering the adverse balance of power’ between itself and government (ibid. 12). This opposition to an external structure of domination is visibly demonstrated in Bern’s view in the strike action of 1970 and in conflict for control of Roper River Citizens Club (ibid. chapter 7). The shared experience of political and economic domination is for Bern then a major factor uniting the majority of Aboriginal people at Ngukurr.

His second theme locates internal relations of domination in Aboriginal religion, which differentiates categories of actors according to gender and age and legitimises the dominance of inducted men over novices (male youth) and women (ibid. 11). The major cult complexes of *Yabaduruwa* and *Gunapipi* ceremonies dramatise the relations of persons to items of social value, to a hierarchical order of social categories and of social segments to each other (ibid. 15). And though Aboriginal men avidly compete for authority positions in the domain of ritual politics, the hierarchy and unity sustained therein is restricted to the narrow circumstances of its own performance (ibid. 437). This is due in part to the fact that control over the relations of production and reproduction are not contained within its bounds (ibid. 440-2). It is also due to the development of a ritual complex throughout the 1960s at Ngukurr, which often divides community interests as it is premised on ‘core-group’ control of ritual politics through restraining estate custody (ibid. 221-2, 252-5, 437). Bern points here to an effect of settlement where the men of ‘core’ families (that is those with a history of residence at the mission since the 1940s) had successfully restricted competition in ritual politics to themselves. They had moreover successfully restricted competition in settlement politics to themselves and European managers.

In conclusion Bern argues that Aboriginal people’s attempts to achieve political autonomy in its relations with government at Ngukurr is undermined in two respects. In the first instance Aboriginal religion, though a focus of identity for

people at Ngukurr, nevertheless inhibits the development of a common strategy to achieve this end. In the second instance Bern finds that the strike action, which entailed a demand for land rights, could not achieve the twin aims of having Ngukurr's economic and political autonomy restored. This, he argues, was due to the fact that the two aims were incompatible, given that Aboriginal people's demand for economic development through government intervention contradicted their demand for independence from bureaucratic control (ibid. 439-41).

Most references to Bern's work are to his pursuit of the political dimension of Aboriginal religion, exemplified in two later articles that he published in 1979 (see for example Morphy 1988a:255-6; Merlan 1988; Keen 1994:17-8; Hiatt 1996:96-7; Dussart 2000:109-10).⁸ Bern's challenge to Meggit's and Maddock's characterisations of an egalitarian Aboriginal polity, with minimal structurally induced inequalities, has often been commended. But equally he has been taken to task for his unilateral view of power, particularly with regard to gender relations among Aboriginal people, and his treatment of ideology as a category of consciousness. I find it interesting however that few anthropologists comment on the other theme of his thesis regarding Aboriginal people's relationships with an encompassing society and the ways in which they sought to address this asymmetry in power in the 1970s.

Bern's thesis provides a rich source of data on Ngukurr life at a time when CMS had withdrawn from settlement administration and self-determination initiatives had barely begun in Aboriginal communities. I propose however that we cannot assume that Aboriginal people thought of autonomy as meaning independence from the state. Chapter 5 of this thesis re-interprets Bern's analysis of the strike and Thiele's of the Yugul Cattle Company at Ngukurr (1982) to show how Aboriginal people sought to render their relationship with government in terms of interdependency, rather than independence. I am aided in this task by Myers

⁸ The journal articles by Bern are "Ideology and domination: towards a reconstruction of Australian Aboriginal social formation." *Oceania*, L No. 2, 1979a, pp118-132, and "Politics in the conduct of a secret male ceremony," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 35(1), 1979b, pp47-60.

(1991[1986]), who brought to Australian ethnography the insight that autonomy within the Aboriginal polity has its own cultural specificities. It is in effect an adult status realised through nurturance, with the life cycle being experienced (ideally) as a 'continuous progression toward autonomy' (ibid. 240). Bern's focus on structures of domination tends to bracket out social processes entailed in the reproduction and transformation of forms of practice through which such values are realised. The issue of changing forms of practice and value is addressed more fully below at the end of the section on organisational dynamics specifically in relation to Keen's account (1994) of transformation. Bern's bracketing out of a mission history also leaves unexplored how 'core-group' families came to prominence at Ngukurr through the acquisition and deployment of Christian knowledge, which they pursued in addition to ritual politics. Chapter 4 of this work takes up the way in which clusters of related patrifilial groups staged Christian services in order to demonstrate their autonomy and authority to act for a place and people during the assimilation era.

Cowlshaw's (1999:5) more recent ethnohistory of black-white relations in the Northern Territory aims to reveal the cultural logic of colonial invasion as it developed into what it is today. She focuses on the ambiguous contexts created by the state's project of managing black-white relations and employs Rembarrnga reflections on their past to achieve her aim. In doing so she documents the way in which the new society of the Territory was constructed through the emergence of practices and discourse concerning race and gender. Further, she traces the development of a system of racialised relations on Rembarrnga country (southern central Arnhem Land) through the laws and practices that were designed to keep black and white apart.

Though Cowlshaw draws Aboriginal people into her text, her work is focused on the continuing reproduction of a white dominated Australia. This is most evident in her account of the way in which a bourgeois ideal of autonomous subjects took a particular form in the era of Aboriginal self-determination (ibid. 221-55). The entity targeted by self-determination initiatives was to be 'the community,' rather than the individual (ibid. 242). And this shift brought into being a federally controlled local administrative apparatus through which a process of

Aboriginalisation was (and still is) to be achieved. Cowlshaw's account of the founding and failure of the Gulperan Pastoral Company provides a telling example of the way in which white administrators and Rembarrnga were either oblivious or insensitive to each other's priorities. Rembarrnga, on the one hand, had little interest in fulfilling an administrative need for responsible participation in a government funded enterprise and eschewed its discourse of 'community duty and public service' (ibid. 241). Bureaucratic responses to Aboriginal demands show that Rembarrnga action was not interpreted as 'reflecting a specific historically constructed relationship to material goods' or as reflecting a 'specific patterning of authority relations' (ibid. 245).

In conclusion Cowlshaw argues that white efforts have failed to efface an existing dynamic pattern of blackfella lives (ibid. 256), but she deliberately avoids the attempt to specify in greater detail important features of this dynamic. I attempt to draw out through a focus on contemporary ethnography how an existing administrative apparatus at Ngukurr does not articulate well with a dynamic Indigenous space of politics and sociality. I also trace the transformation of Indigenous organisation and values as Aboriginal people sought to affirm, in their relations with government, forms of interdependence and hierarchy premised on reciprocity and nurturance. Chapters 2 and 5 of this work pursue these themes respectively. In doing so I propose that the limiting possibilities entailed in self-determination, which Cowlshaw deals with, cannot be addressed without further reflection on past and continuing modes of Indigenous social organisation.

By utilising historical and contemporary ethnography I try to bring into closer focus the way in which tensions in social relations at Ngukurr are premised on different forms of social organisation and value. There has not then been a 'melding of the characteristics of two cultural domains,' as Cowlshaw argues vis-à-vis contemporary Rembarrnga life (ibid. 256). Neither however can contexts marked by such difference, as Cowlshaw is at pains to point out, be considered in anything other than relational terms. In this respect her study has been associated with another project in Australian anthropology, which also seeks to transcend the construction of 'essentialised differences' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians

(Hinkson and Smith 2005:160). Specifically Hinkson and Smith (2005) link Cowlshaw's metaphor of the palimpsest with Merlan's notion of the intercultural (1998, 2005), to dispense with the idea of an autonomous Aboriginal domain of values and practice.

Merlan's study (1998), based on the rural town of Katherine in the Northern Territory, critiques the separation of Indigenous cultural production from the profoundly intercultural contexts of land-claims and struggles over town space. By shifting focus to the articulation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous life-worlds, she seeks to demonstrate how the 'scene' at Katherine 'is not one of autonomy' (ibid. 181), but a place where enormous constraints are placed upon Indigenous cultural creativity. Hence Merlan addresses some of the transformative effects of self-determination policy in Australia, where 'representations of Aboriginality ... come to affect who and what Aborigines consider themselves to be' (ibid. 150). In sum, she proposes that ethnographic accounts must attend to history and changes in social practice for any ethical or practical implications to be drawn out about the way in which Aboriginal people make and remake relations to places (ibid. 240).

My study attends to Merlan's proposal by treating the mission as possibly an original site for studies of the intercultural. Hence I seek to trace the transition from mission to church at Ngukurr as an instance of the evolution of Indigenous organisation. I do so by focusing on Aboriginal people's engagement with European forms brought by missionaries and government agents. Central to this account is the way in which these latter forms entail a similar organising logic; one that presents to Aboriginal people a taken for granted construct of the autonomous individual premised on self-sufficiency. In addition, I juxtapose the tensions in social relations pertaining to different orders of value at Ngukurr with the larger policy frame in which they have occurred. I discuss below some of the literature on Aboriginal Christianity and missions in Australia relevant to this focus.

Christianity, Missions And Aboriginal People

There have been two predominant approaches to the study of Christian conversion among Indigenous Australians. The first treats Christian missions as disciplinary institutions in order to examine their effects, while the second is concerned with issues of cosmology and ontology. There is however a good deal of variation within these approaches to the study of conversion, which addresses a range of Aboriginal responses to Christianity.

Among the former is Attwood's treatment (1989) of the colonial mission as a creative historical force in people's lives. It traces, through a series of case studies, the patterns of association that were woven between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people. In doing so he analyses the missionaries' mode of production and productive relationships through which they sought to transform Aboriginal people. The 'whole machinery of the mission,' as he puts it, 'shaped the world of Aborigines' by determining the boundaries within which they had to live (ibid. 29). Domination was not absolute however, as Aboriginal people rejected 'the notion of superordination and subordination' which the mission took for granted (ibid. 30). Nevertheless Christian ideals such as being 'like one family' were incorporated within the social ethics of Aboriginal culture (ibid.). More significantly, however, Aboriginal people came to protest their situation in terms defined by missionaries as a result of having internalised their values and attitudes (ibid. 31). Ultimately an Aboriginal sense of self and identity became rooted in missions such as Ramahyuck. But the more they were defined and regulated and the more their experiences of oppression converged, the more they came to have 'an enhanced sense of themselves as Aborigines' (ibid. 102). Thus Aboriginal people became an ethnic group (ibid.).

There are echoes of the mission hegemony model employed by Comaroff and Comaroff for Africa (1986) in Attwood's approach to conversion among Australian Aborigines. Trigger (1992) can also be located within this approach. He provides, in contrast to Attwood, a more nuanced analysis of power relations and social action in Aboriginal life at Doomadgee – a Christian Brethren mission in the southern Gulf of

Carpentaria (northwest Queensland).⁹ He therefore addresses Christianity as a sphere of activity in which ‘significant sociological implications’ are to be found ‘within the operation of power relations’ (ibid. 199; idem. 1988a:213). Though a mission regime, beginning in the 1930s, was coercive it did not succeed in getting Aboriginal people to endorse the legitimacy of its administrative arrangements or embrace its values and practices (1992:221-22). Rather Trigger finds that they insulate themselves from the interventions of missionaries and government agents, by constituting a spatial separation between ‘blackfella’ and ‘whitefella’ domains (ibid. 96-7, 100-102). Hence distinctively Aboriginal modes of social action prevail at Doomadgee, through resistance and the maintenance of particular forms of behaviour, politicking and communication.

But Trigger also finds that there is complexity in the post-colonial situation at Doomadgee, based on the way in which Christianity has engendered more political accommodation of white administrative authority (ibid. 224). There is a pervasive tolerance for Christianity due to Aboriginal people’s approval of the missionaries’ benevolent paternalism, evident in their support of whites with whom they have established personal relations. Moreover the missionary capacity to mediate political and economic aspects of the colonisers’ culture tends to inculcate among Aboriginal people the view that secular and Christian authority is somewhat fused if not closely entwined. This is most evident among the small group of Aboriginal people ‘in fellowship’ at a given time (ibid. 224-5); that is, attending Christian meetings.¹⁰

⁹ Though Trigger’s fieldwork was conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s, two Christian Brethren Church Elders occupied the two most important offices of administrative authority at Doomadgee, i.e. Manager and School Principal (1988a:223).

¹⁰ Trigger (1988a, 1992) does not provide an account of the content of Christian meetings or the weeklong revivals that occurred at Doomadgee in 1953 and 1980-1. He suggests that a mood of apocalyptic fear ‘played a considerable part’ in motivating so many people to seek ‘salvation,’ which was fuelled by the dissemination of literature about the coming of the ‘Antichrist’ (1988a:224). Though noting the acceptance of missionaries’ benevolent paternalism, Trigger does not seem to consider that Aboriginal participation in Christian meetings and revivals might have been motivated by the wish to honour their obligations to missionaries who had ‘kept the place together’ for such a

Moreover this small group overlaps with those who have been incorporated into the administrative apparatus through the office of councillor and policeman (ibid. 223). Though Trigger proposes that this minority are more disposed than others to accept mission authority, he nonetheless finds that in contexts free from the influence of whites there is no consistent support for secular or religious authoritarianism. Hence there is a general though diffuse rejection of forms of hierarchy premised on administrative roles or class inequalities, which Aboriginal people view as illegitimate (ibid. 222-24; see also 1988b:339).

The complexity Trigger describes for Doomadgee resonates with the Ngukurr situation in many respects. Noteworthy is the fact that a high proportion of Aboriginal people participate in baptism, though a comparatively small group participates in Christian meetings at any one time. It is also noteworthy that the pattern of involvement in meetings conforms to that at Ngukurr, where dedication, withdrawal, rededication or even nostalgic affection for a time ‘once spent in fellowship’ predominates among the majority of the population (see Trigger 1988a:230-31). Hence membership of this group changes over the years (ibid. 224). This widespread, though often temporary, engagement with Christianity has significance, I propose, for what it reveals about Indigenous forms of sociality, organisation and transformation. The ebb and flow of people’s engagement with Christianity also makes apparent why it has proved attractive to Aboriginal people at Ngukurr over the long term. In this respect Ngukurr differs from Doomadgee, as church services and outdoor Fellowship meetings have been operating in tandem since the 1950s, with the latter being Aboriginal-run events. Moreover self-determination initiatives have led to the indigenisation of St. Matthew’s Church at Ngukurr and encouraged nightly Fellowship meetings as a distinctly Aboriginal form of Christian expression. Chapters 4 and 6 of this work pursue these themes, tracing the ways in which Aboriginal people employ Christianity to support lateral forms of association as they strive to realise a form of autonomy premised on relatedness and exchange.

long time (ibid. 229). Hence he does not explore in any depth how benevolent paternalism may have accorded with an Aboriginal form of hierarchy premised on nurturance and reciprocity.

An approach to Aboriginal responses to Christianity that draws on themes of relatedness and exchange is found in Berndt's account (1962) of the 'adjustment movement' in Arnhem Land, which occurred at Elcho Island in 1957. Berndt describes the way in which Aboriginal men constructed a permanent memorial at Elcho, choosing to publicly display previously secret Aboriginal religious items alongside Christian icons (ibid. 23-5). The significance of this response, Berndt proposes, lies in the fact that Aboriginal men sought to integrate Aboriginal and European worlds through an adjustment of Aboriginal and Christian forms to one another (ibid. 86-8). The memorial could operate internally as a means to politically unite all eastern Arnhem Landers by opening up clan objects to the wider linguistic unit and to women. But it could also signify an offer of exchange to Europeans of culturally valuable items shared in return for opportunities for economic independence. Morphy (1983:110) went on to propose that a further significance of the display of clan emblems at Elcho, and the later Yirrkala memorial built in 1962-3, is that they are statements of prior rights to the land by Indigenous Australians. The act of public display at Elcho and Yirrkala then seeks, by revelation of ownership, an accommodation between Christian and traditional principles governing society.

The second type of approach to the study of Christian conversion among Aboriginal Australians explores its cosmological and ontological dimensions. There are two positions found within this approach. One, not so recent approach, argues for the continuing relevance of traditional cosmologies, leading to widespread resistance to Christian conversion (see Tonkinson 1974; Kolig 1981, 1988; Rose 1988; Yengoyan 1993). A common theme within this literature proposes that Aboriginal responses to Christianity were predominantly materialist rather than intellectual (Tonkinson 1974:117-36; Kolig 1988:386-7; Yengoyan 1993:234).¹¹ Hence there

¹¹ I must note here that Kolig's (1972:6-7) discussion of the Aboriginal 'cosmological periphery,' wherein exotic phenomena, the unknown geographical world and unknown mythological beings are located, accounts quite well for his proposal in a later work (1981:178) that Christianity at Fitzroy Crossing led to agnosticism rather than total conversion. He suggests that Europeans and their culture could have been located within this cosmos as 'all sorts of phenomena not well known to Aborigines or appearing suddenly from nothingness were *a priori* relevant to' its periphery (idem. 1972:6).

was little dislodgement of Aboriginal religion, which was often forced underground due to a missionary rejection of traditional ritual. A strict dichotomisation of Aboriginal and European social spheres moreover maintained a traditional moral order, even if aspects of Aboriginal practice were altered in historical process.

A significant feature of ethnography concerned with Aboriginal conversion is that much of it was written after self-determination became the policy direction in Aboriginal affairs (an exception is Calley 1964). And anthropologists among others have noted this limitation (see for example Morphy 1988:257; Tonkinson 1988:61). In this regard, it is hardly surprising that resistance to conversion is emphasised at the very time when the relevance of Christian mission was in sharp decline. Unfortunately, though, these accounts can also tend to suggest that Aboriginal people simply walked away from one regime into another as a result of self-determination initiatives. It seems unlikely that matters were ever that simple.

The second approach differs from the above by exploring the way in which Christian dynamics engage Aboriginal ontologies and cosmologies, leading to diverse forms of practice and experience grounded in different types of quests. Austin-Broos (2003b) offers an interesting perspective that deals with issues of conversion and change relating to the Arrernte's response to the Lutheran mission at Hermannsburg (see also idem. 1996a, 1996b, 1997). Central to this process is the Indigenous idea that people's being is realised through 'a law understood in terms of right practice in place' (2003b:312). In assimilating Christian forms to their own, God's law became known by the Arrernte as '*pepe*' (paper), signifying the 'bible,' 'buildings, calls to prayer and services' associated with Lutheran practice (ibid.). God's law was further rendered as Arrernte way through a ritual use of literacy, evident in song-writing and the pursuit of other translation tasks identified with the status of being an evangelist (ibid. 313). Thus Christianity could become a localised

Europeans located on the fringes of the known universe did not, therefore, represent something fundamentally new to Aboriginal people nor did their appearance necessarily cause the collapse of the whole cosmology (ibid. 7). Kolig does not specifically argue that Christianity and God could also be located on the cosmological periphery as aspects of European culture that simply appeared with the arrival of missionaries, but this implication is clear in my view.

law for ‘a particular place practiced by familiars’ and thought of in ways that had some affinity with Arrernte notions of law inscribed in country (ibid. 314).

In describing a situation where the conditions of a mission regime produced a domestic economy that encouraged a particular Arrernte Christianity, Austin-Broos also comments on change. The coming of land rights, a cash economy and a new administrative regime have undermined *pepe* by demonstrating that Lutherans no longer order the world. Hence Lutheranism as ritual practice has declined, although an historical identity as Lutherans still has significance for the Arrernte (ibid. 327-8). In this regard it is the conditions for reproducing a ritual practice inscribed in country and a ritually oriented biblical literacy that have changed, making both increasingly difficult to sustain.

Interestingly, Hermannsburg has not experienced a revival of Christianity of the sort that has occurred in the late 1970s and 1980s in other Aboriginal communities. This likely reflects a difference between the sacramental order of the Lutherans and evangelicalism. Of the literature dealing with the latter most would observe that Christianity has not become a basis for a major social movement in Aboriginal communities or been developed into more formal sorts of organisation. Yet there is a noticeable tendency within this literature to treat evangelical revivals as a response to increased social disorder. This is particularly evident in the accounts by Bos (1988), Slotte (1997), Sandefur (1998) and Hume (1988, 1989) and in some of the other accounts in the Swain and Rose (1988) collection on Christian missions (e.g. Tonkinson, and Brady and Palmer in this edition). Bos (1988) exemplifies this approach in his account of the Elcho Island Christian revival of 1979. He provides a five-point summary of changes in social conditions arising from the withdrawal of missionaries from settlement administration that led to increased insecurity among Yolngu people about their relationships to land and with whites (ibid. 431-3). Hence he argues that Yolngu sought to affirm unity among themselves and in relation to

whites through Christian expression in order to cultivate among the latter a greater appreciation of Aboriginal culture (ibid. 433).¹²

All the above researchers emphasise the variety of ways in which Aboriginal people incorporate Christianity within traditional religion and establish continuities between Christian and Dreaming symbols. They nonetheless predominantly address the question of Aboriginal motivation from the point of view of contemporary social disorder wrought by further incursions of modern economic and political forms into Aboriginal life. I do not wish to deny that Christianity can have a pragmatic function and often does provide a positive way to cope with substance abuse for instance or with other crises born of rapid change. However, to rely too much on the idea of deprivation to account for motivation to become Christian is reductive. It does not tell us enough about the ways in which Aboriginal people sustain an engagement with Christianity or how these engagements are transformed over time.

¹² Slotte (1997) takes a similar view to Bos in her account of Aboriginal Christianity at Ramingining in Arnhem Land. She proposes that nightly Christian Fellowship is a contemporary social movement, which aims to extend the range of sociality throughout Arnhem Land by uniting Aborigines of different moieties and linguistic groups. It is also concerned with achieving greater social justice for Indigenous Australians within the wider Australian society (ibid. 29). Hume (1988:260-1, 1989:36-7) in her account of evangelical revival at Yarrabah (Queensland), argues that Christianity provides a refuge from and means to cope with the social and political problems of contemporary life by self-directed change. Hence Aborigines have transformed an imposed system of Christian belief into a framework that is relevant for them and through which they work to bring about social change within their community and in their relations with whites. Sandefur's account of the Aboriginalisation of the Church at Ngukurr (1998:319, 347), argues that Christianity provides a viable alternative to Aboriginal religion because it provides a holistic framework in which the Christian message can be universally applied. The Christian 'message' moreover has been utilised to address physical illness, sorcery, family conflicts and feuding, alcohol abuse and other social problems (ibid. 336-7, 343). My study, also focused on Ngukurr, takes a different direction to Sandefur in particular and the work cited above. These studies tend to treat the shift from assimilation to self-determination initiatives as unproblematic and involving a shift from domination to autonomy for Aboriginal Christians. The situation at Ngukurr is more complex with respect to Christian practice. As I demonstrate especially in chapters 6 and 7, Church and Fellowship stand in marked contrast to each other as different social orders, where the constitution of autonomy and authority have different foci for their realisation.

I therefore turn to the work of Magowan (2003) who moves beyond this limitation through her account of the dialogue between Christianity and Aboriginal law, which has been playing out for some time at Galiwin'ku (formerly known as Elcho Island off the northeast coast of Arnhem Land). Far from depicting rapid change or Christianity as a univocal force in the constitution of people's experience of the world, Magowan addresses how Yolngu negotiate their faith in complex ways from a cultural basis (ibid. 297). Hence perspectives shift along a continuum between a theocentrism rooted in an emplaced ancestral law and a 'Christocentric' focus on moral accountability to God divested of ancestral emplacement (ibid.). In arriving at this characterisation of contemporary practice, Magowan briefly sketches how the missionaries' moral engagement with Yolngu 'spoke indirectly' to the foundations of ancestral law, conceptualised as 'looking after' (ibid. 299).¹³ Hence the moral accountability to others in ancestral law was fulfilled through reciprocal care, manifested through the development of gardens, a sawmill and teaching trade and literacy skills.

Galiwin'ku however experienced something of a crisis after the withdrawal of missionaries in the mid 1970s, which challenged the relevance of both Christianity and ancestral law for Yolngu. This was due to the fact that a welfare system, which served to create differentials of access to money and drug-related activities, strained relations between youth and their families (ibid. 300). The social discontent arising from conflicting values and priorities was however successfully addressed through the staging of a Christian revival in 1979 (also known as the Elcho Revival). A significant feature of the revival is the way in which the principle of discharging obligations in Yolngu ritual through song and dance has been naturalised as part of the Christian obligation to witness (ibid. 301). Composing choruses in Yolngu style and language as family 'items' and performing them at evening Fellowship or Sunday service is also central to Indigenous expressions of Christian worship. In this regard the dialogue between Christianity and ancestral law through musical items employing traditional song styles represents a significant shift away from Methodist hymnody.

¹³ A Methodist mission began at Galiwin'ku in 1942 (Magowan 2003:298).

But it is also interesting that these local expressions of Christian creativity address two intertwined strands of ontological being (ibid. 309). One transcends various forms of fear associated with social deprivation, dislocation or spiritually dangerous entities and places, through the presence of the divine power of Jesus. The other ensures moral accountability between relatives through restorative ritual performance, which reverses feelings of jealousy, loss and grief as it fulfils obligations of emplaced ancestral law. Hence Yolngu Christianity is experientially dynamic, entailing an inter-subjective flow between faith and fear as people continue to question and negotiate their relationships with ancestral law and Christianity.

As Magowan notes, missionary approaches to religious doctrine differ dramatically across Australia, ‘resulting in varying degrees of acceptance, rejection and adherence’ to Aboriginal expressions of Christianity (ibid. 294). Methodists at Galiwin’ku it seems have been more liberal in this regard, being open to forms of syncretism that other churches eschew. An evangelical Anglican presence at Ngukurr has had a different influence on Indigenous Christian creativity for this reason. Both CMS and the Anglican Church treat Aboriginal ritual with caution, viewing it as a possible attempt to manipulate God based on fear of the specifying force of a spirit filled world. CMS moreover is loyal to the hierarchical structure of the Anglican Church, which gives bishops authority to coordinate and control its imperatives of association.¹⁴ The Methodist Church in contrast (now the Uniting Church of Australia), has no specified hierarchical structure (Bently and Hughes 1996).

Both CMS and the Anglican Church nevertheless support Indigenous Christian creativity within its Aboriginal parishes. Hence evening Fellowship at Ngukurr resembles much of Magowan’s description of Yolngu practice, where the composition and performance of choruses as ‘items’ contributed by different groups of kin is central to each meeting. But choruses have not been modelled on traditional song styles at Ngukurr, though they do employ Kriol and a variety of Aboriginal

¹⁴ Bishops provide leadership for the Anglican Church and are considered to be equal in orders. Archbishops or primates, though generally more senior bishops, do not have authority outside their own diocese or ecclesiastical province. These titles are purely honorific.

languages. Nor have choruses been composed as ‘clan’ items to express, through the use of ancestral words, primary ties to country and other clans. This feature of Christian creativity at Galiwin’ku, which Magowan (1999) addresses in detail in another publication, has created its own problems among Yolngu. At deeper levels of ancestral meaning songs can be politically contentious, operating as assertions of clan autonomy over place and church where membership should ideally rest on a principle of equality (ibid. 28-9).

Yet tensions in social relations are also evident among Ngukurr Christians and between Christian and non-Christian people. Issues of autonomy have and continue to be at the heart of these tensions as Aboriginal people strive to sustain values and practices in meaningful form. I trace how these tensions in social relations at Ngukurr emerge, focusing on the different organising logics characteristic of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians that gave rise to them. Hence I treat local government and church organisation at Ngukurr as essentially similar, due to the fact that both facilitate characteristics dynamics of niche control and deflection of centralised hierarchy among Aboriginal people (see chapters 5, 6 and 7). I discuss literature relevant to these themes below.

Issues Of Social Organisation And Value

Two theoretical issues guide this thesis. The first develops a contrast between centralised hierarchical regimes and rhizomic organisation, canvassed by Rumsey (2001). And the second explores a contrast between orders of value premised on centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation. Before discussing these contrasts, I first address the issue of sociocentric versus egocentric approaches to the study of Aboriginal relations as they pertain to the regulation of resources.

Myers (1987) investigates the relationship between spatial organisation and the control of resources among Aboriginal hunter-gatherers. In doing so he proposes an alternative to two traditions within the literature. One view argues for bounded ‘local groups’ having an enduring relationship with tracts of land (e.g. Radcliffe Brown). The other argues against the notion of permanent organisational units,

treating adaptation to resources as the determining feature of foraging societies (e.g. Lee and De Vore). In contrast to both, Myers draws on Pintupi concepts of ‘country’ (*ngurra*) and ‘one countryman’ to elucidate the way in which cultural notions of resource and value are implicated in the reproduction of Aboriginal society (ibid. 98). Myers therefore describes a two-tiered system of organisation where sociocentric ritual groups and egocentric social networks are both entailed in the concept of *ngurra* and one countryman (ibid. 101). In this respect owners of a country associated with a particular dreaming are ‘from one *ngurra*’ (‘named place’ or ritual estate). It is they who control access to knowledge about its esoteric qualities and who must be ‘asked’ for rights to use land (ibid. 105, 107). But being ‘from one *ngurra*’ also refers to those people with whom one is likely to reside or ‘camp.’ Hence it also applies to an egocentric social network where each person has his own set of ‘one countrymen’ based on co-residence and traveling together (ibid. 101-2). It is moreover through actualizing the potential of ‘one countryman’ relations premised on co-residence and co-operation that foraging rights are acquired in a number of defined resource areas or ‘sociocentric ranges’ (ibid. 102, 107).

The thrust of Myers’ argument is that the Pintupi regulate resources through the etiquette of deference to owners, with one countryman links making it possible for people to gain access to rights for many countries. Hence this two-tiered system enables a variety of interests in ‘named place’ to be converted into ownership rights by virtue of criteria other than patrilineal descent. Though knowledge of a country’s stories, objects and ritual are ideally transmitted to sons, multiple pathways exist by which other individuals may become important custodians of a named place too (ibid. 108). Myers therefore describes a situation where the multiple identities that individuals bear through different forms of relatedness extend beyond any definable group.

In arriving at this conclusion concerning the fluidity of Pintupi groups organised around resources, Myers is dealing with the spatial relations of hunter-gatherers in the harsh ecological conditions of the Western Desert. Though not dispensing with the idea of corporate groups, he nevertheless stresses the role of labile residential ‘camps’ in mediating the boundaries of ‘primary cores’ formed

around ritual estates. Also highlighted is the performative dimension of Aboriginal kinship where bilateral relations, reciprocal exchange and prestige constitute individuals with different personal constellations of rights to resources.

Not addressed in Myers' account is the way in which settlement and the commodities of a market economy, largely controlled by government structures external to Aboriginal communities, affect Indigenous modes of social organisation. My study in contrast brings to the fore how sociocentric groups play a major role at Ngukurr, where competition for resources is a significant structuring element of political life. I therefore draw from Bern (1974:113), who found that the 'family' cohering around a patriline or a patrifilial group was the 'primary unit' of social organisation at Ngukurr in the 1970s. These families moreover could be identified in terms of a few large cognatic stocks due to a history of intermarriage and ritual co-operation. But thirty years of secular bureaucracy and resource dependency have had an impact on the way in which cognatic families are currently realised. In this respect 'patronymic families,' as I term these sociocentric groups at Ngukurr, entail an element of stability even as they reveal dynamics of expansion, contraction and fission over time.¹⁵

Patronymic families at Ngukurr, by which I mean surnamed families associated with a place, have some features in common with the 'families of polity' described by Sutton. In his view (2003:209), a distinctive form of social organisation centred on Aboriginal 'families of polity' manifests today in many regions of Australia including both urban and rural contexts. The common content of these 'surnamed cognatic descent groups' is that they are jural in nature (ibid. 208, 211). Their corporate character is defined in part by customary relationships to land and through tracing descent from a particular ancestor or set of blood-related ancestors. Hence Sutton's point is that families of polity are not merely extended families with roles being confined to a private domain of kinship and the mutuality of households

¹⁵ The term 'patronymic,' suggested by Diane Austin-Broos, has also been used by Alberto Furlan in his recent study, "Songs of Continuity and Change: The Reproduction of Popular Culture through Traditional and Modern Music," Doctoral Dissertation, University of Sydney, 2005.

(ibid. 210). Rather they are major and enduring structural elements of public life, being a transformation of ‘classical forms’ of Indigenous organisation (ibid. 213).

Patronymic families at Ngukurr are however smaller and more labile than the ancestor-focused cognatic groups discussed by Sutton in relation to native title in Australia. Large and overlapping descent groups of this sort tend to appear as corporate in response to the jural procedures of a land claim (see Austin-Broos 2003a:118, 131), which requires that the groups involved constitute bounded wholes (see Merlan 1997:10-12). In the day-to-day context of resource politics at Ngukurr however, patronymic families display a greater tendency to expansion, contraction and fission particularly through the activities of their senior males. In this regard patronymic families are realised as groups through the capacity of senior men to engage in competitive status relations with each other and direct the benefits of competition to kin. Equally however competition occurs both within and between patrifilial groups, as individuals and families realise significant status through controlling a resource niche involving service-delivery or enterprise. Senior men in particular realise status as ‘bosses’ by virtue of their ability to ‘look after’ kin. Followers in turn support a boss by backing his initiatives in an effort to expand his re-distributive capacities. Hence the dynamism of small and labile patronymic families gives a form of organisation at Ngukurr among like-status groups in place through differentiating resource niches as kin-locales. Chapters 2 and 5 of this study pursue these themes.

In tracing past and continuing modes of Indigenous social organisation at Ngukurr I have found Rumsey’s elaboration (2001) of rhizome-like organisation in Aboriginal forms of topographic inscription particularly useful. Rumsey’s aim is to relativise an opposition posited by Deleuze and Guattari between nomadic and state-based forms of territorialisation, which they characterise by reference to rhizome and tree respectively (ibid. 20-1). The latter they propose are centred systems, which have a fixed hierarchical ordering of units and subunits at successive levels of ramification. Rhizomes by contrast are rootstocks in which there is both hierarchical ramification and the possibility of reconnection from multiple points along the rootstock. Rumsey dispatches this opposition very quickly by pointing to the fact that

banyan trees and strangler figs confound any notion of a 'one-way' hierarchical relation between trunk and branch as both have aerial roots (ibid. 33). Rhizome then is a property of many kinds of trees.

More importantly Rumsey refines the dichotomy further by describing how the movement of totemic beings' from place to place throughout Aboriginal Australia establishes relationships between them that are non-hierarchical (ibid. 23). Hence the clan centres created by these beings' are originary sites, with no order of precedence established between different clan centres and countries. Moreover nobody commands knowledge of what such beings did along their entire route, so that stories and songs are highly localised as segments of a track owned by the people of those places (ibid. 24). These tracks are rhizome-like in another respect as they criss-cross each other where 'dreamings' meet and interact, which establishes a multitude of differentiated connections to places (ibid.). People are linked to countries in a variety of ways, the most salient of which for many is the link through father. Links are also established through mother, mother's mother, father's mother and so on, with countries also being related within these kin categories (ibid. 26).

The point Rumsey stresses is that Aboriginal forms of topographic inscription generate an elaborate differentiation of social space in terms of relatedness where there is a multiplicity of roughly equal and linked groups. As he makes clear, no particular kind of social group – be it patrilineal clan, language group or cognatic stock – 'provides the central axis around which the system revolves' (ibid. 40). Though differentiated in stable ways, connections between people and places are multiple, crosscutting and contextually relative, being marked by lateral extension through kin, marriage, residence, ritual and regional ties. These forms of rhizomic organisation stand in marked contrast to centralised hierarchical regimes. The former support the relative egalitarianism of Aboriginal group structure, while the latter tend to linearise socio-territorial organisation and social process.

The first theoretical issue guiding this study then pertains to dynamics occurring within Indigenous modes of organisation and to those that arise between Indigenous and European forms brought by missionaries and government agents.

With regard to the latter I focus on the way in which both entail forms of centralised hierarchy for the purposes of directing collective action to realise social, political or economic ends. Not only are centralised hierarchies assumed to be the only way to manage a town or church, they are also designed to operate independently of those who hold offices within them and thereby ensure the corporate future of such organisations. They also have constitutional objectives to fulfil, whether these are sought in terms of the maintenance of statistical equality, accountability, civic engagement or congregational life premised on representative or individual participation. Such structures moreover do not entail forms of reciprocal exchange, being oriented to operate in terms of constructs such as rationality, impersonality and self-sufficiency. These features of centralisation, evident in Ngukurr's administrative arrangements and church organisation, do not articulate well with a propensity among Aborigines to realise a multiplicity of like-status groups between which some relations of exchange obtain.

My study pursues a contrast between the dynamics discussed above with those operating within Indigenous modes of organisation. I therefore distinguish between group and network, identifying the former in terms of the way in which they create boundaries through various principles of recruitment. Networks on the other hand are always laterally extended, being egocentric rather than sociocentric phenomena. Both patronymic families and networks at Ngukurr overlap with instances of their respective kinds. This is so because neither has a single, exclusionary principle of organisation, though both are relatively stable and enduring forms of association. Dynamics that bring networks into being are moreover somewhat different from the competitive status relations occurring within and between patronymic families. Hence in contexts not encompassed by the politics of resource control and landownership, it is the case that bilateral relations articulate features of an Indigenous sociality premised on nurturance and reciprocity. And these characteristics continually infuse networks of association through which residential groups, patronymic families and other contextually relevant groups are realised. Yet it is also the case that an organisational inclination to centralisation, evident in church and secular administration, render ineffective forms of sociality

premised on nurturance and reciprocity. There are then pervasive tensions in social relations at Ngukurr emerging from dynamics occurring within Indigenous modes of organisation and from those arising between Indigenous and European forms. Chapters 2, 5, 6 and 7 utilise contemporary ethnography to address these themes.

The second theoretical issue guiding this study pursues these tensions further through a contrast between orders of value associated with centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation. I develop this contrast by drawing on the work of Myers (1991[1986]), who shows the way in which a status hierarchy exists within the Aboriginal polity as a correlative of differentials in forms of autonomy. He proposes that autonomy as self-directed action is a given in Pintupi life (ibid. 107), but it is also integrated within relatedness (ibid. 163). This integration is achieved through socialisation and initiation, where child-care and transmissions of ritual knowledge from seniors are represented as essentially similar activities constitutive of social order and development (ibid. 221). ‘Genuine autonomy’ is in effect a progressive status realised through nurturing those who have not yet acquired the competence to perform as equals and ‘look after’ others in turn (ibid. 110, 220-1, 241). Hence the symbolism of nurturance provides a means of sustaining hierarchy within an essentially egalitarian framework, investing value especially in elder males while denying this process to be a result of individual will.

This configuration of autonomy nevertheless entails its own tensions, as differentiation (by which Myers means conflict) and relatedness define each other structurally as values (ibid. 179). On the one hand conflict, as an assertion of personal autonomy, is accepted as a valid way in which to get others to recognise one’s rights or satisfy one’s desires (ibid. 162). On the other hand, conflict is experienced as a breach in the value of relatedness, as it opposes the ideal of ‘smoothly running relations among kin’ (ibid. 163). It is important to note however that conflict and relatedness do not stand in marked opposition to each other. Rather both are entailed in the concept and expectation of reciprocity – with conflict including revenge (whether by physical or sorcerous means) being a valid means of restoring equivalence between individuals and between groups (ibid. 115, 170). The ever-present possibility of conflict in social relations is therefore mediated by

channelling sociality in the direction of relatedness, which is maintained through ongoing social interaction, reciprocity and exchange (ibid.). Hence a good deal of social energy is devoted to making public life (i.e. meetings, ceremonies and so on) conform 'to a fundamental image of sociality,' sustaining the appearance that all are related (ibid. 164-5). And ceremonies achieve this objective by presenting participants with the reality that inter-group relations involve the same mutuality as occurs in camp and family life (ibid. 112-13).

There are a number of observations I draw from the foregoing. The self in the mode of sociality described by Myers is never entirely autonomous. This is so because no one is entirely free from obligation or becomes autonomous without the contributions of others (ibid. 124, 174, 254). This relational self nonetheless pursues autonomy through developing status, which is demonstrated by provisioning others with food and organising events that transform youth through the gradual acquisition of ritual and social knowledge. And it is through such demonstrations of caring and teaching that expressions of authority are successfully masked as looking after and reciprocated with deference and service. Within this mode of sociality, individual capacities are continually augmented and surpassed through establishing and laterally extending networks of support. The way this mode of sociality configures autonomy as a progressive status therefore stands in marked contrast to that associated with centralised forms of organisation. The latter encourage forms of career occupation and the accumulation of portable forms of wealth through which the autonomous individual is realised as self-sufficient. This in turn facilitates organisation in hierarchical form, where relations are not reciprocal and dependency is a subordinate condition. Centralisation and hierarchy are moreover justified as the most efficient, hence rational, means of mobilising collective action and thus transcending individual capacities.

This study pursues these contrasts between orders of value associated with centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation in terms of the way in which Aboriginal practices have been transformed at Ngukurr. The varied sorts of resources around which social relations are now organised and values realised is central to this focus. A significant feature of contemporary conditions is the proliferation of

commodities, cash and service organisations that government transfers bring, which has affected processes of production and social reproduction. As Peterson (2005:10-12) argues, social relations are more focused on the circulation of goods in the absence of a domestic mode of production or market economy. Reciprocity therefore becomes a central structuring factor in economic activity because there is an almost complete detachment from productive activity. This in turn heightens the practice of bilateral kinship, where roles in service organisations, cash and commodities are used to affirm relatedness informed by the pragmatics of ‘demand sharing’ (ibid. 12; see also Austin-Broos 2003a:125). The expectation of reciprocity also heightens conflict to do with resource competition. Though networks expand to increase the field available for demands, resource scarcity and competition place limits on the kin to whom one can respond and leads people to retreat into smaller and more rigidified groups (Peterson 1997:189; see also Austin-Broos 2003a:128).

My study addresses these aspects of change in contemporary Aboriginal life at Ngukurr through the tensions in social relations that emerge from people’s engagement with two evolving social orders and their different systems of prestige. The asymmetry of power between these orders entails a major struggle for Aboriginal people to sustain values and practices in meaningful form. A notable feature of this struggle pertains to the way in which dynamics of co-operation and control now play out in a context where resources largely originate from agencies external to a community.

I have found some of Keen’s insights (1994) pertaining to pre-existing dynamics of co-operation and control operating among the Yolngu useful to this focus. He proposes that a ‘vertical’ control of religious knowledge favours senior male leadership, while also being grounded in a patrilineal group and its close uterine relatives (ibid. 292, 295). Control is premised on the possession and dissemination of ritual knowledge, which confers status through the separation of gender, age and group-centred networks. Separation between groups is achieved most often through the maintenance of minute differences in ritual form, which serves to inhibit potential claims by other groups to one’s resources (ibid. 133). And groups do act to control the religious affairs of each other. They do so by ‘looking after’ the countries

and ceremonies of those who lack the requisite knowledge and competence to perform these tasks (ibid. 248-9). This inclination to control is nevertheless modified by a pervasive tendency to co-operate in ritual performances. Ceremonies then provide people with a 'matrix for sociality beyond the everyday' through extending ties of ownership and identity to others (ibid. 294).

These insights have helped me to trace the ways in which Aboriginal people organised relations at the mission, particularly through the acquisition and deployment of Christian knowledge (see chapter 4 of this work). On the one hand dynamics pertaining to control are most apparent where father-son pairs from the 'core' families identified in Bern's study (1974) utilised evangelism to negotiate their standing relative to missionaries and 'non-core' Aboriginal groups. Equally evident is the way in which the collaborative staging of multi-group Christian services and other displays of Christian knowledge beyond the context of the church served to extend sociality and affirm wider kinship networks at the mission. By interpreting the mission as a site of performance and evangelism as the activity that supported it, Aboriginal people were endorsing their own evolving modes of differentiation and prestige. Hence the incorporation of evangelism into Aboriginal modes of organisation and exchange reflects a dynamic Indigenous space of politics and sociality, which has its own internal tensions premised on control and co-operation. This dynamic space moreover deflected the putative centralised hierarchy of the mission regime.

I address, in a rather different way to Keen (1994), further issues of change to do with settlement and Christianity. By treating systems of practice as ones of meaning Keen highlights the way in which they are indeterminate and open to modification. Hence in chapters 1 to 4 of his work he demonstrates the heterogeneity of Dreaming myths, ritual content and group identity and the way in which Yolngu assimilate introduced ritual forms to their own. However, by stressing religious and social fluidity Keen treats changes to do with settlement and Christianity as relatively unproblematic. In part 3 of his work he discusses *Gunapipi* ceremony, the adjustment movement of the 1950s and the Christian revival of the late 1970s as activity that manifests a transformation toward more inclusive forms of co-operation in religious

practices. Not pursued is the way in which commodities, cash or the design of administrative organisations (including the church) operate to transform the social field.

I do focus on this latter dimension of contemporary conditions to propose that centralisation fosters monopolistic control among Aboriginal people, where roles in organisations are themselves resources for achieving prestige. I propose moreover that there is a structural equivalence between niche control and sites of performance, but neither successfully reproduce an Aboriginal system of differentiation and prestige premised on reciprocity and nurturance. The former inflect more to hierarchy, diluting if not divesting in the process forms of reciprocal exchange through which social relations were (and sometimes still are) managed. Sites of performance in contrast do not inflect to hierarchy at all, being oriented to sustaining a relative egalitarianism among people. Both niche control and sites of performance moreover operate to circumvent forms of centralised hierarchy, inhibiting the emergence of an institutional domain of autonomy and authority – these being entities which self-determination initiatives seek to facilitate. Hence different forms of organisation and value provide ambiguity in social relations at Ngukurr that often manifest as tension, unease or even a turning away from state linked agencies mediated by administrative institutions. Chapters 2 through 7 use historical and contemporary ethnography to show the ways in which tensions emerge and Aboriginal people rebuff non-Indigenous forms of organisation at Ngukurr.

By attending to these forms of transformation I treat change as intimately related to the way in which Indigenous Australians are marginally positioned within a dominant white society. In this regard nothing since the mission regime has come to play a totalising role in Aboriginal life at Ngukurr, yet people are working out their own innovations in response to these conditions to some degree. In taking this view I am mindful of an observation made by Asad (1993:4-5), that people are not the passive objects of their own history – but neither are they the authors of the conditions within which things take on meaningful places. Chapter 2 begins this account with a description of the contemporary conditions in which Aboriginal people live at Ngukurr.

CHAPTER 2:

NGUKURR, SOUTHEAST ARNHAM LAND

This chapter describes the contemporary conditions in which Aboriginal people live in a remote region of southeast Arnhem Land. It provides an outline of Ngukurr's spatial and social arrangements to highlight how life is oriented differently for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in the town.

I also provide an account of Ngukurr's administrative arrangements, particularly the way in which a putative group of 20 clans has been designated for the purposes of community management. Administrative clans utilise some imputed indigenous ideas of descent to provide the community with a system of electoral representation. They also provide a way to devolve responsibility for community services to clan groups.

Administrative clans have a significant bearing on Ngukurr's socio-political life, but it is more accurate, in my view, to understand the community in terms of patronymic families. These groups are a primary source of identity for Aboriginal Australians at Ngukurr and they mark people's history of association in the Roper region of southeast Arnhem Land. A major part of the chapter considers the effects on community life of white attempts at centralised management through a 'clan system' in the context of a different and more dynamic Indigenous order of residential groups and patronymic families. Where the former European idea tends to hierarchy, the latter regime is premised on the autonomy of groups and (ideally) equality between them.

A final part of the chapter addresses the everyday dynamics of association in residential groups and ego-centred networks. These forms of association, focused on domestic and public spaces,¹ are the dominant contexts in which Aboriginal sociality

¹ Especially in the context of settlement life, these spaces frequently intermesh, for example when a card game is held at a particular camp.

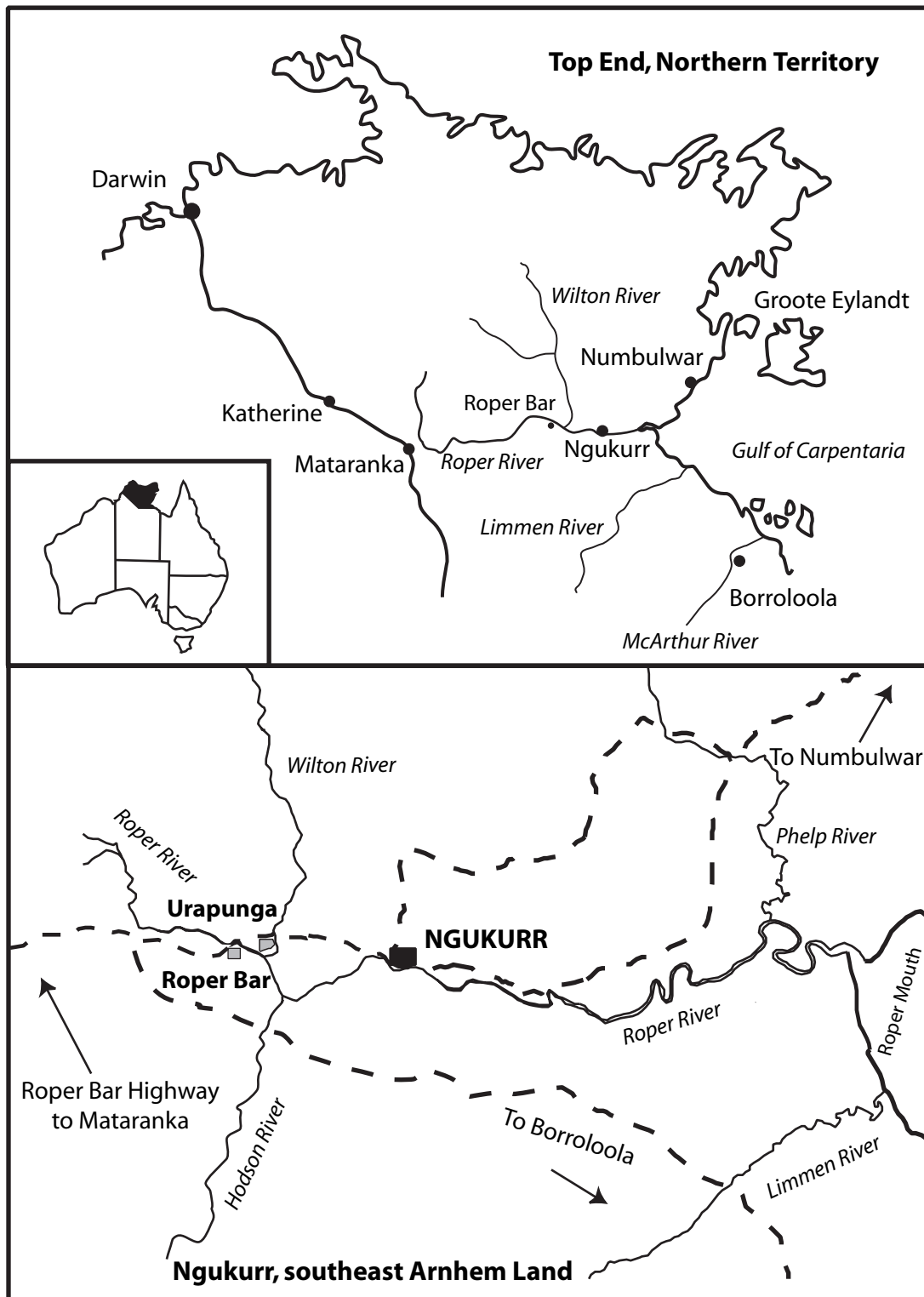
is rendered as relatedness. They are, moreover, the contexts in which focal individuals around whom patronymic families cohere assert their autonomy and provide an identity for the group. I also discuss what bearing these modes of managing relations have on community life at Ngukurr – a different set of impacts from Ngukurr’s administrative procedures. First, however, I provide a brief outline of the location of this study.

The Location Of The Study

Ngukurr is a remote Arnhem Land community of approximately 900 Aboriginal residents. It is located 700kms to the southeast of Darwin and 360kms from Katherine, its nearest major supply centre (see Map 1). Ngukurr lies on the northern bank of the Roper River 120kms from the Gulf of Carpentaria. The river forms a natural boundary for the southernmost edge of Arnhem Land.

The Roper region, wherein Ngukurr is located, lies in the tropical savannah belt of north Australia. It is moderately wooded and well-watered. The tropical climate has distinct ‘wet’ and ‘dry’ seasons. The dry season is characterised by minimal rainfall and occurs between May and October. Access to Ngukurr during this time is via the Roper Highway. It services a number of cattle stations as well as Aboriginal communities at Jilkmanjan, Roper Valley and Minyerri. It consists of 130kms of single-lane bitumen and 70kms of graded dirt road. The highway crosses both the Roper and Wilton Rivers to reach Ngukurr.

A small store at Roper Bar Crossing services the tourist traffic to the area and a nearby outstation at Badawarrka. Urapunga, an outstation lying between the Roper and Wilton Rivers has its own store and school. There is also a store at Ngukurr. All three stores are used by Ngukurr Aborigines throughout the dry season both for shopping and socialising. There are also constant visits to outstations and to other Aboriginal communities such as Numbulwar on the Rose River, which are accessed by dirt roads and tracks.



Map 1: Area of study

Monsoonal rains fall between November and April and temperatures vary between 25° and 40°C. Both the Roper and Wilton River crossings become impassable due to monsoon rains. The country surrounding Ngukurr is often flooded for several months and the town can only be accessed by boat and plane.

The genesis of Ngukurr as an Aboriginal community occurred in the following way. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) founded the first Christian mission in Arnhem Land in 1908.² This evangelical Anglican group established their mission on the northern bank of Roper River approximately 112kms from its mouth in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The mission was relocated to a ridge about 8kms further upriver in 1940 because severe flooding completely destroyed all the stock and buildings at the first site. Roper River Mission operated as a base to extend CMS missions to Groote Eylandt, Oenpelli and Numbulwar. It also operated an itinerant ministry to cattle stations in the Roper region including Roper Valley, Minyerri and Elsey. CMS transferred administrative control of the mission to the Australian Government in 1968 (Cole 1968). After the transfer the settlement was renamed Ngukurr by the Aboriginal population, the name by which they had always known the place.

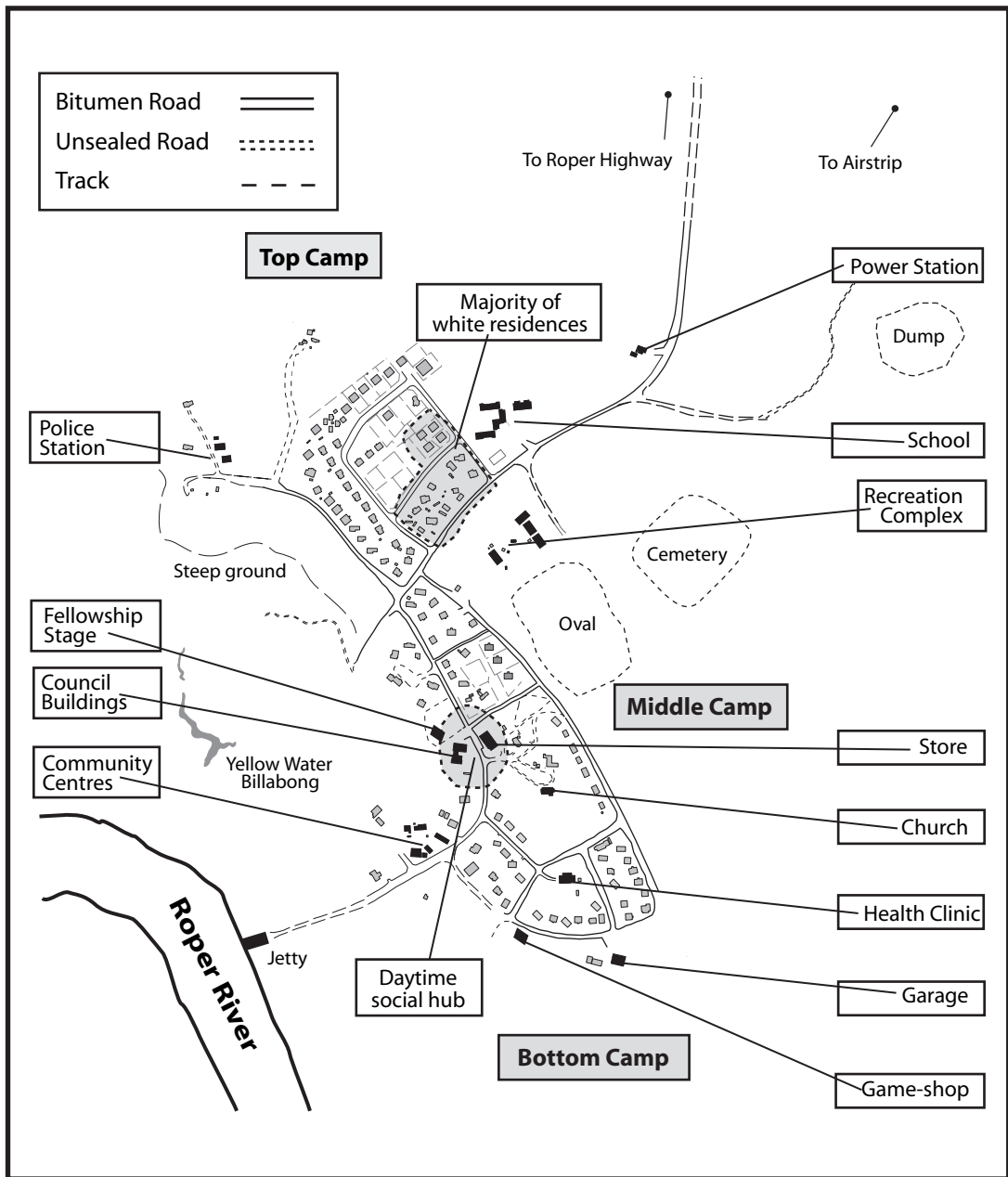
² For the sake of clarity I refer to all Church Missionary branches, including their auxiliaries such as the Church Missionary Association of NSW and the Church Missionary Association of Victoria, as CMS. The Church Missionary Association of Victoria was the branch responsible for founding the first Anglican mission in Arnhem Land at Roper River. They maintained responsibility for it until 1937. The Victorian and NSW associations were formed in 1892. Both were established as partially independent from their parent body, the CMS (England) founded in 1799. The CMA branches absorbed the membership of CMS (England) that had previously operated in Australia since the mid 1800s. Each branch of CMA had its own policy and was responsible for its own recruitment and maintenance of work but the parent body, CMS (England), still determined the locations in which missionaries would work. Eventually the NSW and Victoria CMA reformed as the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania in 1916. In 1952 they were renamed the Church Missionary Society of Australia (Cole, 1971:12-17).

Spatial And Social Arrangements At Ngukurr

Ngukurr is situated along a ridge that gently slopes downhill to Roper River. As is common in Arnhem Land communities, different areas are designated by the term 'camp.' Ngukurr has a top-, middle- and bottom-camp with houses (approximately 100) and community buildings distributed throughout. These designated areas are not identified with any particular Aboriginal language or family group.³ Each camp is qualitatively different though, both in terms of its residential mix (i.e. numbers of whites to blacks) and in terms of the predominant activities that occur in each (see Map 2).

On entering Ngukurr a visitor first encounters the school and recreation complex located on either side of a bitumen road leading into the community. Both are situated in spacious grounds with tended lawns that offer pleasant shaded areas to sit in. A swimming pool, the central feature of the recreation centre, sparkles in the sunshine immediately attracting attention. It gives a familiar feel to a visitor, such as myself, used to frequenting the very popular suburban pools in other Australian towns for leisure and exercise. The visitor is also struck by how quiet these areas are during the daytime and by the fact that they are located right on the periphery of the town, with only the graveyard, garbage dump and airport situated beyond this point.

³ 'Camp' is also used to refer to places (i.e. a cluster of neighbouring houses or an outstation) where people most often reside or spend time in the company of relatives.



Map 2: Ngukurr town

Passing through top-camp, in a south-easterly direction, one arrives at middle-camp, the social hub of daytime activities at Ngukurr. Aboriginal people congregate outside the council building and community store, which are situated opposite each other on the main street. Between 10am and 2pm each weekday is the best time to catch up on recent events and avail oneself of the opportunities to borrow or have loans of cash and food repaid. Social interaction is enhanced due to the seating available outside the store, its take-away food outlet and by the shade trees and grassed area outside the council building. The area attracts a constant flow of people throughout the morning and early afternoon, as the majority of service delivery business is located in and behind the council building.⁴ The council lawn is also the place where public gatherings, such as fortnightly school assemblies and irregular community meetings, are held.

The health clinic is located in bottom-camp as is the game-shop. The health clinic is heavily used throughout the day and night, although the latter time is only for medical emergencies. It is not a place where people tarry. The game-shop is a hugely popular night-time (especially weekend) venue for Aboriginal people at Ngukurr. It has a take-away food outlet, and an indoor and outdoor stage where Ngukurr's many rock bands perform. It also has some pool tables and computer game facilities.⁵ It is fairly rare for white service personnel to attend band nights and other events at the game-shop. The game-shop is the only privately run enterprise at Ngukurr, jointly owned by a local Aboriginal man and a non-resident non-

⁴ The council building houses Air Ngukurr, Land Care, Centrelink, housing, employment and training offices, meeting rooms and a mail distribution centre. The Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme (BRACS) operates from a building adjacent to the council building. The arts centre and library, women's centre and kid's centre are located further along the main street below the council building, while the Northern Land Council (NLC) office is situated adjacent to the store.

⁵ The popularity of these latter facilities with school-aged children is such that the game-shop does not open for business during term time until the evening. Its take-away food outlet, however, does open at lunch times. The swimming pool, similarly, is not open to children during term time until after 2pm.

Indigenous Australian. Both of these men are also joint owners of the store at Urapunga.⁶

Ngukurr houses are either pre-fabricated metal structures or brick constructions built on fenced blocks of land. They consist of 2 to 4 bedrooms. The quality of houses and gardens varies depending on their location and the quantity of residents at each. Bottom-camp houses tend to be more ramshackle than elsewhere and less often have fenced yards. Aboriginal homes are generally overcrowded because there is little out-migration from Ngukurr (Taylor, Bern and Senior 2000:14, 16). Quite a few have additional dwellings such as caravans or cabins in their yards. Networks of Aboriginal kin tend to occupy a cluster of neighbouring houses, which form linked households often sharing resources. Many households are comprised of a married couple, their children, a couple of unmarried siblings and maybe a parent of one of the couple. It is not unusual for two married couples and their children to share a 2 bed-roomed house. Most households have at least a couple of dogs, which form territorial packs especially at night. Aboriginal yards are utilised a great deal, especially at night-time. They are popular places in which to play cards or yarn and play music around a fire.

The majority of whites resident at Ngukurr are service personnel (approximately 40 of 50).⁷ The houses of nurses, teachers and most council employees are located primarily in top camp, taking up a corner block opposite the recreation complex and school. Permanent white service personnel do not have to share accommodation with each other; that is even single workers are allocated houses individually, unless they are transient. Moreover, they do the bulk of their

⁶ Both of these businesses ceased operations in 2003 because they were under investigation by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO).

⁷ Non-service whites resident at Ngukurr included 2 researchers, 2 CMS missionaries, 3 men married to Aboriginal women and not involved with service delivery and 3 game-shop employees. The interaction of these people with Aborigines at Ngukurr is significantly different to that of service personnel.

shopping at major service centres such as Katherine, in some cases having regular supplies air freighted into the community on a monthly basis.

White council employees oversee 8 different areas of community programs and service delivery at Ngukurr. The Town Clerk and the Community Development Employment Project (CDEP) manager administer the town's public revenues.⁸ Other white employees oversee the arts, women's and kid's centres, the building construction and maintenance programs, the garage and Air Ngukurr.⁹ There are 17 whites working in non-council services, including 3 policemen, 8 teachers, 4 health clinic personnel and 2 storekeepers. Most service personnel maintain additional homes in other parts of the Northern Territory or Australia, returning to them over the Christmas period when the school and council at Ngukurr are closed (the former for 12 and the latter for 8 weeks). Only a skeleton crew (approximately 10) remains to attend to service delivery. Moreover, the majority of white personnel stay for less than 2 years at Ngukurr. Only the Town Clerk, Head Nurse, their spouses and the 2 CMS missionaries have worked there for over 10 years.

⁸ The CDEP scheme was designed in the mid 1970s as a response to the lack of formal labour market employment opportunities in remote Aboriginal communities (Morphy and Sanders 2001:1-2). It was expanded in the mid 1980s to include Indigenous communities in more densely settled areas of Australia (ibid.). Funded by the Commonwealth's Aboriginal affairs administration, payments to Aboriginal communities are roughly equivalent to unemployment payment entitlements and enable communities to employ their members on a part-time basis (ibid.). A major reshaping of the CDEP scheme occurred during the 1990s, which recognised participants as social security customers and wage earners in relation to their local community organisations (Sanders 2001:48-9). Participants can receive other income support entitlements from within the social security system administered by Centrelink (e.g. health care and rental assistance), while their basis entitlement is routed through ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) and the local Indigenous community organisation administering CDEP wages (ibid.). See also footnote 17 below for further details concerning the abolishment of ATSIC in 2004 and the transfer of the CDEP scheme to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) portfolio.

⁹ In total there are 23 white council employees at Ngukurr. 10 have management roles in the areas described above. A further 13 whites are employed by council; pilots (4), office staff at the council (4), water and power supply (2) and casual positions such as general office duties or attending to the recreation complex kiosk (3).

A distinct feature of council employment at Ngukurr is that 5 married couples dominate positions of responsibility in 8 areas of community management. For example, the Town Clerk's husband has the contract for building maintenance, while her brother and sister-in-law manage Air Ngukurr. The CDEP bookkeeper's wife runs the women's centre and the wife of the construction program's manager runs the kid's centre. The husband of the arts centre supervisor has the contract for maintenance of the power generator. In several instances too spouses or other relatives (i.e. adult children) of council and non-council service personnel are hired in casual positions related to service delivery. Others receive cleaning and maintenance contracts, for example, at the health clinic or police station.

White service personnel do form a consolidated group within Ngukurr due to the fact that 20 out of 40 of them are married to each other. Moreover they are a distinct group not only in terms of their residential clustering and dominance of community service roles but also in terms of their social habits. There is little black/white interaction outside of working hours. This is due in part to the fact that there is no public venue, such as a pub or club, in which to socialise. Whites, therefore, tend to socialise among themselves, having fairly frequent dinner and drinks parties in their homes. Alcohol can only be legally consumed in these private venues because a permit system operates to restrict its use at Ngukurr.¹⁰ The social separation between blacks and whites is also due to the fact that whites are in general uninterested in Aboriginal sports, Fellowship and rock music activities and disinclined to attend events unless other white service personnel organise them.

Council run events include open days to celebrate Ngukurr's achievements in the annual Tidy Towns competitions or functions to honour long standing service to the community by Indigenous or non-Indigenous workers. These are held at the

¹⁰ Ngukurr is a 'dry' community; that is it operates a permit system for the possession and consumption of alcohol, which is specific to a permit holder and his or her residence. No Aboriginal people at Ngukurr have alcohol permits to my knowledge, though in theory they can apply for them, and most whites do possess them.

recreation complex.¹¹ Such events are popular with the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population especially if they include a free barbeque or free pool use for children.¹² The indoor hall at the complex hosts a movie night and disco on the weekend, both of which are usually supervised by white service personnel and only attended by children.¹³ The same hall doubles as an indoor basketball court and the weekly competitions (male and female), run by an Aboriginal Recreation Officer, are extremely popular with Aboriginal teenagers and adults.

There is a noticeable withdrawal of whites from public space at Ngukurr at the end of each working day and at weekends when the council, arts, women's and kid's centres close. The store does open on Saturday morning but much of the interaction outside it is focused on obtaining a lift to a nearby billabong or river for a day's fishing. In fact the town centre is virtually devoid of people during the weekend as this is a favoured time for day trips or overnight camping trips to outstations around Ngukurr. Vehicles are at a premium every weekend during the dry season as the annual calendar of rodeos and festivals at Mataranka, Katherine and Barunga attract visitors from Ngukurr.¹⁴

¹¹ Ngukurr has received Tidy Towns awards for its Land Care and Women's Centre programs in 2000 and 2001 respectively. It received the Menzies Housing award in 2000 and a high commendation in the CDEP Large Community Awards 2001.

¹² The pool is popular for most of the year with Aboriginal children and white adults. During term time children are not allowed to use the pool until the end of the school day. They are not allowed to use it unless there is an adult to supervise and they are not allowed to use it after 5pm. Adults can use the pool outside of these times. Aboriginal adults, however, never swim in it yet the local billabongs are popular places where people do bathe in the shallow water beside the bank.

¹³ Televisions and video players are commonly owned items at Ngukurr and the store rents videos. Perhaps this is why adults do not frequent the weekly movie. Moreover, children run about and play nosily during the movie and the venue's acoustics, given that it is a galvanised iron construction, are quite bad.

¹⁴ The pilot survey conducted by the South East Arnhem Land Collaborative Research Project (SEALCP) at the end of 1999 found that 35 per cent of Aboriginal households (for the purposes of that survey one household = one residence) privately owned some form of transport. There were about 30 functioning privately owned vehicles at Ngukurr.

The foregoing brief outline of spatial and social arrangements highlights how life is oriented very differently for blacks and whites at Ngukurr. The latter maintain a separation between work and home, each linked to different places. They further maintain a social separation from Aboriginal people, having little involvement in public life except in their capacities as service personnel. They are, moreover, motivated by personal commitments to secure a future for themselves and their families, a future that is located beyond the immediate context and concerns of Ngukurr. Aborigines constantly comment on these differences between white and black at Ngukurr. One unfavourable criticism is that white service personnel cannot get jobs in their own towns, so they come to Aboriginal communities and take them away from blackfellas.

For Aboriginal people, life does revolve around Ngukurr's service delivery arrangements. However, it is structured more by participation in valued activities with kin, rather than through the routines of 9-5 occupational roles. In the following I take up how local government operates through a 'clan management system' and how it fails to represent or bring an Aboriginal community into being.

Administrative Arrangements: CDEP And Clans¹⁵

Ngukurr is currently administered under the Yugul Mangi Community Government Scheme (YMCGS).¹⁶ The YMCGS is the administrative centre also for Aboriginal communities at Urapunga, Badawarrka, Minyerri, Bringung and Nutwood Downs. The Yugul Mangi Community Government Council (YMCGC) receives funding from the Northern Territory and Commonwealth Governments. Its primary source of public revenue is the Community Development Employment

¹⁵ See footnote 8 above and footnote 17 below for further details concerning the CDEP scheme.

¹⁶ The Northern Territory Government suspended Ngukurr Council in late 2002. An independent Commissioner conducted an inquiry into the Council's activities. The major area of concern was the relationship between the Council and Yugul Mangi Clan Development Pty Ltd, which ran Air Ngukurr. The inquiry led to the dismissal of the Council in March 2003. This was followed by a series of consultations between Local Government representatives and Ngukurr residents to develop a new constitution and appoint a new Council.

Project (CDEP) funded by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).¹⁷

YMCGC membership and CDEP revenues are managed through an ‘administrative clan system.’ This arrangement emerged in the following way. The ‘clan system’ was adopted as a representative structure for the YMCGC in 1997. It replaced the ‘7 tribe system,’ founded on Aboriginal language affiliations, which had been the organisational basis of the YMCGC since 1988. The CDEP program collapsed in 1992 under this system of management. A review commissioned by ATSIC identified community dissatisfaction with a council structure based on language group affiliation, as many Aboriginal groups were not effectively represented by it (Mott 1997:1-2). A ‘clan system,’ each being roughly equal in size, was developed as a means to create a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities across the population.¹⁸ The reorganisation of the YMCGC in terms of ‘administrative clans’ followed from the success of reviving CDEP and developing a housing plan through this system (Edmunds 2001:20-4).

The Council is currently comprised of 20 senior Aboriginal members drawn from 20 ‘clan’ groups at Ngukurr. Eligible members within each ‘clan’ group nominate a Councillor to the YMCGC.¹⁹ Age and gender play a large part in

¹⁷ The Howard Government announced in April 2004 that ATSIC would be abolished and its Indigenous specific programs transferred to mainstream government departments. The *ATSIC Amendment Bill 2004* proposing to abolish ATSIC’s National Board of Commissioners from 30 June 2004 and its Regional Councils from 30 June 2005 was passed by the House of Representatives in June 2004 (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner 2004-2005, *Social Justice Reports* 2004, 2005, HREOC). The new arrangements took effect on 1st July 2004 when \$1 billion of Indigenous programs were transferred, which brought the CDEP scheme within DEWR’s portfolio (idem. 2005).

¹⁸ The number of members in administrative clans ranges between 25 and 65. The average number in clans is 45. One is very large with 80+ members and one is small with only 19 members.

¹⁹ The *Local Government Act (NT) 1985* allows for flexibility in the type of electoral system used in Aboriginal communities (Wolfe 1989:42-4, 66, 98). Local councils can opt to appoint members by agreements made between eligible members of specific groups (ibid.). The YMCGC allows for the practice of restricting participation in nominating members onto council. The constitution reads ‘The

determining eligibility for office and in determining who is involved in the nomination of Councillors. Senior Aboriginal men have been successful in restricting competition for Council membership to themselves since the establishment of the YMCGC in 1988. A government-appointed Town Clerk (non-Indigenous) oversees the YMCGC and is subject to the authority of the Council. Nevertheless the office brings with it a good deal of independence in matters of budget expenditure, priority setting and appointing white personnel to administer service delivery programs at Ngukurr. Council members, therefore, are rendered quite dependent on the Town Clerk (see also Taylor, Bern and Senior 2000:11).

Membership of administrative clans reflects descent and affinal connections underlying an Aboriginal system of land-kin relations. I intend by the use of quotation marks, however, to highlight that the term 'clan' in this context denotes its administrative function in the township.²⁰ Specifically patrilineal descent is considered to be a primary basis for membership in administrative clans. But they are also acknowledged to be elective associations because individuals can choose to be members of their mother's, grandparent's or spouse's clan. Individuals do manipulate their membership in administrative clans depending on how best their

election of members for a clan group is to be effected by agreement between persons belonging to the clan group who are eligible to participate in the election as to the persons by whom they wish to be represented on the council' (Northern Territory of Australia 1997, YMCGC section 21:1 p.10).

²⁰ The concept of clan is intimately related to forms of ritual, marriage and exchange (see Morphy 1988b, 1997; Keen 1995, 2000). Although administrative clans at Ngukurr are modelled on what Aboriginal people have identified as important social categories, including tribe or language group, patriclan, family and owner-manager relations, their salience may be altered when linked to the functioning of European derived organisations. For example every administrative clan at Ngukurr has a nominated *mingirringgi* (owner) and *junggayi* (manager), which implies that relations of interdependence and reciprocity exist between these leaders. In the context of secular administration however there is no basis for an exchange of authority between such individuals and no site for its enactment such as occurs in performances of different ceremonies where members of moieties and semi-moieties alternate in the roles of *junggayi*, *darlhyin* and *mingirringgi*. The utilisation of Aboriginal social categories for the purposes of secular administration may drain such roles of their significance, potentially redesigning exchange practices and the forms of authority and autonomy they support (see also chapters 5 and 7; see also Merlan 1998:150).

interests might be served. Individuals can also fall outside the administrative clan system where it pertains to CDEP monies. Those on unemployment benefits, pensions or in private employment often do not identify with any administrative clan at all.

As few opportunities for wage-labour exist locally, Aboriginal people at Ngukurr are employed primarily through the CDEP scheme.²¹ Local enterprises are also developed through the CDEP scheme. It is administered along clan lines and each has its own budget. Clan enterprises include a second-hand clothing store, laundromat and a cattle project/butchery.²² In addition community services, such as garbage collection, fencing, maintenance of the dump, and so on, are contracted to particular clans.²³ Programs run through the arts', women's and kid's centres also provide Aborigines with employment. Approximately 45 per cent of the Aboriginal population aged 15-64 years are employed (Taylor, Bern and Senior 2000:36-7). However, Aboriginal people are less visibly engaged with income related work than this figure suggests. For example, the clothing store, laundromat and women's centre is not open on a daily basis. The butchery had to cease trading after a few months, as it was unable to comply with health and safety regulations. The construction program utilises external white labour gangs to build new houses because this is more economically efficient. Aboriginal involvement in the arts and kid's centres occurs on an ad hoc basis. Service and maintenance work is intermittent and a number of other clan enterprises are inactive.

Aboriginal people frequently express their dissatisfaction with Ngukurr's administrative arrangements. The 'clan system' is criticised for the fact that it does

²¹ There are 32 Aboriginal people in non-CDEP employment; 23 are full-time and 9 are part-time workers (Taylor, Bern and Senior 2000:41).

²² Other CDEP enterprise projects exist on paper, such as the mobile tuck-shop, fish-farm, landscaping supplies and tourism ventures but all were inactive during the time of my fieldwork.

²³ There are constant fluctuations in numbers receiving CDEP payments because much of the nature of that work is part-time and intermittent. Those receiving CDEP payments, in 1999-2000, number between 243 and 324 (Taylor, Bern and Senior 2000:37-9).

not effectively represent the interests of youth, women and smaller kin-groups at Ngukurr or in the YMCGS region (see also Bern 1990:14; Edmunds 2001:28-9). Dissatisfaction is also expressed about the criteria used to constitute clan leaders and the method of nominating them. Specifically senior men, often the same senior men, continue to dominate Council membership after every election.²⁴ There is constant criticism about the fact that whites dominate key administrative and managerial positions, which exclude Ngukurr Aborigines (cf. Cowlshaw 1999:268).²⁵ This lack of incorporation at the local level is a site of constant contestation and mirrors Ngukurr people's lack of integration at a wider community level. In other words, community-wide organisation, founded on hierarchical and centralised control of resources and decision-making, is not a 'natural' feature of Ngukurr's Aboriginal population. Rather, Aboriginal forms of organisation are 'rhizome-like' as Rumsey (2001:22-6) characterises them. They generate an elaborate differentiation of social space in terms of relatedness, realised through a variety of linking mechanisms including filiation, ritual, marriage and residence. Connections between people are, therefore, multiple, crosscutting and contextually relative. In effect, as Rumsey argues, no particular grouping such as a 'patrilineal clan, language group or local cognatic stock ... provides *the* central axis' from which 'all other levels are ramifications' (ibid. 40, emphasis in original). These rhizome-like features of social organisation are explored more fully below, in the sections discussing the 'clan carers' scheme, patronymic families and bilateral relatedness.

Some further observations that I draw concerning local government and CDEP at Ngukurr include the fact that economic control is vested in the Commonwealth through government bureaucracies. Community managers are

²⁴ The YMCGC has an executive committee of 5 members, drawn from the ranks of its senior Councillors. The committee has some of the powers and functions of council delegated to it. Clans also have a deputy representative nominated in the same way that Councillors are appointed at time of elections. They are often drawn from the ranks of junior males and women. They can represent their clans in the absence of Councillors, although I am unaware of any instances where this has occurred.

²⁵ Cowlshaw (1999:268) describes a similar situation that occurred at Bulman in 1997, where whites also held the majority of senior staffing positions.

subject to the limitations placed on them by governments so that decision-making and development plans are undertaken according to the priorities of Euro-Australian notions of economic efficiency, necessity and convenience (Palmer 1990:172). These realities are understood by Ngukurr Aborigines who view Council as an imposed and foreign entity, despite the fact that its membership is Aboriginal. They perceive themselves to be clients of a larger administrative-economic apparatus, over which they feel they have little control. These feelings are heightened by the fact that clan leaders do not form an integrated group for the purposes of collective decision-making and community action. Rather, they vie with each other to maintain their status as leaders of clans, based on their capacity to allocate resources to kin. Individuals, moreover, do not necessarily have a sense of attachment to any one administrative clan. This is due, in part, to the method used to nominate Councillors to office and, in part, to the intermittent nature of much CDEP work.

The 'clan system' is a construct that is assumed to represent and bring into being an Aboriginal community because it brings within one domain both CDEP and Council functions. It therefore penetrates a good deal of Ngukurr's political and public culture being the apparatus through which electoral representation, service delivery, the labour sector and community facilities (e.g. art's, women's, kid's and recreation centres) are organised (cf. Rowse 2002:75).²⁶ But the following case of the 'clan carer' scheme demonstrates that administrative clans cannot be made to function as units for the purpose of top-down administration. The attempt to do so highlights a major disjuncture between white and black understandings about responsibility, community service and the dynamics of Aboriginal groups.

²⁶ Rowse (2002:74-5) comments on the fact that other researchers note the extent to which CDEP schemes have penetrated Indigenous labour markets in some Aboriginal communities (e.g. Altman and Johnson on the Maningrida region, Taylor, Bern and Senior on Ngukurr and its satellite communities). The concern in this literature is with the way in which governments might use CDEP as a substitute funding mechanism or the loss of autonomy that satellite communities might experience as a regional public sector is colonised by CDEP. My concern however is with the convergence of governance and economic functions in the administrative clan system at Ngukurr, and the extent to which it does not reflect the orientations and practices of the population it is designed to manage.

The 'Clan Carers' scheme

A 'clan carers' program began operating at the women's centre in late 1999. The centre had been inactive for some time, only opening to host the quarterly district court sessions and sporadic meetings of the 'Strong Women, Strong Babies' program. I was informed that the Town Clerk closed the centre because Aboriginal women were using it as a place to rest, rather than pursue community activities. I was also informed that Aboriginal women approached Council, specifically the Town Clerk, for funds to support activities at the women's centre. They were vaguely conceptualised, by Aboriginal women, as 'doing something for themselves and the community.' \$19,000 per annum was made available to the women's centre from CDEP revenues with the specific entailment that it be used for a community care program. More than half of this amount (\$11,760) was allocated to pay 10 Aboriginal women to act as carers for one or more of Ngukurr's 20 administrative clans. The payment was a 'top-up' on what they already received from CDEP. It became apparent within the first few months of operations that the white manager employed to coordinate the 'clan carer' program and Aboriginal women had quite different expectations about the function of the scheme and the women's centre.

MN and JB, Aboriginal co-ordinators of the women's centre, were first to be recruited as carers.²⁷ They assisted the white manager to approach other Aboriginal women to act as representatives for their clans. They found 8 women willing to be recruited in the first month. A few activities had commenced during this time, but rarely involved more than a few carers and a few of their daughters. These included a couple of cooking classes, one trip to look for 'bush tucker' and a few gardening sessions in the grounds of the women's centre.

The 'clan carer' scheme was not yet operational, despite these activities. The white manager called a meeting to discuss how it might move forward. Only 6 carers

²⁷ For reasons of cultural sensitivity and privacy I use initials to identify different individuals and families at Ngukurr. The initials used in this thesis do not correspond to people's names whether living or dead. Occasionally I do use a person's real name in this work because he or she has already been identified in published or archival sources. This occurs mostly in chapters 3 and 4 of this work.

showed up. She proposed that each carer should be encouraging more women and girls from their own clans to get involved in the scheme and finding out what women wanted to do at the centre. She asked if women wanted to start a cooperative to buy domestic supplies or start a catering or clothes making venture, as the centre was already equipped with a functioning kitchen and several sewing machines. Carers were also expected to find out what the needs of their clans were. The manager asked if there were elderly people who could benefit from meals-on-wheels or if children had malnutrition problems that could be addressed through programs at the women's centre. She was also concerned that 9 clans had no representation. For the time being she offered to act as liaison between these clans and the women's centre, but current carers were asked to find more women willing to take on this role. In addition carers were asked to work out a roster to water the garden, recently planted.

Two months later another meeting took place to discuss the fact that the scheme was no further ahead than previously. Some cooking classes had been held and some of the food taken to a few elderly people in the community. Another carer had been recruited, but the garden was almost dead. Only 5 carers attended the meeting and a new woman, SL, hoping to be recruited as a carer. The white manager began by stating that 'nothing was happening' at the centre and that the effort 'should be coming from the clans.' She asked if women understood the 'role of the carer' and explained that it was their job to get 'all the women on CDEP in their clans to help look after the clan.' She pointed out that the carers were 'not communicating with each other' and leaving it to her to 'organise what they wanted.' Using a white board, she showed them how CDEP funds were allocated, emphasising that the \$11,760 used to pay carers wages had to be justified.

It was at this point that major difficulties about operating the centre through CDEP became apparent. Only women on CDEP could get 'top-up' payments as carers and there was only funding for 10 of them. The new woman, SL, could not be recruited as she was receiving a different type of benefit. She was informed by the white manager that she was welcome to act in a voluntary role, as were all other women. The notion of voluntary caring did not seem to appeal, however, as 7 clans

still had no carers. Some had no mature women on CDEP. Others had, but these women did not embrace the notion that they were obliged to get involved in the scheme. In response to the manager's statements, Aboriginal women proposed that there should be money for all 20 clans to have one or even two carers. Some women pointed out that relatives of theirs were looking after elderly and sick kin, and they too should get paid. Another pointed out that the women's centre should have supported a recent circumcision ceremony for her sister's boys by catering the event (cf. Merlan 1989).²⁸ Yet another seemed to sum up these views with her statement that she always helped her family and friends but that 'community caring' should be supported by a larger grant from Council. One carer, not for the first time, wanted to know why the white manager hadn't been out to her husband's outstation to see all the environmental hazards she had to endure. She also asked why the women's centre funding was not being used to improve conditions in people's camps. A final offering was that perhaps if the centre could find things to sell they could pay for more helpers to get involved.

To cut a long story short, the 'clan carers' scheme became defunct not long after this meeting because the centre could not be managed through the construct of administrative clans. Firstly, there was a major assumption by white managers (including the Town Clerk) that carers interacted, or would come to interact, regularly with members of the clans they were representing. This did not occur. Though 9 women were willing to become carers for 'top-up' payments none had extensive interaction with members of the clan (in some cases two clans) they were representing. In 5 cases the relationship between clan and carer was posited on the basis of connections through father, mother or spouse. Some of these carers quite easily involved members of their residential groups, namely their daughters and affines, to come to the cooking classes and help with the garden. In 4 cases, however,

²⁸ Merlan (1989) describes an interesting case where help offered by bureaucratic agencies to Aborigines in the staging of a ritual led to difficulties as whites continually tried to detach organisational aspects of the event from issues of cultural content and social indebtedness. For the Aborigines concerned there were no 'institutional divisions' between the ritual's cultural values, the organisation of its performance and economic matters involving payments to performers (ibid. 106-7).

there was no specific relationship between representative and clan, either on the basis of kin affiliation or residential association. None of these carers managed to mobilise other women to come to the centre. Moreover, it was never apparent whether any carers tried or were able to work beyond the context of close kin to encourage other women, either within the clans they were representing or in the 7 unrepresented clans, to get involved with the scheme.

Secondly, Aboriginal women had quite different motives for becoming carers, which did not necessarily entail the object of ‘community care.’ For example, one of these carers represented 2 clans, namely her husband’s clan and her mother’s brother’s clan. These choices made sense for GQ as her affinal and maternal kin are extensive at Ngukurr, whereas the majority of her paternal kin live elsewhere. Though GQ often resided with her mother, mother’s sister or some of her siblings and their children when she was at Ngukurr, she lived with her affines at her husband’s outstation at the time of the scheme. She got involved to support that residential group by trying to direct women’s centre resources to the outstation. When she realised that this would not occur she, her 2 daughters, 2 sister-in-laws and their 3 girls did not involve themselves further with activities at the centre. Moreover, GQ did not mobilise women from her mother’s brother’s clan to participate in the scheme. This was due mainly to the fact that she was not a member of the residential groups linked to other families in her mother’s brother’s clan, despite her ritual connections with them.²⁹ Her role as carer for this group was partial at best, only including some of her siblings, her mother’s sister, mother’s brother and their children at the time. The same can be said for her role in relation to some members of her husband’s clan who did not live at the outstation.

²⁹ I distinguish patronymic families from clans, as there are more than 40 surnamed families and only 20 administrative clans at Ngukurr. There is considerable overlap between the membership of one large patronymic family (B) and one clan while another large patronymic family (A) is split into two administrative clans (see below Diagram 1 in the section on patronymic families). Many of the other clans represent more than one patronymic family and potentially small procreative families may fall outside the administrative scheme if it has no members on CDEP.

In addition, several Aboriginal women voiced a more general response to the 'community care' ethic in the following way. As far as they were concerned 'community care' was a Council responsibility and not something that they, as individuals, were obliged to manage. Moreover they did not see why the women's centre should be run along clan lines at all. They wanted the centre to be open on a daily basis simply as a place to congregate when they wanted, away from the demands of men. Neither did they want to sew and cook. As one woman said, 'we do these things all the time anyway.'

Some observations that I draw from the foregoing account of the failure of the 'clan carer' scheme is that white priorities about the women's centre entailed the view that it should offer some service to the community. The 'carers' scheme was therefore an attempt to realise the entity 'community' as a higher order unity by subsuming the women's centre within the organising logic of centralised hierarchy. Aboriginal women, however, were disinclined to have the nature of their roles in relation to administrative clans (or other groupings) centrally defined and beyond negotiation. They rebuffed the administrative inclination to treat groups as if they were fixed and finite units and thus its attempt to linearise social space.

Funding further complicated the issue of who was accountable to whom. Aboriginal women perceived the funding, once secured, to belong to them to direct as they chose. They were also of the view that white managers were paid to help them. Economic control, however, is vested in white managers who are accountable to the Town Clerk. Carers, therefore, had specific roles to perform to justify their 'top-up' payments and all CDEP women were obligated to work where directed. Aboriginal women did not embrace these expectations and the impasse was not resolved. The women's centre continued to operate with a white manager organising occasional catering ventures and a meals-on-wheels program, with ad hoc involvement from a few Aboriginal women.

My final observation is that white managers assumed that administrative clans would operate as an apparatus for the common good through designated female representatives. Clans, however, could not be made to function in this way as

membership in them is not stable. Clan carers had little sense of attachment to groups constituted in terms of a single or clearly bounded entity. Rather Aboriginal women's attachments were multiple and diffuse. They had, moreover, their own autonomous priorities to satisfy. These concerned their own well-being and providing for members of their residential groups. This further undermined the expectation that they would represent a larger group of people beyond those they generally interacted with at the time. Administrative clans, though reflecting some elements of Aboriginal social organisation, do not capture the dynamics that bring Aboriginal residential groups into being. In the following, I address some of the current modes of Aboriginal group composition and the forms of identity that they evoke in particular contexts. The most salient of these groups are patronymic families, some of which are especially prominent at Ngukurr.

Patronymic Families And Prominence

Bern (1974:113) found that the 'primary unit' of social organisation operating among Aboriginal people at Ngukurr in the 1970s was the 'family.' At the time of his study there were 8 'core' families with the longest history of association with the mission, 5 of which cohered around a single patriline (ibid. 114).³⁰ These families, Bern found, could also be identified in terms of 3 large cognatic stocks because of a history of intermarriage and ritual cooperation. Though family allegiances cut across these 3 cognatic groups they were, nevertheless, important social units both in contexts of ritual competition and settlement politics (ibid. 118, 122). In his work, Bern points to an effect of settlement whereby a large kin base and the ability to hold important positions in ritual and resource contexts consolidated the prominence of 2 of Ngukurr's core families (Bern 1989; Gerritsen 1981, 1982a; Thiele 1982).

³⁰ Bern (1974:103-4) could account for 70 per cent (i.e. 275 of 400 approximately) of the Aboriginal population at Ngukurr in the 1970s by virtue of their descent from 6 Aboriginal men known by their Euro-Australian or biblically derived surnames. Bern also uses the term 'core' to refer to families that had settled at the mission prior to the 1940s (ibid. 170-2).

Thirty years of secular bureaucracy have wrought further changes to this profile. There are now upwards of 40 surnamed families resident at Ngukurr, including those core ones identified by Bern. Some are relatively small having less than 20 members, whereas others are double and triple this size. I characterise the contemporary form of these groups as patronymic, each family cohering around a group of patrilineal relatives identified with the surname of a male antecedent. Patronymic families are important social units of identity at Ngukurr that also entail descent presumptions.

Sutton (1998) has addressed the emergence of ‘surnamed families’ among Aboriginal people, particularly in urban and rural Australia. He finds that surnames are often used as identifiers conferring an association with a mission, cattle-station or traditional land (ibid. 61). A surnamed group may refer to a minimal procreative family, a household with key defining residents plus their affines, or a cognatic descent group with others affiliated by history and residence (ibid. 57). Despite this variability of composition, Sutton nevertheless argues that ancestor-focused cognatic descent groups or ‘families of polity’ are a ‘major structural element’ of public life and of ‘enduring and central importance to the conduct of Aboriginal business’ (ibid. 60). They ‘persist over time’ and have many recognised deceased members that provide reference points in determining how ‘living descendants establish rights and interests’ in cultural forms of property including country (ibid.).

Patronymic families at Ngukurr resonate in some respects with Sutton’s families of polity. They are cognatic groups by virtue of the fact that they commonly include people related through ‘mother’s side.’ It is moreover integral to the conduct of Aboriginal business that these groups afford people multiple ways of reckoning membership.³¹ Hence they are defined in terms of patrilineal and matrilineal relations

³¹ ‘Business’ is a well-known synonym among Aboriginal people that glosses for them culturally established modalities of action, which is noted in the ethnographic literature (e.g. Bern 1974:24-5; Sansom 1980:34-9, 1982:117, 131). Aborigines also use it as a gloss for ritual activity (Myers 1991[1986]:225; Merlan 1989:111, 115 fn5; Dussart 2000:85-138). Ngukurr Aborigines apply the English-derived term to many contexts that entail a variety of transactions, which can have economic, political and social significance.

that extend back to a named, usually male, antecedent. They also confer an association with place. Patronymic families in the Roper region can be traced to the 1920s. They are the descendants of Aboriginal men who adopted biblical names or the surnames of cattle-station owners to mark their close association with Euro-Australian ‘bosses’ (either missionaries or pastoralists).³² It is also common today for some surnames to be derived from traditional clan names associated with a stretch of ‘county’.³³

I do not however wish to utilise Sutton’s terminology of cognatic descent groups for the situation at Ngukurr for a number of reasons. Patronymic families at Ngukurr are smaller and more labile than the ancestor-focused cognatic groups discussed by Sutton in relation to native title in Australia. They are in effect insufficiently bounded for them to be seen as corporate descent groups. Though families cohere around a patrilineal core bearing the surname of a male antecedent, senior males (especially siblings) within the core are also points of fission in the group. Thus some male members of a family descended from an antecedent bear his name and give a group its identity. It is also the case that some families bearing the

³² Aboriginal people apply the English derived term ‘boss’ to people who stand in a relation of authority to others. Anderson (1998) elaborates how it is both an achieved and ascribed status. A significant aspect of the relationship is that Aborigines expect bosses to look after their relatives or workers (Austin-Broos 2003a:123, 2006:4-6; Myers 1991[1986]). Aborigines also apply a ‘boss-worker’ form of association to relations among themselves or with Euro-Australians. See for example Collman (1988:130-42), Dussart (2000:88, 95), Gerritsen (1981, 1982a) and Keen (1994:99-130) among others. See chapter 4 of this study for a detailed account of the use of this model by Aboriginal people at Roper River Mission. See also chapter 5 regarding the difficulties of sustaining a relational form of authority associated with a boss-worker construct.

³³ Aboriginal language groups in the Roper region differ with respect to whether they have named or unnamed patrilineal clans (see also chapter 4 in the section ‘A boss-worker form of association’ – footnote 56). For example Heath (1978, 1980) records named clans focused on totemic estates for Ngandi, Ritharngu, Nunggubuyu and Wandarang people. Mangarrayi (Merlan 1982), Mara and Alawa, by contrast, refer to patrilineal groups with a semi-moiety classification, whether associated with an estate or major dreaming (Heath 1978; Bern, Larbalestier & McLaughlin 1980:24-5). Ngalakan refer to patrilineal groups often by their major dreaming (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982).

same surname at Ngukurr are identified in terms of different focal individuals. For these reasons I find that patronymic families reveal dynamics of expansion, contraction and fission over time at Ngukurr, in contrast to the persistence of Sutton's 'families of polity.'

These dynamics are most evident in the context of resource politics, where patronymic families are realised as groups through the capacity of senior men to engage in competitive status relations with each other and direct the benefits of competition to kin. Equally however competition occurs both within and between patrifilial groups, as individuals and families realise significant status through controlling a resource niche involving service-delivery or enterprise. Hence 'focal people' and 'bosses' are important reference points that determine group composition, as people attach themselves to the powerful in order to be more than marginal in the life of a place (Anderson 1998:200, 206; see also Austin-Broos 2003a).³⁴ However, as family sizes increase different foci within them also seek to differentiate themselves from each other. The following example shows the effect of powerful individuals on group composition and the tendency to distinguish lines within families through the use of different naming practices (see Diagram 1).

³⁴ The concept of 'focal people' is borrowed from Anderson (1998:200). He describes how focal Aborigines act as social reference points for others, being primary in determining camp and group composition. They achieve status by virtue of the benefits they can bestow on others (ibid.). Focal individuals who become 'bosses' must also fulfil structural principles that determine ascribed status, especially criteria of descent ties to land and direct descent links to an old or deceased boss (ibid. 206).

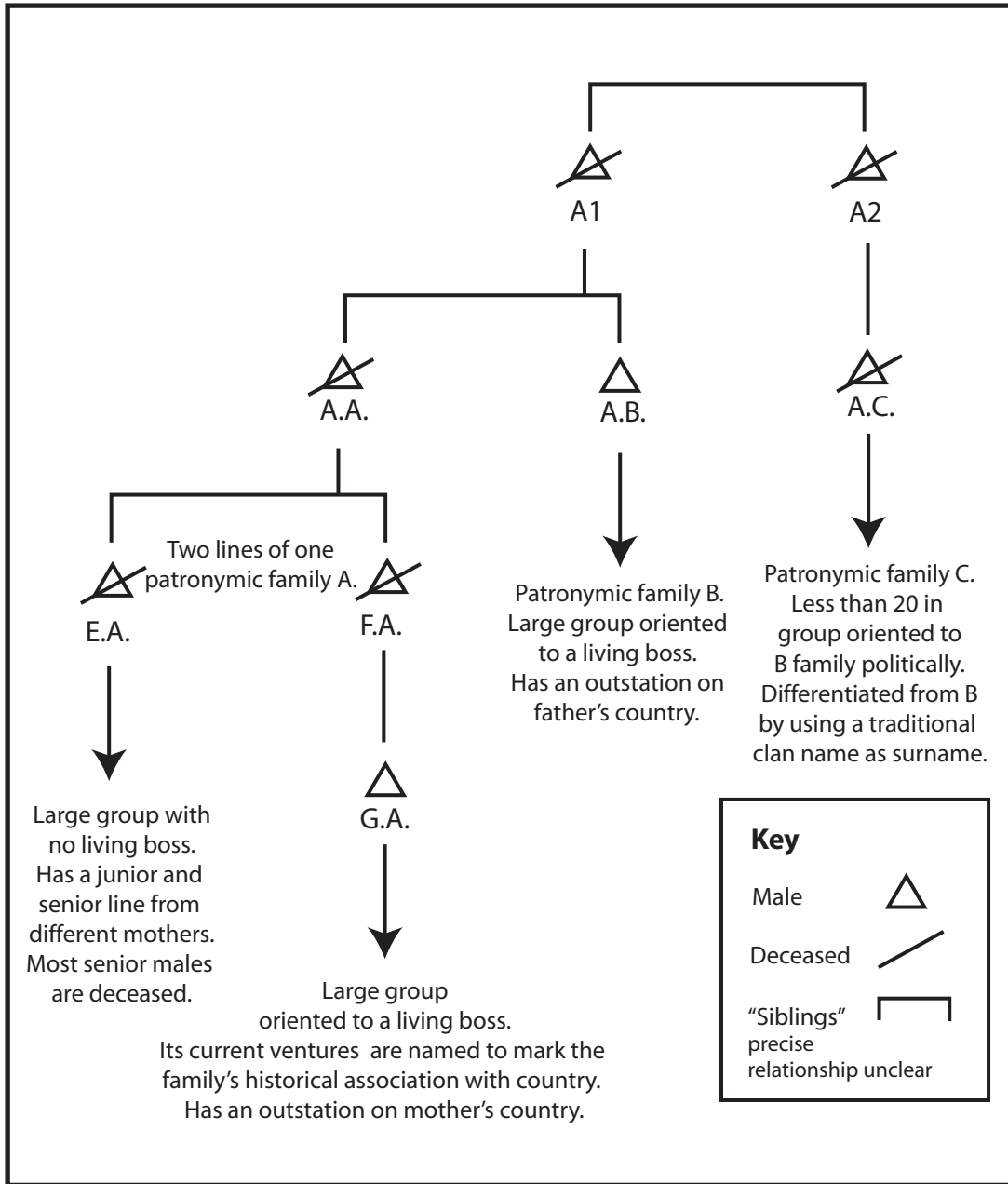


Diagram 1: Patrilineal family groups

During the 1970s Bern (1974:112-117) could identify the group, shown in Diagram 1 above, as a family cohering around the patriline of A. At this time it included a minor patriline K (not shown in the diagram above). In writing of cognatic aggregations Bern could combine A and K with the families L and Y because of a history of intermarriage and political alliance. The families of L and K are now large groups. While they maintain friendly relations with A, they are quite separate patronymic families that are represented politically in different administrative clans. In addition, the family of B has emerged as a new patronymic group that coheres around an elderly male (AB) who was 'younger brother' to the now deceased AA.³⁵

This family has flourished through the activities of AB's adult sons, some of whom are well represented across a range of Ngukurr's administrative niches. They too are represented politically with a separate administrative clan. AB and his eldest son HB are focal individuals and bosses for their kin. AB's status is derived from his extensive ritual knowledge of Aboriginal law and country. As holder of significant ritual paraphernalia he is also a living embodiment of valuable cultural property wherein group identity is vested. HB's status is based on his capacity to allocate resources to kin through his leadership of the cattle project. His camp is something of a reference point for much of the B family, being also the place where AB resides when not at his outstation.

The family C are a small group who have recently come to distinguish themselves from B and A families by using a traditional clan name as their surname. They are, however, oriented politically to B's group because they are small. Though younger members of A, B and C families recognise that they 'go together for ceremony,' patronyms express their principal social identities.³⁶

³⁵ I have put 'younger brother' in quotation marks to denote a classificatory or ritual relationship rather than a biological one.

³⁶ Though patronymic families are cognatic the patrilineal bias within them is the basis upon which members acknowledge other social identities based for example on moiety affiliations that they share

In addition there has been further fission within the A patriline. The progeny of AA's two eldest sons (EA and FA), though still known by the same patronym, now maintain a separation of interests at the level of administrative clans and at the level of residential groups. Indeed there is sometimes tension between these branches as one has become increasingly marginalised since the death of its genitor (EA) and the premature deaths of a number of that man's senior sons. In the other branch, however, a new leader (GA) emerged. He was a major competitor of EA while that man was still alive (see chapter 5), and he has successfully provisioned his close kin through his periods of control of the YMCGC and through his business enterprises. GA's success in provisioning kin constitutes him as a boss for them. His business interests enable him to offer roles to his senior son and eldest daughters to host weekly rock band performances, disco's and more irregular music festivals and band competitions. His senior son, a musician, is emerging as a focal individual for his younger brothers, sons and his brothers-in-law through organising these events and through his mentoring of younger rock bands. The family of GA, including his sisters and sister's children, is usually a significant presence at these events. They further support GA's ventures by purchasing the bulk of their provisions through his game-shop and store at Urapunga. Though still known by the A patronym, GA's family names its business and sporting ventures to reflect their historical association with Ngukurr.

There are contexts where several patronymic families do claim a 'one-mob' identity, extending the principle of cognatic affiliation to include as many people as possible within an aggregation. This occurs especially when families perceive their interests to be threatened. The rise to prominence of traditional owners in Ngukurr's administrative arrangements provides an example. The Roper Bar land claim validated a small agnatic core of Ngalakan people as traditional owners of Ngukurr because the town is situated on the totemic path of their major dreaming (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982). They receive rent for the lease of the store at Ngukurr on this basis and have tried to press for further rights in the running of the town (Bern

with members of other patrilines. Ngukurr Aborigines may therefore have some expectations regarding forms of exchange in relation to marriage and ceremony at this level of patronymic families.

1989:173). Patronymic families with a history of residence at Roper River Mission contest the configuration of ownership upheld in the Roper Bar land claim. They continue to assert that responsibility for country involves cognatic aggregations. They propose that reciprocal performances of *Gunapipi* and *Yabaduruwa* ceremonies, which celebrate totemic estates, generate parity though differentiated responsibility between those constituted as *mingirringgi*, *junggayi* and *darlнын* for them. Specifically individuals are *mingirringgi* (owner) in their father's father's country, *junggayi* (manager) in their mother's father's and father's mother's country and *darlнын* (custodian) in their mother's mother's country.³⁷ They refuse to concede a privileged position to the town's *mingirringgi* by extending this model to the management of Ngukurr.³⁸

³⁷ I interpret the term *darlнын* as custodian, rather than co-owner or co-manager. I intend by this usage to circumvent the rather exclusive English distinctions associated with the terms owner and manager, because they do not do justice to the ways in which Aboriginal people render 'ownership' inclusively. I am aware that *darlнын* is discussed in the literature on southeast Arnhem Land as being 'company' with *mingirringgi* (see Merlan 1982:154) and 'co-*mingirringgi*' (Bern & Larbalestier 1985:61), indicating that they have rights and responsibilities in relation to *mingirringgi* estates that are more in keeping with owner rather than manager roles. It is also the case that *darlнын* play a supplementary role to *mingirringgi* as well as *junggayi* (Bern 1979b:48-9; Bern & Layton 1984:78-9), acting in concert with one or the other at different times (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982:12; 1985:23; 1990:24, 104; 2001:13). The point I make is that all three categories are constituted as co-custodians for particular ceremonies and places through performing supplementary and complementary functions. I discuss this again in chapters 4 and 7 of this study with regard to performance rights in Aboriginal ceremony and issues of participation in Christian healing services and the Church.

³⁸ It needs to be noted here that the relative status of these three categories of ritual-territorial custodianship are continually contested both in land claims and among Aboriginal people. *Mingirringgi* are the owners of country by virtue of common patrilineal descent (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982:7). No one at Ngukurr denies this but they propose that *junggayi* have greater authority by virtue of the fact that performance rights in ceremony are greatest in the order of *junggayi*, *darlнын* and *mingirringgi* (see also Tamisari 2000:148). It was frequently proposed to me that traditional owners at Ngukurr were entitled to some authority but not so much that other rights were denied or completely subordinate.

The solidarity of large cognatic aggregations such as Sutton describes, whether constituted in terms of descent or the categories of ritual custodianship, is confined to events such as a land claim (where they may or may not be validated). They can also be confined to ceremony where the realisation of a ‘one-mob’ identity is temporary. Competition both within and among patriline and patronymic families, especially among male members in a community that has little out-migration, makes it difficult for a large cognatic group to be realised in an enduring form from these smaller and labile aggregations. Conflict is inevitable as individuals, patriline and patronymic families seek to protect their autonomy and status in relation to each other both in the context of Ngukurr’s administrative arrangements and in the context of restricted activities such as *Gunapipi* and *Yabaduruwa* ceremonies.³⁹

Patronymic families and administrative clans at Ngukurr do have a significant bearing on community life. The former, however, evoke an identity in a way that the latter do not, although they are related to each other in settlement politics. Patronymic families, often referred to as ‘mobs,’ are realised as groups through the capacity of bosses (i.e. senior men) to engage in competitive status relations with each other.⁴⁰ The patronyms are linked to traditional stretches of country no longer lived on for most families at Ngukurr. They also refer to a history of residence and association with Ngukurr as it evolved from mission to town.

There are, in addition, other contexts of community life that are not encompassed by the politics of service delivery or landownership. Specifically, bilateral relations and ego-centred networks of association ‘articulate other features of [non-corporate] kin[ship]’ (Austin-Broos 2003a:118). In the following, I address

³⁹ Bern’s work (1974, 1979a, 1979b) has pursued the competitive dimension of Ngukurr’s ritual life. He notes the reduction in ritual repertoires being performed at Ngukurr since the 1950s and the intensification of competition to control individual estates celebrated in the *Gunapipi* and *Yabaduruwa* ceremonies (idem. 1974:218-20).

⁴⁰ Aboriginal people at Ngukurr commonly refer to families and other forms of groupings as ‘mobs.’ This can mean a large or small kindred group residing or interacting together and identified by a patronym or the name of a prominent individual within it. ‘Mob’ is also a contextual reference applied to a group combined for some purpose such as ‘that Fellowship mob’ or that ‘land-care mob.’

how Aboriginal people render sociality as relatedness through extensive interaction with bilateral kin. I highlight how reciprocal exchange is a significant dynamic that influences the reconfiguring of situational or contextually relevant groups in different forms.

Bilateral Relations And Residential Groups

Kinship is the most significant dimension of Aboriginal socio-reproduction at Ngukurr.⁴¹ Here I deal with its performative dimensions. One aspect involves service exchange, of the sort described by Sansom (1988:166, 171), where the capacity to contribute to others generates a ‘close-up identity’ between giver and receiver as well as ‘social standing’ for the giver. Claims to closeness, however, are never enduring as Sansom notes, because relationships can be undone by ‘acts of denial,’ namely the refusal to act reciprocally by helping and provisioning ‘turn and turn about’ (ibid. 166-7). This structural indeterminacy, premised on the insecurity of reciprocity, infuses social life where relationships are only sustained by adequate performance of service exchange.

A second aspect involves the way in which autonomy is realised over time through participation in labile residential groups and overlapping networks of association. According to Myers (1991[1986]), Aboriginal people experience the life cycle as a ‘continuous progression toward autonomy’ (ibid. 240), even as ‘personal

⁴¹ Kinship entails the constitution of groups in terms of descent and sociocentric principles of affiliation. Moiety and semi-moiety systems of representation are in evidence at Ngukurr particularly in organising ceremonial and territorial relations. People inherit their moiety (*Dhuwa* or *Yirritja*) and semi-moiety (*Mambali*, *Murrungun*, *Budal*, *Guyal*) identifications via patrification (Bern and Larbalestier 1985; Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982, 1990). Moieties and semi-moieties are not land-holding groups, although totemic entities and tracts of country associated with them are often identified in these terms (see also Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1990). Subsections (of which there are 8) have both patrilineal and matrilineal principles of recruitment (Bern 1974:50-3). Subsections function as a general statement of ideal relations and are useful for specifying a person’s place in the local scheme when an individual has no actual kin at a place. In the east Roper region and Ngukurr, however, it is not unusual for people to claim dual subsection affiliation especially in cases of alternate or irregular marriage patterns (Bern 1974; Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1990).

autonomy' is recognised as 'a given in human life' (ibid. 107). In this latter respect, Myers says, private will is respected as 'own idea,' even in children (ibid.). And its assertion in the form of 'making trouble' to get others to recognise one's demands is accepted as a valid way to influence others to satisfy one's desires (ibid. 162).⁴² However, Myers argues, such assertions are also recognised to be an obstacle to smoothly running relations and are therefore distinguishable from 'genuine autonomy' (ibid. 110). This latter form of autonomy is acquired and given proper expression by sustaining relatedness through reciprocal interactions with others (ibid.). Moreover, Aboriginal processes of socialisation focus on increasing the capacity for reciprocal exchange (ibid. 173), which entails taking responsibility for others 'who are as yet unable to be equal' (ibid. 175). Myers' 'genuine autonomy' is an equivalent of the 'social standing' that Sansom (1988) describes, as both are adult statuses based on the 'capacity to engage in reciprocal exchange' (Myers 1991[1986]:173).

In the following, I offer two examples of how Aboriginal people render sociality as relatedness through reciprocal exchange. I highlight how such action contributes to the elaboration of a range of identities as well as the development of autonomy. The first is a residential group, composed in the following way. A senior

⁴² See for example Robinson (1997) for an analysis of how male youth among the Tiwi utilise a strategy of 'trouble-making,' often employing violent provocation and property damage to get kin to fulfil a duty of care to the trouble-maker. 'Cursing' is another strategy used to give visible expression to a person's dissatisfaction (*nogudbinji*) with current arrangements and is an attempt to get others to redress the loss or wrong that the curser feels has been committed. Instances of 'cursing' are fairly frequent at Ngukurr and are carried out predominantly by younger men. Secret names of sites in country are said in the relevant language and used to invoke the power of totemic ancestors to make an area dangerous for others. The curse is dis-invoked by a series of other secret names and by 'smoking' performed by the appropriate senior for the country named. A potent curse is often made through a man's mother's country, thereby implicating the mother's brother in dis-invoking the curse and settling whatever issue gave rise to the curse in the first place. 'Cursing' is also a strategy that publicly indicates that the curser is not without power and knowledge and should be listened to. The areas most often 'cursed' at Ngukurr are the centres of administration and service delivery, in particular the store, council offices and health clinic and the act brings business to a standstill until the curse is dis-invoked.

brother, JA, and 4 sisters of the family A live in three neighbouring houses in one section of Ngukurr. They are aged between late 20s and early 40s. The 2 older sisters, their mother (family Z), their spouses (families N and W) and 7 young children occupy one house. The other 2 sisters, their spouses (families N and U) and 4 children occupy the second. Occasionally the father of the sisters and his third wife also reside here when they visit Ngukurr.⁴³ JA and his spouse (family V) occupy the third house. It includes, at times, 2 of JA's sons from a former marriage (linked to family Y) and 2 of his spouse's sons (family X), also from a former marriage. JA's eldest son, his spouse (family S) and child also live here at times.

Though several relatives of one patronymic family dominate these adjoining houses, the residential group is nevertheless composed of overlapping networks of kin from at least 8 additional families. Moreover, the group fluctuates in size depending on the availability of resources and the desire to interact with kin. For example the 4 sisters share resources and provide child-care for each other on a regular basis. Their mother offers support to her grandchildren from the three houses. These children (and sometimes their parents) often reside for short or extended periods with the families of N, W, U, V, Y and S, two of which (W and V) are located in communities to the north and northeast of Ngukurr respectively. They can also reside with other members of the A family, particularly their father, his brothers or his sisters. Alternatively, JA and his sisters often accommodate members of their father's brother's and father's sister's families at their homes. A deceased father's brother's 3 children often reside with JA when they are not with their mother's family (P). And a married cousin, his spouse (family L) and his 4 children often reside with the 2 younger sisters of JA.

The A family, in addition, are related to other families via ritual connections. A classificatory father's father from the B family is a particularly salient relation for them, establishing ties to traditional country that link these Ngukurr families with

⁴³ Serial marriage is a common form of practice for both men and women at Ngukurr. Polygyny has not been a feature of Aboriginal practice in this region since the establishment of the mission at Roper River.

others at Numbulwar. JA moreover is something of a focal individual for his male relatives due to their mutual interest in rock music. JA's capacity to organise rock band performances has attracted his brothers-in-law, sons, junior brothers from his father's second marriage and cousins to further their musical skills. JA acquired his own musical skills through his mother's kin, particularly his mother's brother who is now deceased. His father's game-shop, moreover, provides him with a venue to demonstrate his autonomy. He does so by offering opportunities, especially to his younger relatives, to build autonomy through sustained interaction with kin.

This residential group, like others, is labile. Nevertheless such groups are major contexts in which a 'close-up identity' is forged between members (Sansom 1988). They are, moreover, contexts wherein 'social standing' (Sansom 1988) or 'genuine autonomy' (Myers 1991[1986]), is established for those who provision and organise events for others. Such contexts also provide multiple pathways for individuals to elaborate a range of possible identities through interaction with others (see also Myers 1987). They also allow for the pursuit of diverse knowledge and skill options that, as Austin-Broos notes (2006:8), 'arise across time and space.' This form of social organisation displays, then, some of the 'rhizome-like' features that Rumsey (2001:22-6) describes for Aboriginal Australia. Specifically these features pertain to the way that overlapping networks of relatedness, being marked by lateral extension through kin, marriage, residence, ritual and regional ties, generate an elaborate differentiation of social space (ibid. 34-8). This finely differentiated social space provides individuals with a variety of locales wherein shared identity and autonomy is built and demonstrated. The accumulation of diverse skills and knowledge options also within these sites of sociality are, as Austin-Broos proposes (2006:8), an 'objectification over time of associations among kin.'

There are three important implications that can be drawn about the way that Aboriginal people differentiate social space in terms of relatedness. First, it generates relatively stable forms of organisation such as patronymic families and residential groups. These groups nevertheless fluctuate in terms of membership, being subject over time to processes of fission and fusion. Second, though some members within

these groups assume more importance than others, none are more important for the whole group as knowledge and other resources are highly localised (Rumsey 2001:40-1). Third, is the fact that authority and control are located within certain kinds of kin units and is not sustained between them.

Overlapping networks of association are a constant feature of Aboriginal forms of social organisation, generating fluidity in terms of group composition and interaction. They also generate a variety of locales wherein sociality is rendered as relatedness. In the following, I provide an example of one of these contexts beyond patronymic family and residential group in order to address further how autonomy is built through reciprocal interaction.

Sociality in networks of association

Women's basketball competitions offer a second example of how sociality is rendered as relatedness and conceived to be positively structured through interaction with significant others. Basketball competitions are highly popular weekly events for men and women at Ngukurr. Female teams are organised through matrilineal and patrilineal links.⁴⁴ For example *Lirrijal* is composed of a set of adult sisters of the G family, their daughters and those constituted in kin terms as 'own child' (e.g. FFBSDD) and 'brother's child' (e.g. FFBSDD).⁴⁵ *Ngandi* is composed of a set of adult sisters, their father's brother's and father's sister's daughters. The social reference point for the identities of both these teams is a senior deceased male, links to him being realised through father, mother, father's father and mother's father. The names of the teams underline this relationship, as *Lirrijal* is a site in country of G's patriline and *Ngandi* is the name of an Aboriginal language that the L and O families identify with. Two other female teams, *Mirri* and *Yugul*, are similarly organised and easy to identify patronymically by virtue of the site/language names they have

⁴⁴ I assume that male basketball teams are similarly organised through focal men and a social reference point of a deceased relative because rock bands are so constituted in many instances.

⁴⁵ I use standard anthropological abbreviations throughout the thesis. F = father; M = mother; B = brother; Z = sister; S = son; D = daughter; C = Child.

chosen.⁴⁶ The older women (ranging between the ages of 25-45) will find funding for team uniforms and for the team to participate in regional events. They also take defence positions in matches as they call out the plays to their younger kin. The competition between basketball teams is intense as winning brings recognition from others of the talents of individuals and their families. In addition ‘star’ players will emerge from local competitions and go on to compete as ‘Ngukurr mob’ at the annual Barunga festival.

Older women take on the task of recruiting kin to teams and they are quite successful at this. Of the four groups described above most had sufficient members for an A and B team. These women also contribute to local competitions by alternating as referees and umpires for each other’s matches. Older male basketball players often help out on these nights and women reciprocate for them during men’s competitions. Tuesday night women’s competitions run for upwards of three hours. If all teams do not get a turn to compete, play will resume on the following night. Older women see their organisational role as derived from their capacity to take responsibility for others. In other words, they demonstrate their autonomy by doing so. They talk in terms of ‘helping’ younger relatives to gain skills through practice in local competitions. Moreover they see themselves as providing opportunities to youth to participate in status conferring events that contribute to the prestige of individuals and the solidarity of kin.⁴⁷ Older women and men see themselves as fulfilling their obligations to younger kin by ‘putting something up’ to ‘bring’im inside’ youth who would otherwise be ‘running around’ and getting up to mischief.

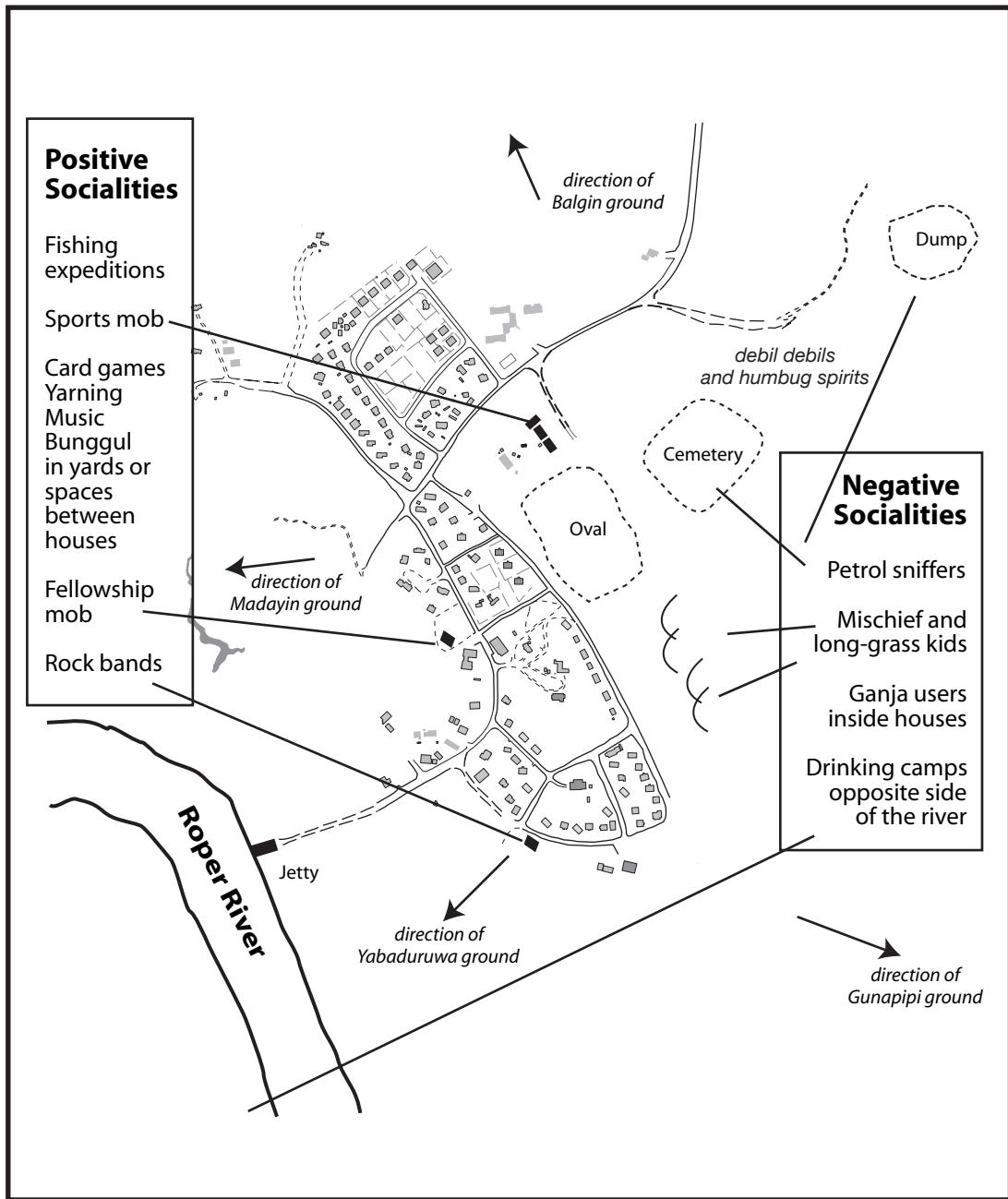
⁴⁶ There are occasions, such as regional festivals, when sports teams name themselves as ‘mixed relations’ because there is no specific social reference point from which to take an identity. Moreover by 2002 after my fieldwork was complete 5 out of 8 women’s basketball teams chose names more typical of Euro-Australian sporting ones, such as *Puma*, *Panthers* and *Sonic*. This may be indicative of the fact that membership is mixed so that no one social reference point will suit.

⁴⁷ The phrase ‘status conferring events’ is borrowed from Dussart (2000:chapter 3). She explores how public (unrestricted) rituals are a valued arena for the sustenance of social networks and the expression of group solidarity among Aboriginal people. I extend her point, that status and well-being are secured through performance, to other events besides public ritual.

Indeed Aboriginal socialities, both positive and negative, can be mapped in terms of the various sites where they occur at Ngukurr (see Map 3).

Positive and negative socialities, as I gloss them, are generated from the investment of people's time in particular activities. Activities that engage Aboriginal people and animate group life always involve contexts where sociality can be realised through engagement with kin. Participating in activities, such as fishing expeditions, card games, yarning around a fire or attending a *bunggul* (corroboree) performance in people's yards or on open ground, are valued arenas wherein sociality is generated through the investment of time with others. The regular basketball competitions, rock band performances and nightly Fellowship gatherings are similarly valued sites of action wherein sociality is realised and structured through performative interaction.

There is a significant contrast in terms of how positive and negative socialities are produced and their effect on others. Positive socialities are generated through involvement with a wide range of kin and in settings that are, to greater or lesser degrees, public. Basketball competitions, Fellowship, rock music and *bunggul* performances involve large aggregations of people in events that are open to everyone to participate in. The emphasis in these events is on taking turns to perform or contributing as a spectator by showing one's appreciation for the efforts of others. During a rock music session one night at the game-shop, a band-leader conveyed this understanding in the following way. Only a small group of older women and children were dancing in front of the stage while the band played. A much larger group of young men were gathered at the farthest point from the stage, almost invisible in the shadows. Annoyed by the minimal involvement of these men the band-leader yelled out 'What yu mob doing back there? Why don't yu come iya and dance like these women? What yu doing in the dark – yu boning us?' His allusion to sorcery left no doubt in anyone's mind, including my own, that non-participation and hiding in the dark were suspect ways of behaving.



Map 3: Aboriginal socialities

Much of the work of socialisation for Aboriginal adults is directed to orienting youth to the value of engaging with kin in public activities that involve singing, dancing, displays of prowess and reciprocal interaction. Fishing expeditions and a variety of camp activities going on in people's yards, though less public, are nevertheless socially exposed places of interaction with known others. They too, like public events, are contexts in which youth learn to master correct action and appropriate response by participating with knowledgeable kin who tell them what they should say and do in a given situation (Merlan 1987:147). They are also places where shared experience in association with others generates solidarity and well-being for participants. It is these performative dimensions of kinship that produce and maintain relationships. Participation is, to extend Myers' thinking on the subject of shared identity (1988), a 'thing that has social value' for Aboriginal people. It shows that you think and care about others and are willing to *jidan gudwei* (sit down the good way) with them.⁴⁸ It constitutes, therefore, a moment in the reproduction of shared identity when people are willing to be the same and do what everyone else is doing.

In contrast to these interactive locales are those where substance abuse and mischief occurs. Map 3 shows that these activities occur beyond social exposure, being located inside houses or beyond the periphery of the town. These activities are negatively valued by Ngukurr Aborigines because they contribute little to group life and actually threaten the production of relatedness. Long-grass kids 'running around' in the company of other kids are eluding Aboriginal processes of socialisation. They leave themselves open to the bad influence of older youth who have withdrawn from kin. They put themselves and family at risk by getting embroiled in fights with each other, in which adults feel compelled to intervene. When adults do intervene violence

⁴⁸ Collman (1988:128) also notes the use of this phrase among Aboriginal drinkers who demand of each other that they 'sit down the good way and drink quietly.' I heard it many times in everyday contexts at Ngukurr. A man chided his wife one day because she wouldn't eat the same food as others. He remarked 'why do you have to be different, why can't you *jidan gudwei* and have the same as everyone else.' In social contexts *jidan gudwei* can be an injunction to another to not fight or cause trouble. Its general meaning is that people be satisfied with current arrangements and indicates the value that is placed on being like others.

can erupt. One instance resulted in a stabbing when two fathers assaulted each other because of a fight between their children.

Substance abusers are also a threat to relatedness because they enter into states where they are not ‘really themselves’ anymore. They are incapable of entering into normal interactions with kin because of the effects of alcohol, petrol or cannabis, which makes them ‘deaf’ to others. They ‘go own way too much’ yet continue to demand that kin look after them, providing them with food and money to purchase further supplies of drugs. Fights over money are frequent as adults not involved with alcohol, petrol or cannabis try to earmark cash for provisioning households. Alcohol users and petrol sniffers moreover put themselves and kin at risk by going off to isolated areas at night where they are vulnerable to the malignancy of spirit entities or sorcerers.⁴⁹ Should a dangerous force affect a person, he or she will endanger kin by exposing them also to its troublesome effects.

My account of negative sociality is from the point of view of those not involved in ‘running around’ or using alcohol, petrol or cannabis. I am aware of literature that provides a positive theory of drinking (e.g. Collman 1988; Sansom 1980) and petrol use (Brady 1992; Brady and Morice 1982) from the point of view of users. Brady and Morice (1982:74, 82-3) suggests that group inhalation sessions of petrol provide users with the opportunity to share and generate esteem among peers and to passively or overtly defy the authority of Europeans and European institutions such as the school. The dominant representation about petrol abuse at Ngukurr rejects the notion that youth peer groups can constitute an experience of sociality without the presence of mature, or fully autonomous, individuals.

⁴⁹ It is not the case at Ngukurr that spirit entities and sorcerers are inherently malignant. They are, however, unpredictable as they have the power to be malevolent or benevolent. Spirit entities are dangerously potent and should only be approached with the right personnel who can mediate this danger. This is one of the important attributes of a *junggayi*. Only he has the capacity to mediate the danger of a site’s totemic power for its *mingirringgi* (see also Maddock 1972:36-8, 41; Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982:11).

In addition, ex-users I knew denied that defiance motivated them to abuse petrol. Rather they experienced themselves as alienated, being ‘lonely’ and ‘lost’ to kin before they began to abuse petrol and while they were regular sniffers. Alcohol use, on the other hand, is the least negative of these behaviours at Ngukurr. This is most likely due to the fact that drinking-camps include a wider age range (30s-50s) than petrol sniffing or cannabis using groups (teens and early 20s). As Sansom (1980:63) notes, a drinking camp can control risk as older individuals generally take some measure of responsibility for the well-being of the group. In effect, they have members who can demonstrate autonomy by looking after others. It is also the case that Ngukurr Aborigines talk about ‘learning to drink gudwei’ or of ‘having the good drink,’ by which they mean that moderate alcohol consumption is not a bar to good relations or sustaining shared identity.⁵⁰

Immoderate alcohol consumption, however, does cause frequent conflicts with non-drinking relatives. Conflict often occurs over the misuse of money but it also occurs because drunks and other substance abusers withdraw from reciprocal interactions with kin. Moreover all substance abusers frequently ‘humbug’ relatives for attention, money or food.⁵¹ The irony, or ‘deafness’ that Aboriginal people allude to, is that substance abusers expect kin to support them even though they fail to realise that their self-interested behaviour negates shared identity.

⁵⁰ In practice this view seems to hold good as a little bit of discrete drinking even at band nights, which I observed, did not preclude drinkers from normal interactions with others. It has never been proposed to me that a little bit of petrol or cannabis use is either possible or unproblematic even if, in reality, many individuals might be casual users and many do permanently stop taking such substances by their late 20s or 30s.

⁵¹ The old police station at Roper Bar is a favoured site for drinking groups. Often members will descend on passing cars or on those fishing on the river-bank to demand a lift, food, money or attention. They are often abusive when drunk or when they feel they have been slighted. Non-drinkers, therefore, try to avoid any engagement with them, driving past the old barracks as quickly as possible.

I do not hesitate, therefore, to characterise substance abuse, including alcohol consumption, as a negative form of sociality when it is evaluated by Aborigines as ‘going own way too much.’

Aboriginal people at Ngukurr regard the negative socialities that I have described as bizarre or incomprehensible forms of behaviour (see also Myers 1991[1986]:124-6). Though accepted as a fundamental aspect of humanity, ‘going own way’ or having ‘own idea’ can threaten relatedness in two ways. First, relatedness cannot be generated at all, nor autonomy built and channelled toward taking responsibility for others, when Aboriginal processes of socialisation are eluded. Second, relatedness is undone by the refusal to act reciprocally with kin turn and turn about, leading to conflict over the negation of shared identity with others. The time invested in the pursuit of ‘going own way too much’ is then unproductive. It undermines the performative dimensions of kinship that infuse networks of association and through which residential groups and patronymic families are realised.

Summary

This chapter has provided an account of the contemporary conditions of socio-political reproduction at Ngukurr. A crucial aspect of these conditions pertains to how Ngukurr is managed through the YMCGC and the administrative clan system. The clan system attempts to harness Aboriginal priorities of affiliation to kin and country for the purposes of community management. Attempts to make them operate as an apparatus for the common good often fail. They fail because Aboriginal forms of organisation do not reproduce community-wide organisation, founded on hierarchical and centralised control of resources and decision-making.

Rather lateral forms of organisation, which I have discussed in relation to patronymic families, residential and other contextually relevant groups, deflect such attempts. This is so because lateral extension generates a multiplicity of groups, which are configured and reconfigured over time through the following dynamics. A crucial dynamic that brings patronymic families into being as groups is the capacity

of male bosses to engage in competitive status relations with each other, to provision kin and to be repositories of valuable cultural property. Patronymic families are most evident then in the context of resource politics at Ngukurr, with male identities being also the point of fission within these groups. They do provide people with a primary expression of social identity and operate as a principal unit of social organisation at Ngukurr. Nevertheless they show a tendency over time to divide, as lines within them seek to differentiate themselves from each other. Though cognatic in principle, patronymic families are not oriented to extending relatedness except in contexts where the rights and interests of several families may be threatened. Neither are they a locus of socialisation, which is grounded in residential groups and networks of association.

These latter forms of organisation contrast with patronymic families yet entail similar dynamics of association. Residential groups, like patronymic families, are a stable form of organisation with fluctuating membership. Residential groups, however, have little bearing on the administrative and political life of the community. They are composed of small groups of kin that can be drawn from overlapping families and involved in various networks. They tend to cohere around individuals – a married couple or a woman – with the capacity to provision and organise events. Individuals demonstrate their adult status through looking after and offering opportunities to others to share identity and build autonomy. However, there is no central axis of bounded group formation upon which other units are built. Rather, both residential groups and patronymic families are generated and reproduced through dynamics of association over time.

Aboriginal forms of organisation and their attendant values of relatedness and autonomy are, by and large, foreign to whites, even to those living at Ngukurr. A white administrative inclination to centralisation and hierarchy, and an Aboriginal orientation to linked and dynamic nodes of autonomy do not articulate well as demonstrated in this chapter. In the context of efforts to organise a CDEP, an imposed interpretation of ‘traditional’ practice was rebuffed by Ngukurr women due mainly to the fact that it still relied upon centralised organisation and, ultimately, on

hierarchy. The tensions created by this type of impasse pervade life at Ngukurr today as Indigenous people struggle to sustain familiar forms of practice in the face of administrative organisations – including the church – that tend towards hierarchical control.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 address in turn the colonial mission, and the periods of assimilation and self-determination that followed. They explore the history of Ngukurr's administration for the light it throws on this central and enduring tension.

CHAPTER 3:

THE COLONIAL MISSION AT ROPER RIVER

This chapter provides an account of colonial conditions in southeast Arnhem Land, which informed the founding of Roper River Mission by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1908.

A major theme of this chapter concerns the way in which colonial agents were predisposed to define Aborigines in antithetical terms to the project of permanent European settlement in the Northern Territory. As a result Aboriginal people were characterised mainly in terms of lack and pathologised. They were seen to be both a hindrance to and victims of the course of pastoral expansion, which had brought violence and rationing in its wake. In developing proposals for a better solution to black/white relations, missionaries would target the Aboriginal failure to have achieved a rudimentary form of agriculture. This lack was to be addressed through the routine organisation of daily life at Roper River Mission, geared to the production of permanent food supplies to create a self-supporting Aboriginal population.

As a concomitant of defining Aboriginal people in terms of lack missionaries would also fail to recognise widespread lateral forms of regional organisation that sustained an Indigenous autonomy. Hence missionaries could not appreciate the multiplicity of Aboriginal groups that resided in the vicinity of the mission or how they had established connections with specific places and with each other. They were moreover unaware that their presence in Yugul/Wandarang country created tensions in social relations, both between Aboriginal groups and between themselves and Aborigines. Being oriented to view manual labour and evangelism as crucial dimensions of moral being, missionaries did not understand the ways in which Aboriginal people sustained their own forms of spatiality and sociality while engaging a mission regime.

These dynamics are addressed through considering the ways in which Aborigines sought to incorporate the mission within their own modes of reciprocal exchange and sustain their own imperatives of social life. Rather than defining themselves according to mission criteria, Aboriginal accounts highlight instead that evangelism and manual labour demonstrated relations of service with Europeans and forms of engagement with a modestly resourced social order. Aboriginal people moreover did sustain connections with other sites besides the mission and provisioned themselves in traditional ways, because the resources of the mission were limited. Hence, to a significant degree, overlapping networks and ritual exchange sustained an Aboriginal autonomy as both they and missionaries pursued linked but functionally separate ‘domestic economies’ (Collman 1988:106).¹ Despite these continuities, however, Aboriginal narrative histories also indicate the appeal that new resources in the form of rations had for them and their accounts acknowledge the differentials in power between themselves and Europeans. Such accounts moreover reflect the changing views that Aboriginal people had of themselves, revealing the ways in which they would begin to revalue their roles and practice in European milieus.

I begin with an account of the early decades of colonisation in the region when relations between white and black were characterised by violent rather than co-operative exchanges.

¹ As Collman (1988:105-7) describes it, a domestic economy is one that seeks in the first instance to provision itself. As he argues the early history of white settlement can be characterised as an articulation of two domestic economies; one based on hunting and gathering and the other based on subsistence forms of pastoralism and cultivation. Though retaining their fundamental autonomy, black and white domestic groups could nevertheless establish relationships with each other without the engagement entailing subservience of one group to the other. Peterson (2005:8) similarly characterises a ‘domestic mode of production’ as a system organised at the household level with finite objectives to satisfy limited wants.

The Spread of Pastoralism In The Roper River Region

Settlement of the Roper region of the Northern Territory followed an Australian colonial pattern. Expeditions undertaken to gather scientific information and assess the economic potential of land opened up the country to stock routes and pastoral development.² Both Leichhardt's (1844-5) and Lindsay's (1880-1; 1883-6) surveys of the Roper region helped to stimulate European colonisation. Their reports provided details of the wealth of agricultural and mineral resources in the area.³ Once pastoral settlement of the Roper region got under way, violence and welfare rationing were the predominant techniques employed to manage local Aboriginal populations.⁴ Many Aboriginal language groups in the Roper region were forced into cattle stations and the mission by European expropriation of their lands (see Maps 4

² Dewar (1992:7-8) provides a summary of Arnhem Land expeditions. The account starts with Leichhardt's venture of 1844, which entered Arnhem Land from the direction of the Gulf country. It travelled from the coast up the Roper River and headed north roughly at the point where the Roper and Wilton Rivers meet. Gregory's expedition in the late 1850s travelled east from Croker Island along the Arnhem coast. In 1866 Cadell undertook a survey of the land and sea between the Roper and Liverpool Rivers taking in the Wessels and Groote Eylandt. In 1883 Lindsay crossed Arnhem Land from Roper River to Liverpool River looking for suitable pastoral sites. In 1910 Love travelled west across Arnhem Land evaluating the mineral potential of the region. Though these forays were relatively brief most expeditions report some conflict with Aborigines. It was common practice for expedition members to fire over the heads of Aborigines to discourage their interest. And the Love expedition ended in a massacre of Aboriginal people at Caledon Bay (Dewar 1992:7-8; Berndt and Berndt, 1954:91-100; Powell, 2000[1982]).

³ The Urapunga Land Claim report (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 2001:33) makes use of Lindsay's survey of the Wilton River in 1883. Lindsay found evidence of a large native camp with several large humpies, a number of small enclosures and some excavations of varying size. He thought it might be the site of some great corroboree as the area was well worn. On this survey and further along the north side of the Roper River towards its mouth Lindsay recorded that he met with friendly Aborigines and recorded some vocabulary and the names of places and waterholes.

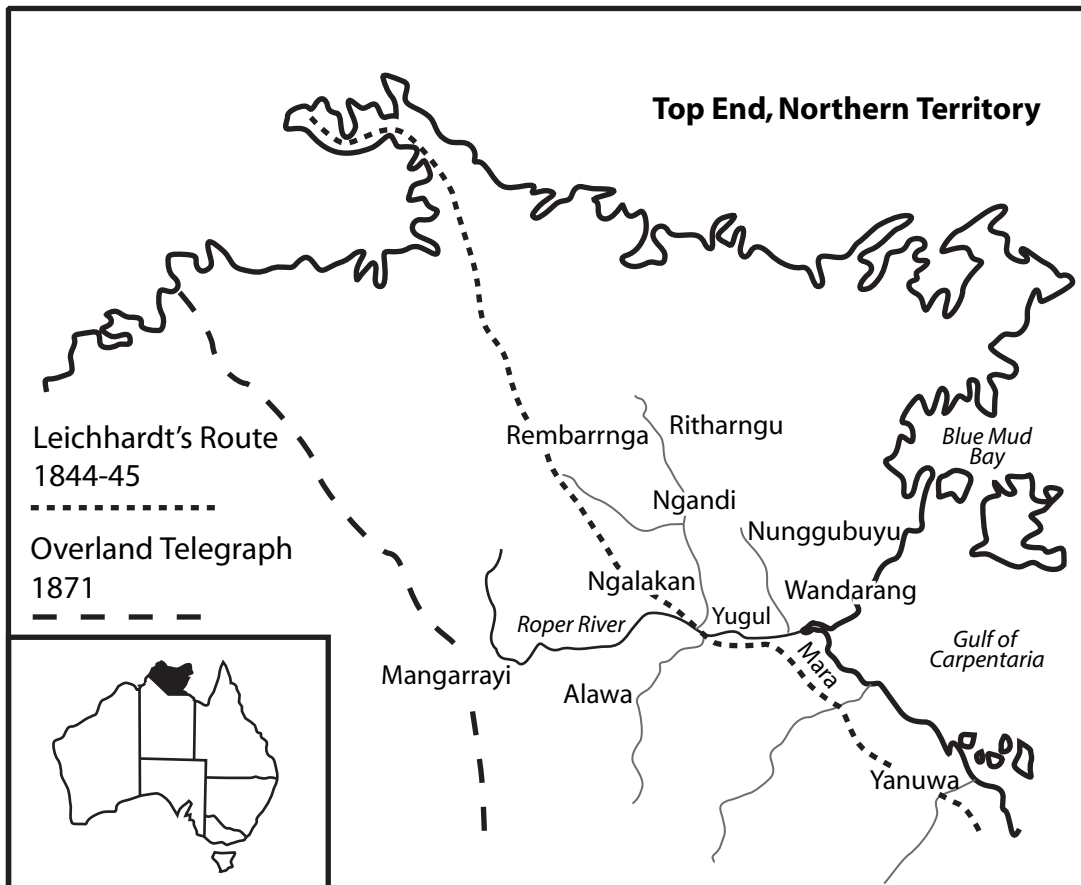
⁴ See Rowse's (1998) discussion of the role of rationing as the means of managing remote Aboriginal populations. The institutional practices of assimilation, he argues, were built on the colonial practice of rationing Aboriginal people with issues of clothes, food, blankets and tobacco. This usually occurred after a period of intense violence. Its use implied the forging of a more predictable relationship with Aborigines, permitting evangelism and their labour to be used as an informal means of social regulation.

and 5). By 1908 both Roper River Mission and cattle stations provided a focal point for protection and sustenance of the survivors of these groups.

Scientific expeditions, unlike pastoralism, were generally relatively short forays into a region and had minimal contact with Aboriginal people. For example Leichhardt (2000[1847]:274-299) noted that there was extensive evidence of Aboriginal habitation all along the Roper River. He found numerous footpaths along the lagoons near the river, fish traps and old camps showing ‘fresh burnings and fresh mussel-shells’ (ibid. 288). He minimised his interactions with Aborigines, however, keeping them at a distance by the ‘discharge’ of firearms (ibid. 289, 295). Despite the brevity of Leichhardt’s journey through the western Gulf country, he left behind a legacy. He named the river after ‘Mr. Roper,’ the member of his expedition who had first sighted it on the journey from Moreton Bay to Port Essington in 1845 (ibid. 286). And the ledge of rocks he found crossing the Roper River, at its highest navigable point, made Roper Bar a significant nodal point of colonisation in the Northern Territory up to the 1890s.⁵ It became a useful watering place for stockmen droving cattle into the region and steamboats, carrying supplies, could dock nearby (see Map 4).

The 1870s and 1880s were significant decades of colonisation in this region. Roper Bar became a provisioning station for the construction of the Overland Telegraph line in north Australia (to link Adelaide with London via Port Darwin). In the early 1870s Roper Bar attracted a ‘constant stream of overlanders, comprising good honest men, brumby hunters, cattle duffers, horse thieves, and non-descript outlaws’ (Searcy 1909:147).

⁵ A plaque commemorating Leichhardt’s expedition, including the ‘discovery’ of Roper River and the crossing, still stands in the grounds of the old police station just above Roper Bar (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982).



Map 4: Aboriginal language countries and routes of colonisation

Roper Bar had a European population of 300 in 1872, at the height of construction of the line (Chisolm 1973, in Morphy 1993:213). There was also an encampment of Europeans at Port Roper, a supply depot established at the mouth of Roper River (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 2001:32).⁶ Once the telegraph line had been built Roper Bar became peripheral to the business of opening up the Northern Territory (Morphy 1993:219). Nevertheless, it remained a sizeable settlement. Both a store and hotel were operating by 1885 to service the expanding pastoral population (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 2001:34).

Relations between black and white were characterised, during these decades, by violent rather than co-operative exchanges. Patterson, officer-in-charge of the telegraph construction party at Roper Bar in 1872, was convinced that the best way to manage Aborigines was to 'show them what our rifles could accomplish' (in Morphy and Morphy 1984a:468). At both the Roper Bar and Port Roper supply depots Europeans occasionally offered food in return for services. They frequently deterred Aborigines from looting stores and gardens or damaging marker buoys and beacons with the use of firearms (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 2001:32). In one incident at Port Roper depot in 1872 'a Bangawa [sic]' was shot dead at the landing resulting in a non-fatal retaliatory spearing of one of the European men there (ibid.).⁷ Aborigines also speared to death Charlie Johnson, manager of the Daly Waters station (while he was searching for stock near Roper Bar depot in 1875). Only one of his two European companions survived the attack. These killings led to severe

⁶ In 1878 the European population of the NT as a whole was only 505 (Chisolm 1973, in Morphy 1993:213). Population estimates for the Northern Territory are often unreliable but large fluctuations appear to be the norm for non-Indigenous residents. By 1888 the non-Indigenous population reached a peak at 7533 with approximately 80% of that being Chinese and 14% European (CPP 66-1911 in Larbalestier 1988:134). By 1910 the non-Indigenous population was only 2846, 48% of which was Chinese and 41% European (ibid.). For the periods 1788, 1901 and 1921 the Aboriginal population, for the Northern Territory, is given as 35,000, 23,363 and 17,973 respectively (Rowley 1970:384). The figures Rowley supplies are estimated from a variety of sources.

⁷ 'Bunggawa' is a term used by Aborigines to denote an older authoritative man. Searcy (1909:157) reports its application to Europeans by Aborigines to indicate a type of boss or chief.

reprisals against Aboriginal people in the Roper area, which included the burning out of a large camp at Mt McMinn.

The development of cattle stations brought a permanent population of European settlers into the southeast of the Northern Territory during the 1880s. The many pastoral enterprises sited mostly to the south of Roper River were to establish a pattern of violence and rations for managing black/white relations (see Map 5). As pastoralism got underway the image of Aborigines as a 'blood-thirsty lot of fierce savages' (Willshire 1896:7 in Harris 1986:194), was an entrenched view about frontier conditions in the Northern Territory common in newspaper reports and popular literature. Searcy, a customs officer who visited Roper Bar in the late 1880s, provides a typical summary of the violence of this period and the concomitant European attitude to it:

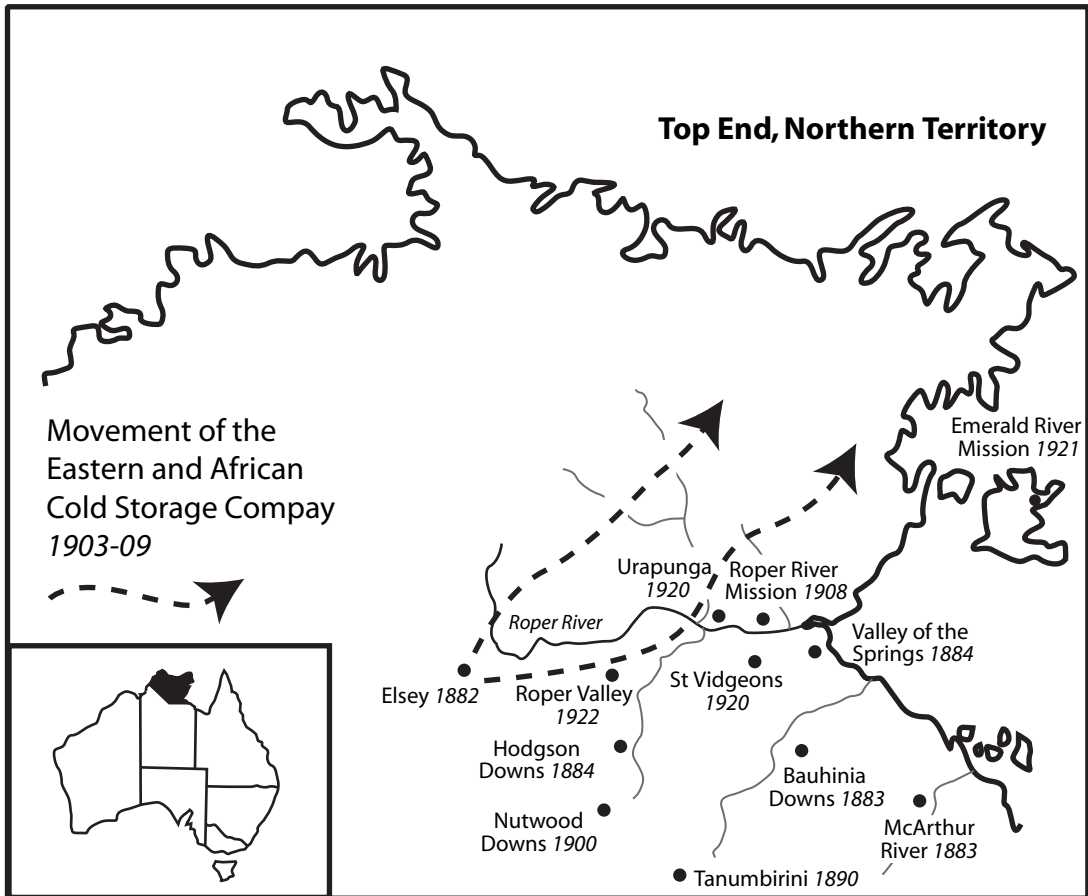
There were many murders by the niggers which the police had to look into ... there can be no doubt that many of the murders were caused by the white men taking away the black women from their tribes. Nearly all the drovers, cattlemen, and station hands had their "black boys" (gins). ... There can be no doubt that at times many of the blacks have been put away by some brutes just for the fun of killing, by others for revenge, but mostly the niggers brought the trouble on themselves by interfering with the cattle. ... In one instance a whole nigger camp was wiped out. ... Thus it will ever be in developing a new country where the aborigines are at all hostile, and where there is no recognised authority to deal with them. (Searcy 1909:173-4).

Between 1880 and 1920 Roper Bar remained a frontier. As cattle stations developed taking up leases on large areas of Arnhem Land the conditions necessary for a hunter-gatherer economy were further undermined. Provision had been made in 1882 for Aboriginal people to remain on pastoral leases to hunt and gather, under the Northern Territory Crown Lands Consolidation Act (Aboriginal Land Commission 2001:35). Pastoralists, however, rejected it by demanding police protection of their holdings against the 'attack and vanish' methods employed by Aborigines who

would quickly raid stocks or a European camp and immediately disperse into the bush evading capture (Bern, Larbalestier and McLaughlin 1980:12-3). A police force operated for a year at Mt McMinn to check the hostile actions of Aborigines. It was also proposed that distributing rations to them could prevent theft. A Police Station was established at Roper Bar in 1890 sporadically distributing rations to Aborigines in return for items of material culture or services. By 1907 the distribution of flour, tobacco, tea, sugar and blankets to aged and infirm Aborigines or in return for labour was official practice. It continued up to the 1950s (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 2001:37).

Both Aboriginal people and outlaw Europeans from other States continued to be a persistent problem for pastoralists because they speared and stole cattle and horses from the stations in the region (Searcy 1909:148-9, 154; Merlan 1978:81-2). The Eastern and African Cold Storage Company took an aggressive approach to the matter of theft (Merlan 1978:86; Dewar 1992:9). They had acquired Arafura station in the north of Arnhem Land and taken up leases on Elsey, Hodgson Downs and Wologorang stations to the southwest, south and southeast of Roper Bar in 1903. In their attempt to stock their holdings near the Blue Mud Bay area from their southern stations, the company engaged in the systematic hunting of Aborigines. Bauer (1964:157) states that during its operation between 1903 and 1909 the company 'employed 2 gangs of 10 to 14 blacks headed by a white man or half caste to hunt and shoot the wild blacks on sight.'⁸ The sorties of the Eastern and African Cold Storage company particularly decimated Aboriginal groups on the north of Roper River who were most in its way (Merlan 1978:87). Others survived by becoming clients of the surrounding cattle stations and rationing depots (see Map 5).

⁸ I note here that the term 'half caste' in this quote is an integral category of a racialised social order. Its inclusion here and throughout this study references that order and is not a descriptor of my own devising.



Map 5: Missions and cattle stations, established 1890 -1922

(Sources Duncan 1967:160-1; Harris 1984:201; Munro 2004:51)

The relations that existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Roper region when CMS began its work in 1908, was structured by violence and rations. Aborigines made efforts to defend themselves by guerrilla tactics or found niches for themselves as workers on European stations that relied on Aboriginal labour paid for by rations. Yet others found ways to attach themselves as clients of European rationing depots. And the South Australian Government, administrators of the Northern Territory between 1863 and 1911, rarely intervened in the pattern of settlement through violent expropriation and rationing (Bauer 1964:194). They summed up the situation in the following way:

the occupation of the country for pastoral purposes and peaceful relations with the native tribes are hopelessly irreconcilable (Government Resident's Report 1889:9 in Bern, Larbalestier and McLaughlin 1980)

Government Residents did request that Aboriginal reserves be established to deal with the contact situation. But the only provisions made by the South Australian Government were the establishment of the positions of Protector and sub-Protector of Aborigines with powers of guardianship over them. The South Australian Government was, moreover, inclined to the view that Aborigines were a dying race due to the impacts of settler violence, introduced diseases and an innate inability to withstand the advance of a superior race (Rowley 1970:102-3 204). It was a common view also among missionaries that Aboriginal people were rapidly 'disappearing' and in the 'course of a generation or two' would be extinct (Report of the Australian Church Congress 1906 in Harris 1998:93). Though the effects of colonisation had apparently degraded Aborigines, missionaries nonetheless believed that this loss of status could be recouped. As Bishop Gilbert White (Anglican Diocese of Carpentaria), who selected the site for Roper River Mission, put the matter: 'the Aboriginal was the Lazarus of Australia' lying at its gate, 'which is so rich, so comfortable and so well fed' (in Harris 1998:184). Hence they could be revived if proper attention was given them. How CMS and other colonial agents imagined the task of achieving a better solution to race relations in the Northern Territory is

discussed below. I pay particular attention to the way in which they affirmed the structures and techniques of their own cultural forms, primarily through a discourse on the ‘nomadic Aborigine.’

The ‘nomadic Aborigine’

When CMS entered the Roper region there already existed two interrelated views about Aboriginal people, based on the event of colonisation in Australia. Embodied in the image of the nomad and popularised in European accounts of frontier life cited above was the danger ‘wild blacks’ posed to settlement, being a threat to life and livestock. A related view saw Aborigines as dispossessed and suffering hunter-gatherers, whose primitive mode of production would ensure their inevitable extinction. This latter idea in particular views the ‘nomadic Aborigine’ as manifesting only lack, due to the absence of recognisable forms of material culture and organisation. This lack was defined primarily in terms of the explicit connections that colonial agents made between survival and permanent forms of food-production. And the contemporaneous existence of nomadism with pastoralism, agriculture and commerce elsewhere in Australia disposed colonisers to the view that Aboriginal people did not have an internal incapacity for regeneration.

Prof. Spencer’s 1913 report on Aboriginal living conditions while he was ‘Chief Protector’ of them in the Northern Territory provides a pertinent example of the thinking of the time. Central to his report is the fact that the ‘Aborigine’, as a ‘pure nomad with no fixed abode,’ had failed to develop (Spencer 1913:7). This was evident, he argued, because Aborigines had not realised the use value of animal hide to keep themselves warm or that of sowing grass seed to ensure a permanent food supply (ibid. 8-9). Because they had not reached ‘the agricultural stage’ of provisioning, Aborigines had no ‘time and thought to spare for other branches of work’ (ibid. 9). He reasoned, moreover, that a hunter-gatherer economy made Aborigines more difficult to deal with than Papuans or Africans, who had achieved a rudimentary form of agriculture. It also meant, in his view, that Aborigines had developed no sense of responsibility, initiative or morality except that which was instinctual (ibid. 9, 14). His major recommendation to the Commonwealth

Government, who had assumed administrative control of the Northern Territory in 1911, was that Aboriginal reserves be established under proper European control (ibid. 23-8). Confining Aborigines on reserves would make them 'lose the longing for a nomad life' and they could be made useful, even in a spasmodic way (ibid. 9, 27). Aboriginal children in addition could be made 'quite competent to do much more than their wild parents' in the matter of realising 'the importance of cultivation' (ibid. 9, 23). In this regard missions were acceptable to Spencer as a means to train Aborigines in both moral and industrial habits (ibid. 27; idem. 1912:9). And he was particularly complimentary about Roper Mission's practice of only supplying rations to Aborigines who worked for them, unless they were incapacitated (idem. 1912:9). The Commonwealth Government however did not implement his recommendations in any systematic way.

CMS also drew on the idea that Aboriginal people had not developed in similar ways to white races. An early publication states that Aborigines had 'not been touched by evolution' in 10,000 years (CMS 1923 in Harris 1998:100). Their survival, it proposed, had merely been that of the fit, and not the more strenuous competitive form of 'survival of the fittest' (ibid.). Because of a lack of 'stimulation' Aborigines were therefore 'the surviving remnant of a primitive race,' a 'child race' that could 'never stand against the civilisation of today' (ibid.).

CMS also made a similar connection between material culture, moral order and viability. And they made even more explicit value judgements regarding human well-being and the structures to maintain it.

For many years it has been generally recognised that the aboriginal has little chance of survival unless he can change his manner of living. For hundreds of years he has been a food-gatherer, contributing nothing to the material well-being of the world in ideas or materials. The missionaries have long realised that they must help the aboriginal to that place of personal self-respect and significance which comes to those races of men who are building up the structure of the world by being food-producers. The aboriginal himself has

continually showed his appreciation in being welcomed into food-producing races of the world. Accordingly agriculture and hard work play an important part in the life of the missions (*The Open Door* 1941:10, in Harris 1998:209-10).

Both Spencer and CMS, in the views expressed above, define food-gathering in antithetical terms to permanent food-production. Hence a nomadic form of life, as they understood it, was akin to vagrancy, as Aborigines wandered from place to place being excessively reliant on natural resources. They could not then contribute in their present form to ‘the structure of the world,’ an order shaped by the utilisation of land and labour. Nor could they generate sufficient material advantage from food-gathering to develop more sophisticated forms of practice and organisation. The inadequacy of hunting and gathering moreover could not ensure their survival because it left them vulnerable to the vagaries of nature and the depredations of Europeans. Such reasoning by colonists affirmed for them the superiority of settlement and pastoralism over nomadism and the insecurity of a hunting-gathering existence. It conditioned CMS to the idea that if an Aboriginal population could be located in one autonomous site then they could be literally seen, in European terms, to own the land through its cultivation. Aboriginal people would then have the moral and material fortitude to withstand the impacts of colonisation. Hence the vision that CMS had for Roper River Mission was the creation of ‘a self-supporting community’ of Aborigines ‘providing for their own needs as much as possible’ (CMS 1923 in Harris 1998:219). Missionaries were therefore to ‘give every assistance’ to ‘any blacks’ that ‘desire[ed] work ... or show[ed] any aptitude for a settled life’ (ibid.). They also hoped that Roper River Mission would be a base for creating separate ‘self-supporting’ Aboriginal settlements throughout southeast Arnhem Land (CMA 1908 in Dewar 1992:9; Harris 1998:12).⁹

⁹ Some of their proposals included taking over the abandoned Florida station in the north of Arnhem Land (Sharp 1909:10 in Dewar 1992:9), and setting up temporary settlements throughout the region (Thomas 1911:8 in Dewar 1992:9).

A contrasting image of frontier conditions, however, allows us to see that place was important to Aboriginal people for different reasons. A range of known places provided them with security and well-being, which linked Aboriginal groups through the integrated activities of hunting-gathering, ritual performance and exchange. In the following, I draw upon one Aboriginal man's experience of this in order to highlight the way in which pastoralism in the Roper region disrupted the relative autonomy and patterned mobility of life in small kin groups.

'No-more sit down one place and be happy'

Lockwood's (1980[1962]) *I the Aboriginal* is a biography of Waipuldanya, an Aboriginal man who grew up at Roper River Mission. In it Waipuldanya describes how his father (born circa 1894) encountered Europeans for the first time during his childhood. Waipuldanya gives the account as if it were his father Gabarla speaking. He states:

Bad times, bad times ... we bin live like wallabies, frightened one ... all-a-time walkabout ... no-more sit down one place and be happy ... all-a-time we go, we go, run away from white man and his bullet. Naked we go, got nothing blanket, nothing food only what we hunt, nothing water only what we steal from white-feller. White-feller ... say him Boss along all that land, all that water. He send us into hills with rifle bullet chasing us. We frightened to make fire 'cos ... white-feller see smoke and find us, so we eat meat raw. We bin watch ... we see them tracking us like kangaroo. On horses they are [that squatter and Queensland blackfeller], with rifles ready, playing Hunt the Nigger. Get Three Before Breakfast. ... All-a-time we stay walkabout, [my mother, my father and his mob] ... hunting kangaroo, emu, lizard, eat 'im raw-feller. ... Many years we bin live like animal. Can't have corroboree, can't have Kunapipi, can't have Yabudurawa ... can't have Lorrkun 'cos when blackfeller dead-finish white-feller burn his body. (Lockwood 1980[1962]:133-4).

Gabarla's account, as retold by Waipuldanya suggests that Aborigines, far from being nomads constantly on the move in search of food and at the mercy of nature, pursued a more patterned life before Europeans came. They took pleasure in living on their own country, in gathering for ceremony, in reciprocal visiting and food exchanges in the course of hunting and gathering. It was squatter Europeans hunting Aborigines as a form of sport and laying claim to all the land and water, Gabarla says, that disrupted essential conditions of Aboriginal cultural reproduction. They could not enjoy the resources of any one place for fear of being shot by Europeans. They had moreover to steal basic resources from whites, rather than engage in practices of exchange. They could not risk lighting a fire to cook food nor stay in one place long enough to perform ceremony. They could not therefore give priority to maintaining attachments to particular places in a ritual economy based on the control of ancestral sites. Hence they could not integrate the living and the dead with sites and entities through the re-enactments of ancestral journeys in *Lorrkun* or other ceremonies. The disruption to this way of life, informed by Aboriginal law, was dehumanising Gabarla remarks, as it forced him and his family to live like 'animals.'

Gabarla's account concludes with the following statements about how frontier violence came to an end:

Arright now, ... The policeman bin come. The missionaries bin come and they talk-talk to we: Allabout ... come live along mission ... We friend belong you, we God-man, we school-teacher ... We come to teach about God-in-sky, we come to teach about read and write, no-more fight, no-more kill. They bin talk: We got no rifle. White-feller missionary is Mister Joynt, is Mister Sharp, is Mister Huthnance. They got tents ... and they live there. We got fish, we got wallaby. We give 'em fish, we give 'em wallaby. They talk: Thank you. Big-feller [God?] thank you. We got friend now, squatters no-more bin come, we safe here, and we stay and we stay ... and now we talk Christian way about God-in-Sky. (Lockwood 1980[1962]:134).

The arrival of missionaries and policemen, Gabarla suggests, offered to Aboriginal people the opportunity to resume some of their own cultural practices. Ironically, Aborigines could now 'sit down one place and be happy' again as the missionary promise of non-violence offered them safety. Missionaries also wished to pursue ongoing friendly relations with Aborigines, being willing to share the new knowledge and skills that they had brought with them. Aboriginal people reciprocated with gifts of food and with their acceptance of the mission as a place that provided a patterned existence, not unlike their own previously patterned life. It was a place also informed by God's law mediated through the important personnel of 'God-man' and 'school-teacher.' Such people seemingly had the power to prevent more violent 'squatters' from coming into the region and marked missionaries as a different category of Europeans to other settlers. The friendship entered into with missionaries, Gabarla proposes, was based on the exchange of food for knowledge and peaceful relations. And it was affirmed through his taking a biblical name (Barnabas) to indicate his association with the mission. Such exchanges validated Aboriginal practice and now made it appropriate for mission Aborigines to also 'talk Christian way' (ibid.).

The 'bad times' of the frontier came to an end for Gabarla because he and his parents were to survive by becoming residents of the mission and engaging in its routines. They would initially take this up in a part-time manner, which enabled them to continue to pursue some of their own modes of reproduction and value creation. Gabarla for example would maintain a life-long association with both mission and country through his work as an itinerant evangelist and through his ritual associations in the Roper region (see chapter 4). The forging of relationships between missionaries and Aborigines however would be a gradual process, marked during the first decades at Roper by non-recognition and avoidance. The following section addresses these themes.

Roper River Mission ... 'A Better Order Of Things'

Evangelism for CMS was central to the task of bringing about a change in the living conditions of Aboriginal people and daily chapel service was a routine feature of mission life. Gospel, however, would be contextualised in what CMS referred to as the 'common occupations of life' (in Harris 1998:205). Aborigines were to acquire skills in 'gardening, building, stock-work, school ... cooking, house-work and cleanliness ... all taught under the influence of Christianity' (Joynt 1918:7). Attending to these everyday European practices, missionaries believed, would effect a 'healing of the [Aboriginal] body,' which in turn would bring about a 'healing of the [Aboriginal] soul' (in Harris 1998:205). Hence the dual objectives of instructing Aborigines in the 'truths of the gospel' and improving 'their temporal condition' with training in the 'useful arts of life' were to be 'pursued simultaneously' (ibid.). As missionaries saw it, they would be bringing with them 'a better order of things' than 'nomadic habits,' 'superstitions' and the absence of a 'conception of sin' (Thomas 1911:3 in Dewar 1992:10).

It would not be a straightforward matter for missionaries to realise their endorsement of useful daily occupation as a fundamental dimension of moral being in their engagement with Aboriginal people at the mission. Although they would pursue gospel instruction in tandem with the routine tasks of mission life the relationship between them and personal moral worth was not a transparent one to Aborigines who had quite different imperatives of social life.

Early mission reports, of which very little remains in CMS archives, provide some examples of the way in which missionaries misrecognised the complexity of the situation they were in at Roper River Mission.¹⁰ For instance, it is commonplace

¹⁰ Cole (1968) was the first to provide a brief history of Roper River Mission. He visited the mission in order to collect data for his publication during 1968 when it was decided by CMS to hand over administration of it to the government. A Roper Mission report records his visit and comments on the fact that Cole found few mission reports or documents pertaining to the first 20 (1908-28) years of Roper River Mission's operation (NTRS 1102 Vol 2. 1955-73 *Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River*, Chaplaincy report February 1968:2, Rev Woodbridge). Cole therefore

in CMS publications for accounts to highlight the welcome that they received from Roper Aborigines (e.g. Cole 1968:6; Harris 1986:234, 1990:704, 1998:11). And the photograph of the first religious service conducted by the bank of the river is frequently used to support the idea that missionaries and the ‘few natives present’ came together in a joint act of thanksgiving (Joynt 1918:3). The event has been widely documented in CMS accounts of their endeavours (e.g. Joynt 1918:2; Cole 1968:14, 1985:65; Harris1990:703, 1998:10).

The photograph of the first service shows about a dozen clothed people in the frame and evokes the idea that there was an easy rapport reached with Aborigines in the Roper region, although few are actually present at the service (see Photograph 1). Presumably it was the three missionaries (Rev. Huthnance, Mr Sharp and Mr Joynt) appointed to begin the mission and the three ‘half-caste’ Christians (Mr and Mrs Nobel and Mr Reid) brought from the Yarrabah Methodist Mission to assist them who are depicted in this joint thanksgiving and undertaking.¹¹

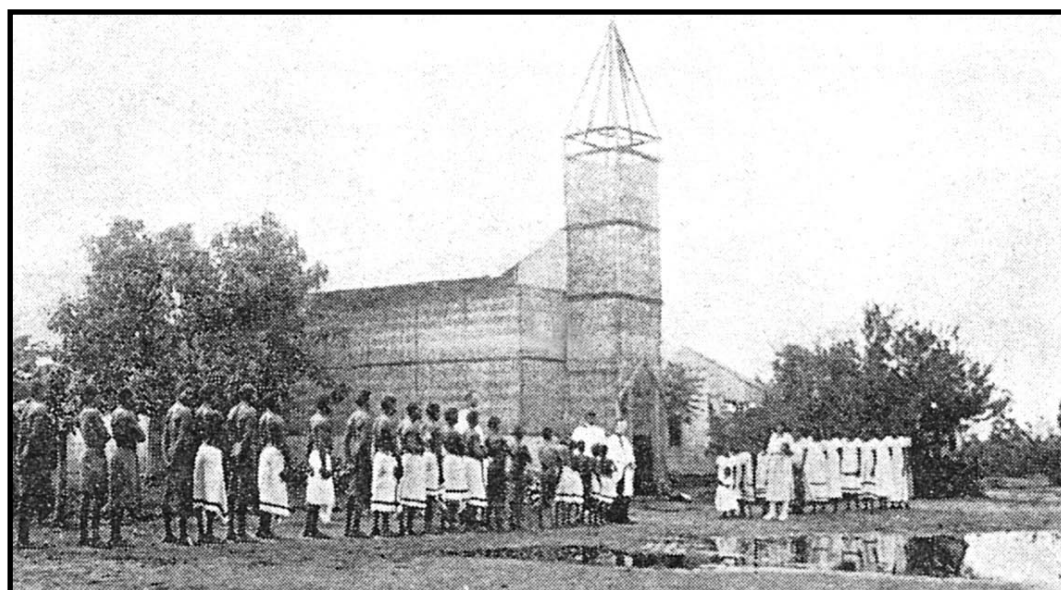
compiled his account from a few of the early annual reports submitted to CMA Victoria and from excerpts of annual reports published in missionary magazines such as *The Church Missionary Gleaner*. The difficulty of locating material on the mission’s early years was also noted in chapter 1 of this study.

¹¹ As noted earlier in footnote 8, the term ‘half-caste’ is utilised in CMS reports and other literature of this period, being an integral category of a racialised colonial order.



Photograph 1: First Anglican service at Roper River, 1908

Reproduced with permission – Church Missionary Society



Photograph 2: Mission Aborigines

Reproduced with permission – Church Missionary Society

St Catherine's Church completed by 1918, Roper River Mission (Cole 1971:177)

Early reports nevertheless attest to the success of the mission during its first years of operation. Missionaries purchased a herd of cattle from the nearby station at Urapunga (Cole 1968:6) and 50 goats from the police station at Roper Bar (Reid 1909 in Sandefur 1998:20). They also acquired 6 horses (ibid.) and with Aboriginal labour, paid for with rations and tobacco, had cleared, fenced and planted a number of acres of land (Annual report 1909 in Cole 1968:6). They also erected a hut for stores, a school, staff housing and some native huts (ibid.). Although the Aboriginal population fluctuated seasonally, there was on average 70 Aborigines residing at the mission (ibid.). With these regular numbers, Huthnance reported, missionaries were able to conduct a school for children, daily classes for adults and frequent religious services (ibid.). He was also happy to report that the regional Aboriginal population had 'assumed a friendly attitude' toward the mission (Annual Report 1908:8 in Cole 1968:6).

It is clear, however, from other sources that missionaries were largely uninterested in the way in which Aborigines established affiliations with different stretches of country, as they seemed to be unaware of the problems their presence might have caused other Aborigines in the region. It was not their practice to record in any systematic way the variety of Aboriginal language groups that came to reside at the mission, how they intermixed or how they had established connections with specific places.¹² Nor were missionaries predisposed to recognise Aboriginal people in terms of their own modes of identification or in terms of their own imperatives of social life.

A letter from Horace Reid, one of the half-caste mission assistants from Yarrabah, allows us a glimpse of life beyond the mission precincts, which contrasts

¹² Bern's (1974:103-4) identification of the earliest Aboriginal residents at the mission, as including Mara, Alawa, Ngalakan, Wandarang, Nunggubuyu and Ngandi, is inferred from his fieldwork which showed the longest history of co-residence among those groups together with a high incidence of intermarriage and ritual association. Harris' (1986:235) identification of these six groups plus Rembarrnga and Mangarrayi as the 'remnants' attracted to the mission is an inference based on the history of violence in the southeast Arnhem Land region and similarly does not come from CMS archives.

with Huthnance's reports. Far from indicating that a rapport had been established with Aborigines regionally, Reid's letter points instead to the tensions created by a missionary presence and to the very transitory residence patterns that were usual at the mission. He writes:

The [Aboriginal] people here are not frightened to work, although they are myalls in many ways. We have six horses, and every morning one or two boys go first thing in the morning and fetch them out to our place. One morning a man named Laurence went out for the horses. He nearly got speared by some other blacks from another place. Laurence was the first man we had to stay at the mission for good. The others come and work for a month or two and then go away again to the bush. When they finish the tobacco they got when they were working, they soon return here again to us. One night they had a big growl in the night – the saltwater blacks against the inland blacks. They made a big fire and they stood with their fighting nullas, spears, boomerangs ... ready for the fight. Then old King Bob stood in the middle and stopped them growling. (Reid 1909 in Sandefur 1998:20-21).

I juxtapose Huthnance's dry reporting on missionary success with Reid's more lively account of conditions at the mission in order to highlight that relations in general were far from easy or friendly. As Reid makes clear, no one at the mission was entirely safe from the hostilities of 'other' Aborigines from 'another place.' Likewise the 'myall' blacks, by which is meant Aborigines still living in a traditional manner unfamiliar with European culture, were also prone to settling disputes with violence. Reid goes on to describe, in his letter, how four Aboriginal people had been speared since the arrival of missionaries, one fatally. He also recounts how one of the survivors recovering at the mission had two of his three wives taken away by 'enemy' Aborigines (ibid.). It is impossible to know what the dispute that Bob stopped was about and what the basis of his influence over it was or why Laurence was nearly a victim of spearing from other Aborigines. But it is likely that these

tensions were precipitated by missionary presence in Yugul/Wandarang country, which drew strangers, competing individuals and different Aboriginal groups to the place.

It is also the case that Aboriginal practice, particularly spearing and polygyny, could be used to elaborate further the 'better order of things' that missionaries aimed to establish at the mission. Though they did not seem to know the significance of named country to Aboriginal people, violence and 'child-betrothal' gave missionaries two useful objectives on which to focus their energies. All CMS missions made two rules fundamental to continued relations, in order to curb violence and polygyny. Fighting, especially with spears, was banned and Aborigines had to observe the rule of 'one man, one wife' while living at the mission.¹³ Breaking these rules would identify Aborigines as insufficiently socialised in mission values and could lead to their expulsion or removal to the police station at Roper Bar. In addition the varied ways in which Aborigines responded to missionaries provided them with a useful method of differentiating among Aborigines and evaluating Roper River Mission's success. It is to these themes that I now turn.

'Myall' and 'mission blacks' at Roper River

A new way of differentiating among Aboriginal people arose at Roper River Mission based on the way in which they engaged with its routines. Aborigines who were unfamiliar with European culture were commonly referred to as 'bush' or 'myall' blacks. These Aborigines might not associate with the mission at all. Some however lived in 'camps' immediately outside the mission precinct (Joynt 1918:9; Masson 1915:139; Spencer 1912:45), and for a time would receive rations in return for sporadic amounts of labour. In contrast to camp Aborigines, mission blacks resided in 'native huts' within the mission precinct and were more integrated into the everyday tasks of mission life. The daily routines they were involved with, according to Joynt (1918:9), included everybody rising at 5 a.m. to carry out domestic and gardening duties before breakfast at 7 a.m. This was followed by a prayer service and

¹³ NTRS 1105/P1, 1953-81, Arnhem Land Missions Publications, Harris, G.R. 1981:179.

more work around the mission for older Aborigines, while young children attended school. After dinner at noon the situation was reversed with children going to the gardens or sewing class and the older Aborigines going to school. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons were free and only necessary work was attended to on Sunday.

A missionary, in 1913, summed up the contrast between camp and mission natives quite evocatively. He stated that 'camp natives' were 'covered with grease and dirt, and drinking out of the same vessels made use of by their dogs,' whereas the mission children were 'clean-skinned, clothed, happy and very lovable' (Holmes 1913:40 in Sandefur 1998:56).

The ability to assume the outward signs of the mission's value system, including habits of dress and hygiene, attendance at Christian services and deference to mission authority were important criteria for defining Aborigines as mission blacks (see Photograph 2). These signs were not easy to exemplify all of the time, although they were not the only ways in which Aboriginal people could demonstrate their commitment to Christianity and the mission. One could maintain faithful Christian witness also through evangelical activities and diligence in providing mundane services to the mission. Aboriginal people who were too transitory then did not take up an obligation to the mission and were unlikely to assume the outward signs of its value system. Neither would they forge sufficiently strong personal relationships with missionaries necessary to achieve valued roles in the mission regime. But for those Aborigines who did provide exemplary service to the mission, some would find their roles and worth subject to arbitrary redefinition by a recently arrived missionary. The situation at Roper River was then quite unstable in terms of the way in which Aborigines might rise or fall within the mission's social order.

There were two factors that contributed to the instability of the mission's hierarchy of relations. In the first instance both missionaries and Aborigines proved to be quite transitory populations. It was noted in several reports that the mission

experienced acute staffing shortages between 1910 and 1913 (Cole 1968:7).¹⁴ And a state of friction existed between mission personnel about their project adversely affecting mission operations until 1914, though sources do not indicate why this tension existed (Harris 1990:707-8). But Aboriginal people also frequently absented themselves at short notice (Cole 1968:7.). They habitually withdrew their children from the dormitories (Thomas 1911:3 in Dewar 1992:10), or the boys and girls simply absconded from them (Chrome 1913 in Dewar 1992:12). There were tensions concerning the fact that the ‘husbands’ of the young girls in the dormitory would come to ‘the Mission and steal away their wives’ (Joynt 1918:3-4). And, the girl’s dormitory was a further source of attraction to young men who often enticed girls out or snuck in to stay overnight with them (Chrome 1913 in Dewar 1992:12).¹⁵

In the second instance the services that Aboriginal people provided were themselves subject to individual missionaries’ interpretations. For example some Aborigines are remembered most by CMS for their evangelical work. King Bob, referred to by Reid above, stands out in CMS accounts in this regard. Though unbaptised, Bob is nevertheless considered by CMS to be their first convert. He is reported to have said to a missionary just prior to his death in February 1909 that ‘Jesus been talking alonga me. Him bin tell me no more be frightened to die. Me no more frightened feller’ (Joynt 1918:20-1; Cole 1968:6; Harris 1990:705, 1998:44). He was something of an itinerant evangelist during the five months before his death, and assisted at ‘service time’ by telling ‘his people in his own language’ the stories missionaries told about ‘the Almighty’ (Reid 1909 in Sandefur 1998:21). Subsequently, Cole (1968:6), Harris (1986:233-4) and Gerritsen (1981:10) have attributed to him the status of leader for Aborigines at and in the vicinity of the

¹⁴ Only one (Joynt) of the original three missionaries was left at Roper by 1910. All three of the half-caste assistants brought from Yarrabah mission in Queensland left that year. Six new missionaries arrived in 1911. Four were women but two of them and their husbands left before 1913 (Harris 1990:708; Cole 1968:7). By 1913 there was a new missionary in charge, Rev. Hubert Warren, and a staff of six missionaries.

¹⁵ Dormitory inmates were punished for these breaches having their ‘hair cut right in the centre and shaved a mark’ that ‘would remind them’ and others ‘of the sin that caused it’ (Chrome 1913 in Dewar 1992:12).

mission.¹⁶ Bob clearly was a significant person for both missionaries and Aborigines, having some measure of influence over the latter. But as Reid's letter above indicates, missionaries did not know how Bob's authority over other Aborigines was realised.

Bob's importance, as a person who rendered significant service to the mission, has endured primarily through its recounting in CMS literature. Other Aboriginal people of a later generation, who achieved valued roles as evangelists are similarly accorded a place in CMS history. For example, one young Aboriginal woman, Johanna, gave a commentary on the lantern pictures used at a Christmas service in 1918 (in Sandefur 1998:33). The following year James Japanma, a young Aboriginal man in his early 20s, held 'informal services' at Roper Bar (ibid.).

¹⁶ Harris and Gerritsen do not agree on Bob's linguistic affiliation. Harris (1986:234) not only identifies King Bob as Mara who, he says, was an 'old and respected leader throughout the region' he also infers that King Bob was 'old Bob', the 'former pilot' encountered by Bishop White when he selected the site for the mission. Gerritsen (1981:10), however, claims that both Bob and his successor Ned were 'heads' of the Ngalakan who took over control of the tribes gathering at the mission. Gerritsen provides no evidence for his claims. Harris' (1986:228-9) source is Bishop White (1918:153), who met with 'old Bob' when his party were reconnoitring for CMS in 1907. Harris actually infers that Bob is Mara because he surmises that Bob most likely camped at the mouth of the Roper River, on its southern side, in order to pilot ships from there to Roper Bar (ibid. 229). This country has been documented as Mara since at least Spencer's (1914:253) account of them as 'one of the coastal tribes on the Gulf of Carpentaria'. In fact White (1918:148) encountered old Bob at his camp on the northern bank of the river, more than 30 miles from its mouth, in country that was documented by Capell (1959:206) as 'Wandarang' or by Spencer (ibid. 7) as 'Yukul.' The purpose of drawing attention to these different claims is not to find fault with Harris or Gerritsen but to point to the fact that their statements are based on inferences from available documented sources or personal communication with living missionaries or Aborigines. If the latter case, then it needs to be borne in mind that the current context through which people remember past events has an impact on the way in which affiliations and relationships are claimed. It seems to me that Bob could just as easily have had a Wandarang or Yugul affiliation. It is also interesting that neither Harris nor Gerritsen provide an Aboriginal account from the present that claims Bob (or Ned his successor) as a relative. During my fieldwork neither Bob nor Ned were mentioned to me as significant personnel through which contemporary Aborigines render their relationships with the mission, although I acknowledge that such accounts might exist and may be the basis for Gerritsen's claims.

Timothy Hampton was the first half-caste to take Evensong and deliver the service in ‘full English’ at Roper in 1924 (Cole 1968:11). Prior to that Timothy and his wife were employed to staff the mission at Groote Eylandt (ibid.). Even corroborees were a useful site for evangelising with ‘mission boys’ as Warren recounts:

A great corroboree was held near here, and large numbers of blacks attended. Mr Dyer was able to visit it and do some teaching, and there was great enthusiasm among our boys and many were keen to preach to their own people – in fact there has been quite a revival of spiritual life and interest among the boys, especially in the matter of preaching and teaching their own people. New Blacks whom we had not seen before were among those who listened night after night (Warren 1924:12 in Harris 1998:70).

The evangelical activities of Aboriginal people were highly valued at the mission, but so too were the rites of Baptism and Confirmation important markers of Christian identification. And consistent dedication was required to achieve them, as another of Rev. Warren’s comments makes clear: ‘Our standard for baptism is very high – two years probably – each lapse into sin sets the candidate back’ (CMS 1922 in Cole 1968:10-11). These criteria were evidently adhered to as only three baptisms (of young Aboriginal men) had occurred by 1913 and it was 1922 before six Aboriginal adults were confirmed. The same year two infants were baptised to a married Christian couple, making ‘up the first whole native Christian family on the Roper’ (ibid.). Clearly native Christian families were a desired outcome for the mission as evidence of its own progress. In these early decades of operation however evangelism and diligent service to the mission were the ways in which Aboriginal people could be seen to embody missionary ideals.

Assisting in the mission’s project of expansion and maintaining Roper River Mission were two forms of diligent service that enabled Aborigines to forge close associations with the mission. Men such as Saltwater Jack, Umbariri, Djangardba and Rupert, crew of the *Evangel*, made exploratory trips to Rose River, Bickerton

Island and Groote Eylandt in 1916 and 1917 on behalf of the mission.¹⁷ They frequently acted as guides for missionaries, helping them to communicate with Aborigines in other areas of southeast Arnhem Land when the mission sought to expand. They helped missionaries find a suitable site on Groote Eylandt for another mission and assisted them to build it. Yet others assisted in maintaining Roper River Mission, building, gardening and tending to its animal stocks. These everyday occupations were also valued by missionaries, even if not as frequently commended in CMS publications as the evangelical activities of Aboriginal people.

Though there were varying ways in which Aborigines could render service to the mission and be recognised for faithful witness, no particular role or marker of identity was sufficient to secure a permanent position within its regime. An example of one Aboriginal man's change in fortune can be read in Joynt (1918) and Langford Smith (1936), the latter succeeding the other as missionary-in-charge in 1928. Joynt had a close relationship with Minimere (elder brother to Gabarla) and he believed that Minimere was a great leader (1918:21). Joynt also valued the fact that Minimere had apparently given up the 'dances that were impure, and that include devil worship' (ibid.). Minimere was baptised in 1918 and had taken the name Caleb to mark his association with the mission. But this did not protect him when Langford Smith took over. Rather Langford Smith (1936:75-6) regarded Minimere as a violent man and wife beater. He also claimed that Minimere had tried to perform sorcery on

¹⁷ Roper River Mission briefly became a repository for half-caste children because it was the only one of its kind in southeast Arnhem Land. Police and other Europeans brought in children from the surrounding cattle stations and settlements from Roper Bar to Borroloola. However, all half-caste children were removed to Groote Eylandt mission in 1924, to ensure that they were kept free from the influences of myall or tribal Aborigines. The half-caste population at Groote Eylandt was returned to Roper Mission in 1933 at the request of the government (Harris 1998:394). It also occurred in accordance with a change in CMS practice to redirect its efforts to the island's Aboriginal inhabitants (ibid.). Most, however, were evacuated from Roper to Sydney and the CMS home at Mulgoa in 1942 (ibid. 404, 409), when Australia and Japan entered World War II. A number of married half-caste couples and families stayed in the south after the war having secured independent incomes, generally in the building trade (ibid. 410). The boys and girls, after much debate, were dispersed among various institutions in South Australia and Alice Springs (ibid. 417).

him. (*ibid.*).¹⁸ Hence Minimere had to leave and find a niche elsewhere.¹⁹ Saltwater Jack was another who did not prosper as he had a ‘violent maniacal outbreak’ in 1931.²⁰ He also failed to be baptised or confirmed. His sister Elizabeth and her husband Umbariri, however, did achieve valued roles as diligent workers and faithful Christians. Elizabeth was among the first to be confirmed in 1922 and Umbariri gave a ‘forceful message’ at the Christmas service one year.²¹ Others have simply faded from the record without missionaries or surviving kin to remember them.

Securing a reliable relationship with a missionary was difficult for Aboriginal people at Roper River Mission, as twenty-five different missionaries had worked there within its first twenty years of operation (Langford Smith 1936:43). Mobility, within the hierarchy of relations at the mission depended, for an Aborigine, on the ability to hold onto valuable relationships with missionaries. But missionaries, who often only stayed for a couple of years and occupied the elite categories of

¹⁸ Allegations of sexual misconduct and mismanagement were made against Langford Smith in 1932 (Cook 1932, CRS F1 38/534 in Dewar 1992:36), and were the subject of a government inquiry in 1933 (Harris 1998:228). Langford Smith had sent Minimere to the police station at Roper Bar with a letter asking them to lock Minimere up because he was dangerous. Minimere countered with the claim that Langford Smith had sexually interfered with Rachel (Minimere’s wife) and the allegation was passed on to the Chief Protector, Cecil Cook, by the police (Dewar 1992:36). CMS dismissed Langford Smith (Harris 1998:229) though their own inquiry exonerated him from any charge of misconduct (*ibid.* 230). The Northern Territory Administration maintained his guilt, at least in the matter of mismanagement, and withdrew its subsidy from Roper River Mission for the next decade (*ibid.* 231).

¹⁹ Bern (1974:104-5; 1979b:50-1) notes that during the 1930s a large contingent of Alawa people emigrated from Roper River Mission back to their traditional country south of the river, where other Alawa kin had gathered at Nutwood and Hodgson Downs cattle stations. His informants suggested that this was prompted in part by the rivalry between Minimere and an elderly Ngalakan man (Tommy Costello) over control of the Balgin cult. It is also quite likely that Minimere could not recover his standing even with a new superintendent at the mission after he had made such serious allegations against Langford Smith. In any event, Minimere’s younger brother Gabarla and his family were among the few Alawa that remained at Roper River Mission after the 1930s.

²⁰ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, February 1939.

²¹ *ibid.* December 1945.

superintendent and supervisory staff, set the upper limit of Aboriginal mobility within its regime. Despite this instability, those such as Elizabeth and Umbariri, but also Lobar, Gabarla, Djangardba and Ulagang, who came to the mission in their youth managed to maintain a life-long association with it. They are remembered as having been the first to receive Christian knowledge and mediate between missionaries and Aborigines (see chapter 4). And it is their sons and daughters who, in later decades, would reinterpret both the tasks of Christianity and the demands of the mission reorganised in terms of government-directed assimilation initiatives (see chapter 4).

It is also the case that accounts of ‘mission times’ from this generation offer a contrasting perspective from which to understand Aboriginal imperatives of social life and its patterns. Rather than defining themselves as being faithful Christian witnesses or not, Aboriginal accounts highlight instead the way in which their priorities of action were affirmed in the course of sustaining connections with other sites besides the mission. Their accounts moreover reveal the way in which they revalue images of themselves as wild and myall, often affirming the capacities of their forebears in positive terms. It is to the ways in which a largely mission-born generation of Aborigines remember the past through their interpretations of the present that I address my final remarks.

Affirming Values Of Service Exchange And Sociality

The first account of mission times comes from Holly (born 1943 to Umbariri and Elizabeth), which brings together the themes of service exchange and sociality that were sustained for her in the course of travelling and camping with kin. She recounts a journey she made in the early 1950s (Ngarliwarra, 1998:39-49), which displays characteristics of widespread lateral forms of regional organisation. She and her mother and sisters left the mission during school holidays and did not return for two years. Holly describes how they met and camped with their mother’s brother at Walgundu cave and further south at a billabong called Warlingandu. At Limmen River he showed her some stones that were related to his and her mother’s Dreaming. From there the group walked on to Tanumbirini station (about 195kms)

where they stayed for two months with him and his wife. Here they worked collecting eggs, milking goats and mustering the horses for the stockmen. In return they received blankets, calico and hats. From Tanumbirini Holly, her mother and sisters walked to Borrooloola (about 170kms) where they stayed for upwards of a year with Holly's grandmother. They had to live bush for a while when the cargo boat failed to arrive with supplies and before making the 215kms walk back to Roper River. Holly remembers attending her first *Gunapipi* ceremony at Limmen River with the Roper and Borrooloola 'mobs' during this time. It was put up by her *abuji* mob (father's mother) and included a *Lorrkun* ceremony (mortuary rite) for Holly's father, who had died at Channel Island leprosarium just before she had left Roper Mission.

It becomes clear at this point in Holly's narrative that her family had left the mission on 'sorry business,' which required them to be separated from the things and places intimately associated with her father. When she meets with her relatives from Roper at the site for this ceremony, Holly, her sisters and mother, are reintegrated through ritual into the social network of her mission relatives. During the *Lorrkun* ceremony Holly saw the bones of her *abuji* and she observed that her living *abuji* received gifts of food from her mother and sisters. After these protocols and others were observed Holly, her sisters and mother were 'free' to settle once again at the mission. What is significant in Holly's story is the sense of lives patterned by a variety of occupations undertaken at the mission and on cattle-stations. Interspersed with these periods of work are regular intervals on country, hunting and gathering and fulfilling obligations of a kin-land based sociality. Though stopped during the period of frontier violence as Gabarla recounts above, the integration of the living and dead with sites and entities through the re-enactments of ancestral journeys in ceremony had resumed. They had moreover continuing relevance in the mid 20th century, even for a mission-born girl such as Holly. And the number of kin that resided throughout this region provided her and others with a range of locales wherein sociality realised through spatiality supported the relative autonomy of life in overlapping networks of kin (see map 5 on page 89).

It was possible for Holly and her relatives to maintain their priorities of action, despite the intense daily routines of the mission. This was due to the fact that the mission's domestic economy was underpinned by the use of 'bush breaks' (mid-week, Saturday, Easter, Christmas and at any time the mission experienced shortages). These were a regular feature of mission life up to the 1960s, ostensibly provided to allow Aboriginal people to 'reclaim something of their native bush-craft'.²² But they had a more pragmatic purpose. Minimal or no rations were issued to those leaving the mission, which helped to extend supplies. Often local crops failed and sometimes cargo did not arrive. On these occasions, Aboriginal groups were sent 'bush' in rotation for two weeks at a time to provide for themselves, without disturbing the routines of the mission.²³ The twice-yearly cargo from Queensland and local supply of beef was supplemented with wild game, kangaroo, fish and water-lily bulbs, the seeds of which could be pounded into a substitute for flour.²⁴ The mission then never achieved its aim of creating a self-supporting food-producing village by agricultural means. Its moderate supplies of produce (from the gardens and herds of cattle, goats, pigs and fowl) were subject to careful preservation and distribution. Seasonal factors, including the regular influx of Aboriginal visitors during the wet season and the effects of excessive heat and rain, ensured that it was never adequate to the demands made on it.²⁵ Initiatives in agriculture and cultivation were never more than subsistence ventures that were supplemented by grants from CMS and donations from Anglican communities in the south. The mission, therefore,

²² CRS F1 1938/534, Stanley Port, Missionary-in-Charge, Roper River Mission, December 1933.

²³ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, March 1939.

²⁴ *ibid.* October 1938; *ibid.* May, June, August 1939.

²⁵ A constant problem that Roper Mission faced was the unpredictability and extremes of the regions climate. On a number of occasions floods completely destroyed the mission's gardens and stock (NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, 1940, 1957). In other years droughts beset the mission (NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, 1931, 1951, 1952, 1954; NTRS 1102 Vol 2. 1955-73, Mission Reports, 1961) causing crop failure. The drought of 1954 was so extreme that CMS launched a famine appeal raising £1,500 for food supplies (Cole 1968:24). Crops could not be irrigated from the tidal Roper River, which became increasingly salty during droughts and forced the evacuation of the population further inland for drinking and washing water.

remained heavily reliant on the ability of Aborigines to provision themselves by hunting and gathering.

Though Holly and others could still experience life in terms of sociality sustained in overlapping networks of relatedness, an enduring orientation to the mission is nonetheless a significant feature of her narrative. There are moreover other Aboriginal narratives that reveal a similar orientation to the mission and which highlight instead the intense manual labour required to bring it into being and maintain it.

A particular account of sustained labouring for Europeans comes from Sam Thompson, born circa 1912. He recounts that as a boy he first learnt to work in the gardens with Rev. Warren growing vegetables.²⁶ He was also put to minding and milking goats and when he was older he was taught carpentry and building skills. He then learnt stock-work at Urapunga cattle-station, but came back to Roper Mission when more building work was required. Sam also worked for the army during the war years erecting camps and as a guide, after which he returned to the mission and resumed his occupation as a builder. Sam recalls the variety of Aboriginal groups that came to the mission and how they engaged with it: ‘Yugul this country, nother that side Wandarang, nother other side Alawa ... everybody bin come to mission ... lotta bush people here, lotta croc here. Everything here bin done by hand, no tractor then, carry everything on shoulders, digim up airstrip, carry water in drums, buildim windmill.’ Sam’s defining statement about his life is: ‘I bin work, no matter what.’

Sam’s account of learning to work for Europeans reveals a different sense of the way in which a place can be brought into being through new forms of activity, rather than through the integrated activities of hunter-gathering and ritual. And his comments about the drawing in of multiple language groups to permanent residence at the mission also point to a different way in which sociality and relationships to

²⁶ NTRS 219, OHI, TP 559. This account of Sam’s work history is a summary of his taped conversation with Francis Good of the Northern Territory Government Archives Service, oral history division made at Ngukurr in 1986.

place might be realised through the manual efforts of building and maintenance. A further reflection of Sam's about the flood of 1940 and the work entailed in rebuilding the mission brings together these themes of new forms of activity and relatedness realised in this project.

The flood of 1940 was a significant event for missionaries and Aborigines in the Roper region. Roper River rose by 60 feet and wiped out all the stock and most of the buildings at the mission and affected many of the nearby cattle-stations. Sam recalls: 'we got no daga [food], flood bin finish nanny goat, chook chook, everything. Mr Port say "we can't feed you mob."' While the bulk of the population sat out the flood at Manugani hill living on bush tucker, Sam and a group of 'mission boys' went by canoe to Roper Bar police station to seek assistance. The journey took two days, but they found that conditions at Roper Bar were not much better than at the mission and, as its wireless was out, they had to travel on foot for three days until they reached Roper Valley cattle station. Holt, the manager there, sent word about the crisis to Darwin administration. When the 'boys' returned to the mission five days later they were surprised to find that a boat from Darwin had already arrived with provisions for the population. And after the flood-waters subsided, the work of salvage and rebuilding began. Sam recalls he 'worked like a donkey' carting timbers, iron and stores to the new site 6 miles upriver and rebuilding the mission from scratch.

Though government files indicate that no additional supplies were sent to the mission at the time of the flood, I take Sam's comment to be a reflection on the different capacities of missionaries and Aborigines to provision a population.²⁷ Missionaries, Sam proposes, seemingly had unlimited capacities to provide supplies because they could draw on very distant relationships with other Europeans as required. Their ability to continually import non-indigenous resources (rations) as needed marked them as powerful in a way that Aborigines were not, Sam suggests. The places they could bring into being by these means were then, in Sam's view,

²⁷ CRS F1 1948/265, Correspondence between Stanley Port (Roper River Mission) and the Director of Native Affairs, Darwin, January and February 1940.

quite independent of the ways in which Aboriginal camps and ritual sites gain their significance. But Sam also implies that missionaries were not omnipotent. Rather there were interdependencies established between them and Aboriginal people as the latter's unique bush skills and labour was essential to maintain the viability of the mission.

A final account from an elderly mission woman offers another perspective on the differences between Europeans and Aborigines and on the differences between the past and present. Her account begins with the 'wild times' of colonisation and reflects on the image of the 'myall Aborigine,' offering the view that the present is more disorganised than the past. In doing so Maureen's account, similarly to Sam's, reveals the way in which sociality realised in terms of the spatiality of travelling and camping on country is repositioned relative to permanent settlement and its demands. I begin with the way in which the image of the wild and myall Aborigine reflects the changing definitions that Aborigines have of themselves and of their relationship to Europeans (Morphy and Morphy 1984a:465).

Redefining roles and revaluing practice

Morphy and Morphy (1984a:460) have drawn attention to the prevalence of the image of the 'wild blackfellow' as a representation about the past, common to Ngalakan and other Roper Aborigines. The oral Aboriginal histories told to them about the early years of contact contained many similar elements, which underscored an Aboriginal lack of material possessions and ignorance about European culture. Accounts also generally highlighted the violence of Aborigines, either toward Europeans or among themselves. Morphy and Morphy found then that the image of the 'wild blackfellow' functioned to create a discontinuity between past and present patterns of Aboriginal life (ibid.). The image also functioned to justify the 'subordinate role that Aborigines played in the cattle industry' in relation to Europeans (ibid. 476). And though constructed from the negative representations of European settlers about Aborigines, its use by the latter served to enhance the cattle station era as a period of mutual dependency characterised as a 'Golden Age' (ibid.). But it is also the case that Aboriginal representations about myall and wild blacks

can be rendered in more ambiguous ways, which often acknowledge the prowess of their forebears ‘as continuous with positive Aboriginal capacities’ (Merlan 1994:154).

Maureen’s account of the sinking of *The Young Australian* offers an ambiguous rendering about the role of the wild and myall Aborigine during colonisation. A painting of hers depicts the cargo vessel having crashed near Tomato Island on the Roper River, an event that occurred sometime in the 1870s and the wreck of which is still visible today.²⁸ It had been carrying supplies from Roper mouth to Roper Bar but on its return journey the crew were drunk and crashed, Maureen says. The top right window of the painting shows a camp of Aborigines that includes seven humpies and a barely clothed couple at a fire. In front of the Aboriginal camp the crew are depicted wearing clothing, and one of the five appears to carry a rifle. The crew were all speared by the Aborigines, Maureen says, and included Chinese, Europeans and ‘those people [Japanese] who fished around Blue Mud Bay.’ In the bottom right corner, the Aboriginal camp is depicted again with no crew present. Individuals wearing armbands are preparing for ceremony and are surrounded by coolamons of vegetation and dilly bags with ‘other things’ (an allusion to secret ceremony objects) inside. When giving me this account, Maureen drew attention to the similarity between these armbands and marks inscribed on her arms that she carries in memory of deceased relatives. She went on to say that these ‘very wild blacks’ didn’t know what rations were, indicating that they were also myall (i.e. bush Aborigines who were ignorant of European culture). When they took the cargo from the ship they ‘threw away’ a lot of it, she said. They used the flour for

²⁸ Searcy (1909:105) on his travels as Customs Officer refers to the wreck of the *Young Australian* in his account of his journey to Roper Bar in the *Palmerston* in 1885. He says that the *Young Australian* was sent by the South Australian Government to assist in landing materials for the overland telegraph line in the 1870s. He says that he thinks it sank in 1872. White (1918:149), who travelled up the Roper River in 1907 and saw the wreck, wrote in his journal that the crash occurred some thirty years previously. The wreck is still visible today, the chimneystack standing proud of the water at low tide and is frequently referred to by Ngukurr Aborigines when recounting events in the history of black/white contact.

‘painting up’ in ceremony, they mixed the sugar with water and ate it by dipping grass straws in it and they smoked the tealeaves, she added.

There is no evidence that the crew of *The Young Australian* were killed when the boat crashed. Had such an event occurred it would have led to reprisals against Aborigines, in the same way that the spearing of Charlie Johnson and his companions in 1875 at Roper Bar, the killing of five Japanese in 1932 and Constable McColl in 1933 in the Caledon and Blue Mud Bay areas by Aborigines had done. The site of the wreck provides Maureen with a location where significant social events including patterned life and violence have been inscribed, retold in her painting and her narrative about it. She also attributes the origin of this story to her mother, who she says was a teenager at the time of the crash.²⁹ In doing so Maureen brings forward the ‘wild times’ to the 1920s, situating herself at the point where the pattern of Aboriginal life altered, culminating in her arrival as a ‘naked piccaninny’ at the first mission.

Far from depicting herself at a distance from wild Aborigines, Maureen’s narrative and paintings brings the past of ‘wild times’ (Morphy and Morphy 1984), into fairly close proximity with her own life. In this regard she suggests that the wild and myall Aborigine, even during the violence of pastoral expansion, sustained imperatives of social life and had a viable form of organisation that she is also familiar with. They camped on country, performed ceremony and had marks inscribed on their bodies just as she has done. Maureen’s painting of the crash then emphasises the positive capacities and practices of her forebears, seeing them as continuous with her own similarly patterned life. And this motif of sociality sustained in various places of significance is carried through in other prints of hers. One in particular depicts a period in her life where she lived in seclusion as a widow

²⁹ It is highly unlikely that Maureen’s mother actually witnessed the crash sometime in the 1870s (either early or late) as Maureen, her second child, was born in 1921. Moreover, Maureen dated the event as having occurred in the 1920s. It is more likely that over time the site of the wreck provided Maureen’s mother and others with a ready-made locus for inscribing shared memories of violence. In this regard the conflation of various incidences that occurred at different times and in different places in Arnhem Land is not unusual.

for a number of years at a place on the other side of the river from the mission. During this time her mother looked after her and sometimes they would sit by themselves at the billabong when it was dark so as not to be seen by anyone else. 'We still carried that on then,' she said, 'people came and smoked us' (i.e. used the smoke from burning iron-bark leaves to ritually free the widow from her connection with the deceased). 'But now,' Maureen concludes, 'people run around everywhere' – 'knowing nothing and having only kangaroo marriage.' It is the present then that is discontinuous with the life that Maureen has known of moving between places (mission and country) with different yet significant forms of sociality.

Though Maureen's later prints posit a discontinuity between past and present her view does not preclude the possibility that continuities with the past can be established again. As Morphy and Morphy propose (1984a:476-477), it is possible currently for the 'wild blackfellow' to be reconnected to history, for the image to be rejoined to the present as an earlier fighter for Aboriginal rights. Hence the image can be retrieved again and again to redefine the role of Aborigines in the process of colonisation (ibid.).

There is however a final observation to be made about the way in which Maureen, though emphasising the viability of camping on country, nevertheless underscores the difference between rations and natural resources. The theme is even more explicit in Sam's narrative, which similarly acknowledges that rations are realised through relationships with Europeans and the forms of activity that they deem to be important. The motif of rations and their lack is also evident when Gabarla (via Waipuldanya's account) recounts how his kin group 'got nothing swag, nothing blanket, nothing tomahawk, nothing billycan, nothing flour, nothing tea, nothing sugar' during the early years of pastoral expansion (Lockwood 1980[1962]:134). The latter two in particular make explicit their interest in portable European items and the appeal of rations over natural resources obtained through hunting and gathering. Though rations did not serve to generate differentials among a mission population in these decades, the source from which they came was nevertheless highly intriguing. As is evident in all the narratives recounted above,

including Maureen's and Holly's, non-indigenous resources functioned to focus this generation's energies on one place and to seek new ways in which they could realise valued roles in relation to it. Chapter 4 takes up this theme, highlighting the ways in which Aborigines would organise their 'current situation in terms of the past' (Sahlins 1985:155).

Summary

This chapter has provided an account of Roper River Mission during its early decades of operation, which was established in response to the impacts on Aboriginal people of pastoral expansion in southeast Arnhem Land.

Missionaries aimed to provide a solution to race relations in the Northern Territory, by creating a self-supporting Aboriginal population who provided for their own needs through agriculture. Cultivating permanent food supplies and settlement, CMS believed, would locate Aborigines within a hierarchy of colonial relations and give them an equivalent standing to settlers. They would then have the moral and material fortitude to withstand the impacts of colonisation if autonomous sites could be created by these means. The mission was however unsuccessful in its attempt to realise autonomy as a capacity for self-sufficiency and facilitate organisation in hierarchical form among its Aboriginal population. The continual use of 'bush-breaks,' which were used to supplement the mission's meagre supplies of imported and locally produced foods, contributed to this failure. But it was also due to the fact that missionaries were predisposed to define Aborigines in terms of lack. Hence they failed to recognise the ways in which Aboriginal people sustained an Indigenous autonomy via lateral forms of regional organisation or interpreted their situation vis-à-vis the mission.

Aboriginal narratives, however, underline how a kin-land form of sociality was maintained in the course of travelling between mission, cattle-stations and country, being grounded in traditional ways of provisioning and exchange. Missionaries' efforts were moreover deflected by this propensity to realise an Indigenous sociality through linked places sustained throughout a region in the

course of foraging and the maintenance of ritual life. The missionaries' efforts to remake their charges were also deflected by the way in which Aboriginal people interpreted labouring and evangelism as service exchange through which the mission as a place was made. Hence to a significant degree, Aborigines sought to render these new forms of activity in familiar terms and incorporate the mission within their own modes of reciprocal exchange.

Missionaries were largely unaware of these adaptations due to their assumptions that 'the blacks' simply lacked organisation relevant to settlement life. Chapter 4 addresses the way in which assimilation, as the new policy direction in Aboriginal affairs, perpetuated this characteristic non-recognition of indigenous social organisation. The bases for this view would change but white misapprehensions would remain.

CHAPTER 4:

ASSIMILATION FOR ALL

This chapter turns to a second form of non-recognition at Roper River Mission, when CMS undertook an organisational agenda of assimilation in keeping with a new direction in government policy.

A major part of the chapter addresses the ways in which government agents and missionaries were now disposed to define Aboriginal people in terms of lack. In this regard Aboriginal structures of authority and forms of organisation were deemed to have broken down due to the corruptions of a fringe-dwelling life. Hence reorganisation was required to assist them with sedentarism and orient them to the idea that waged work enabled individuals to generate self-supporting family units and community organisations. A policy of assimilation was therefore conceived as a response to this lack. The introduction of modern amenities and a cash economy were to be vital components that would provide Aborigines with the incentive to become waged workers and attain a similar standard of living to the majority.

The conviction that working citizens would logically follow from the economic reorganisation of the mission would prove, however, to be unsound. Though missionaries were disposed to view waged labour as a socio-moral discipline, they would accord even greater priority to church life at this time. This was due to the fact that they could not conform to the standards set by government either to improve living conditions among Aborigines or employ them. But their efforts were also deflected because the Aboriginal response to assimilation was not in terms of waged activity or in terms of greater attendance at the church. Rather Aborigines interpreted the mission as a site of performance, and evangelism as the activity that supported it.

These dynamics are addressed through the ways in which Aborigines proliferated valued roles and prominence in the mission's social order by staging Christian services in a variety of locales beyond the church. In the process of

incorporating ‘gospel ceremony’ into their own modes of organisation and exchange, Aborigines generated a boss-worker form of association. In doing so they sustained their own construction of autonomy as a status realised through nurturance and honoured, in their view, their obligations to missionaries. Thus in significant part Aboriginal evangelism deflected the putative hierarchy of the mission and affirmed an evolving Indigenous system of differentiation and prestige.

The organisational tensions emerging from Aboriginal responses to assimilation were not recognised by missionaries or government agents in these terms. Rather they were disposed to view Aborigines as passive and dependent. I address below how this view came into being and gave rise to assimilation policy.

Aboriginal Dependency And Nascent Assimilation

A new discourse about Aboriginal people emerged in Australia in the late 1930s. No longer were they a ‘dying race,’ a premise that had sustained both the South Australian and Commonwealth Government’s administration of the Northern Territory (see chapter 3). Rather, there was an increase of Aborigines of mixed descent and a growing fear among Europeans in the Northern Territory that they would be engulfed by this new hybrid race (Austin 1993:133-135).¹ Successive government administrations throughout the 1940s and 1950s were also concerned by the fact that there was a growing population of detribalised Aborigines in the Northern Territory.² Detribalised Aborigines, so classified because they were no longer nomadic, required management because they had not yet acquired the ability to be economically independent or adopted the same standards of living as their

¹ Census figures for the Northern Territory for 1926 estimate that the half-caste population was 529 (cited in Austin 1993:95, 152). There were, in addition, 73 quadroons and 1 octoroon. The half-caste population had almost doubled to 913 by 1938. The non-Indigenous population was 6704 (ibid.). As noted in the previous chapter, terms such as quadroon, octoroon and half-caste were categories integral to the racialised social order of the colonial era.

² By 1942 the Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory was 13,453 (cited in Abbott 1950:142). More than half (7031) were classified as detribalised and the rest were nomadic (ibid.). By 1948, some 13,300 Aborigines were classified as detribalised and only 600 as nomadic (ibid. 144).

Euro-Australian counterparts.³ The majority of Aborigines were already residents of or in regular contact with government and mission settlements, many of which had been established throughout the 1920s.⁴ Though the assimilation of all Aborigines had been proposed as a Commonwealth Government aim since the 1940s, World War II intervened and delayed its implementation as policy until the 1950s (Gray 1998:57).

The question during these decades of how detribalised Aborigines could best be managed focused on one central issue: the idea of their degeneration due to the expansion of settlement. There were two concerns entailed in the view of Aboriginal degeneration. The first pertained to their evolving dependency on whites, even in remote regions, as they were drawn by the attractions of European settlements. The second concern pertained to the way in which Aboriginal structures of authority and forms of social organisation were allegedly affected by continued engagement with Europeans. Both concerns were prominent in the writings of Dr Cook, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Protector of Aborigines in the Northern Territory (1927-39), and

³ This chapter is primarily concerned with the management of Aborigines at Roper River Mission and to that end highlights Euro-Australian explanations of Aboriginal dependency. I do not, therefore, discuss particular issues pertaining to the assimilation of mixed descent Aborigines or the eugenicist solutions put forward by Dr C Cook. Aborigines at Roper River Mission and in the southeast Arnhem Land region had, since Spencer's (1913:15) report, been categorised as having been made 'dependent for their existence on promiscuous charity' due to the impacts of pastoral expansion. The majority, he allowed, were 'still in their wild state' (ibid.).

⁴ During the 1920s government institutions were in operation at Darwin (Kahlin Compound) and Alice Springs (Bungalow) for the separate care of mixed descent Aborigines (Austin 1993). CMS was operating a similar specialist mission at Groote Eylandt for mixed descent Aborigines of the Roper region. The aim of segregation was to keep such Aborigines free from the degenerative influences of native camps and to provide some educational and employment opportunities to them so they could be absorbed into the dominant culture. Declaring areas reserved for Aboriginal occupation also occurred during this time. Arnhem Land was declared a reserve in 1931. It did not initially include CMS's lease of 200 square miles on the northern banks of the Roper River. After continued application by CMS it became part of the reserve in 1940 (*Commonwealth Gazette*, 1940:210, in Harris 1998:449).

those of Professor Elkin, anthropologist, Anglican priest and advocate of citizenship for Aboriginal people.⁵

Cook (1950), in providing a review of Aboriginal deterioration, argued most forcefully that rationing exacerbated Aboriginal dependency on whites because it ‘sheltered’ the native ‘from the very influences necessary to his new evolution’ (ibid. 23). Missions in particular had inculcated ‘new and disturbing wants in the native’ (ibid. 19), because imported subsistence rations did not serve to ensure that the native acquired:

... the white man’s attitude towards the conservation and increased production of wealth and ... the capacity to live comfortably and with self-reliance in fixed communities (ibid. 23).

There was, in Cook’s view, only one solution to the ‘native problem.’ They must be taught to develop ‘the impulse to frugality, thrift and productive enterprise which together are the mainspring of white civilisation’ (ibid. 12). Specifically the Aborigine had to be shown that ‘the product of his labour’ was ‘exclusively his own’ and that his standard of living and those of his dependents rested on this ‘fundamental economic fact’ (ibid. 24).

In Cook’s view nothing of Aboriginal tribal life survived intense European settlement. Rather the attractions of white settlements fostered in Aboriginal youth a ‘defection from the restrictions’ of ‘tribal marriage law’ and initiation ceremonies (ibid. 17). This in turn eroded the authority of elders who would no longer ‘impart

⁵ Cook and Elkin both had a particular interest in Roper River Mission. Cook had visited the mission several times during his term as Chief Protector and advocated its closure due to its poor management and the inadequate standard of its facilities (CRS F1 1938/534, 1932-38, Roper River Mission, Cook to Admin. Darwin 1933-4, Cook to Admin. Darwin, February 1935). Elkin assisted CMS to formulate its first constitution and policy statement regarding the operations of its Australian missions in the early 1940s (Harris 1998:102). Hence CMS took the view that they were preparing Aborigines for citizenship (NTRS 870/P1, 1944-82, General Records, Constitution and Policy of CMS 1944).

the secrets' to youth, which had constituted the fundamental bond between 'tribal identity and ordered behaviour' (ibid. 18).

Tribal authority structures and social organisation were in addition part of the 'fundamental incongruities of the native life-pattern' that prevented its assimilation into the 'fabric of the white social order' (ibid. 11). It fostered communal tendencies that sheltered the idle, rather than generating individuated workers who accumulated portable forms of wealth and thereby attained a better standard of living. Aborigines had not, in Cook's view, made any positive adaptations to European settlement. And he proposed that a 'genetic inheritance' might account for this failure (ibid. 23).

Elkin (1951), though sharing Cook's opinion that a nomadic life could quickly degenerate under contact, did not see all Aboriginal responses to European settlement as negative. He proposed that a process of 'intelligent parasitism' arose among Aboriginal people as a rational and culturally determined response to settlement (ibid. 167-71). They could fulfil some of the demands of settlers for labour without this affecting too much their attachment to place and kin. And they could utilise some European resources without this having an adverse effect on the custodianship and transmission of ritual knowledge. But intelligent parasitism, Elkin also proposed, was a frail condition. A growing desire for foreign goods, particularly among younger natives, made them amenable to and dependent on whites (ibid. 170). They tended as a result to 'ignore and even despise the old men's knowledge and authority,' causing conflict between the generations (ibid. 171). Social breakdown ensued, as the old men would not entrust these youth with sacred knowledge (ibid.). And when 'group life and pride' was broken intelligent parasitism degenerated, leaving Aborigines as 'claimant paupers, shirking and denying social responsibility' (ibid. 176).

Social disintegration was inevitable, in Elkin's view, if Aboriginal people were not assisted to move from a stage of 'intelligent parasitism' to 'intelligent appreciation' of what part they could play in the society of Europeans. On the one hand they needed to be trained 'to appreciate the responsibility of the individual to work and be self-dependent' (ibid. 175). But on the other hand Aboriginal group life

also needed to be maintained for assimilation to be successful. The 'tribe as a community' could maintain its cohesiveness if it included the authority of 'the headmen with their knowledge and custodianship of the moral and social sanctions' (ibid. 173). There could also be more 'advanced' stages of Aboriginal group life, where the adoption of 'Christian moral principles,' employment and settlement operated in conjunction with the preservation of native languages and modified customary practices (ibid. 174).

Both Elkin and Cook make the issue of tribal authority central to their discussion of the deterioration of nomadic Aborigines. The relegation of elders to positions of unimportance was a significant factor, which they believed had contributed to the breakdown of the Aboriginal social order. Cook's response proposes that governments should address this degeneration by training the individual to be economically independent and to live in communities in a similar way to Europeans. Elkin however proposes that government initiatives must address both the individual and his or her group life if assimilation is to be successful. But in proposing some of the ways in which Aboriginal group life could be maintained, Elkin leaves unelaborated the kinds of social units entailed in the tribe or community to which an order of authority applies. And though Elkin recognises that headmen and their custodianship of tribal law are an important source of order among Aborigines it is unclear what domains of activity they might have authority over. It is moreover left unexplored by Elkin how the authority of headmen or other Aborigines might be realised in contexts such as missions where several tribes or language groups had settled.

Both CMS and successive government administrations during the 1940s and 1950s were influenced by the views of Cook and Elkin on the social disintegration of Aboriginal life. They both subscribed to the belief, albeit in a more simplistic way, that the authority sustained by Aboriginal elders had largely disappeared due to continued association with whites. For example, Abbot (1950:144), Administrator of the Northern Territory 1937-46, maintained that there were few primitive natives left in the Northern Territory after WWII that were not under the influence of European

settlements.⁶ Hasluck (1988:135), Minister for the Territories 1951-63, agreed with him. Both proposed that Aboriginal societal breakdown occurred because of dependency on alien foods and goods (Abbott 1950:141, 145; Hasluck 1988:126). The tribal authority of elders weakened because youth rejected customary practice and the Aborigine was 'passing into' (Abbott 1950:151), or 'drifting to the white' very rapidly (Hasluck 1988:126). Such thinking gave rise to Hasluck's commitment to a policy of assimilation, leading him to state that the future of all Aborigines lay 'in close association with the white community'.⁷ Government initiatives aimed to reverse this drift to deterioration by enabling Aboriginal people to 'attain the same manner of living as other Australians'.⁸ Home management, communal feeding and educational programs at mission and government settlements would therefore emphasise training in personal and home hygiene, cash use and employment.

Hasluck (1988:130) would later reflect that the policy of assimilation had focused too much on the individual without appreciating the way in which the person was bound by membership in a group (see also Rowse 1998:115). CMS however would take seriously Elkin's idea that individual self-reliance and group life had to be attended to if Aborigines were to be prepared for assimilation. They also subscribed to the idea that tribal authority was largely eroded at Roper River and would see it as incumbent on them to realise it anew among Aborigines. They would moreover theorise the issue of Aboriginal dependency in a specific way in order to address the fact that the population at Roper River was still largely detribalised despite almost forty years of a mission regime. Both tobacco and native camp life would be targeted as the major factors that inhibited the project of assimilation. How missionaries mediated the demands of government agents in order to achieve

⁶ Abbott (1950:144) states that 5,500 detribalised Aborigines were in regular contact with missions in the Northern Territory by 1948. Hasluck (1988:135) states that in 1956 only 600 of the 14,000 Aborigines in the Northern Territory were still nomadic.

⁷ Hasluck, *Native Welfare in Australia* 1953:5-12, 17-8, cited in Tatz 1964:12.

⁸ Native Welfare Meeting of Commonwealth and State Ministers held at Canberra, 3-4 September 1951, Government Printer, Canberra, cited in Lippmann 1996[1981]:25-6.

assimilation through educational programs and improved living conditions at Roper River Mission is discussed below.⁹

Assimilation At Roper River Mission

A report from Roper River Mission in 1945 indicates that missionaries had begun preparing Aboriginal people for citizenship. It stated:

An attempt has been made to explain to these people the possibility of ... being rewarded with full citizenship ... in the future. Care has been taken to make it plain that they must win this by their own efforts ... Some are very interested, but they need continual encouragement.¹⁰

The report does not elaborate how the explanation was delivered or if it was simply a general topic discussed in contexts of work, study or church. But it was now a new aim of missionaries to attend to the education of both Aboriginal children and adults and English classes for the latter had been introduced the previous year.¹¹ Missionaries also began classes in citizenship in 1949, with the aim of imparting to Aborigines the economic values of white society.¹² Specifically they wished Aboriginal people to understand that the value of a day's work lay in the fact that it realised the necessities of life and a particular material standard of living. Work provided food and clothing; but also generated both private and public amenities such as housing, schools and hospitals. Adult education classes aimed therefore to train Aborigines at the mission to 'evaluate their better facilities more accurately'.¹³ This was a somewhat ironic statement; a Welfare Branch report (previously the

⁹ The Department of Native Affairs was established in 1939 as administrator for Aborigines in the Northern Territory (Rowley 1970:317). This was replaced when the Commonwealth Government established the Department of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch in 1951 (Collman 1988:12).

¹⁰ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, January 1945.

¹¹ *ibid.* October 1944.

¹² *ibid.* February 1949.

¹³ NTRS 870/P1, 1944-82, General Records, CMS Stations in North Australia, February 1950-1:3.

Department of Native Affairs) on Roper River Mission in 1951 would regard its facilities as substandard in every respect (see below).

In explaining to Aborigines what citizenship meant, missionaries were also explaining it to themselves. It entailed in their view both democratic freedoms and responsibilities, but Aborigines had not acquired any real understanding of this to date. Rather they had gained a distorted view of the values and economic basis of white society, missionaries believed, because tobacco had been used as an integral part of the exchange of rations for work. It was a primitive form of barter, missionaries argued, that did not assist Aborigines to appreciate the many 'beneficial commodities' of 'modern industry,' which generated a higher standard of living and health.¹⁴ Nor did they learn anything constructive regarding the 'democratic principles' by which whites participated co-operatively in social, political and religious life.¹⁵ Rather the exchange of tobacco for labour produced a listless and unreliable Aboriginal worker because he or she acquired only a limited view of the versatility of real currency and the possibilities entailed in earning a living.¹⁶ It was tobacco then, rather than rations per se, that was the 'direct cause of detribalisation' as it 'lured' young men away from the 'strict tribal discipline' of initiations and the 'authority' that came with compliance with these customs.¹⁷ It disturbed missionaries also that Aboriginal people now seemed to think they had a 'right' to tobacco, regarding its refusal as an 'act of deliberate ill-will' on the part of the missionary.¹⁸

This was a somewhat incongruous attack on a substance that Roper River Mission had issued to its Aboriginal population for more than forty years. But it provided them with an explanation for, as they saw it, the failure of their own attempts to successfully orient Aborigines to the routines of physical labour and settlement. The Welfare Branch however would see the mission's withdrawal of

¹⁴ *ibid.* p1.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p2, 5.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p3, 5-6.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p3.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p1.

tobacco as indicative of its general failure to meet the ‘legitimate needs of the native’.¹⁹ Its review report for 1951 described Roper River Mission as a ‘frontier station,’ which had failed to progress in the following ways:

No wages are paid at the Mission and there is no trade store for the sale or barter of useful articles to the natives. ... Several natives on the Mission show promise in stock-work ... and ... mechanical work, but little incentive is offered them. It is essential that a simple wages system be introduced and a trade store ... [so] the natives will have [the] opportunity to learn the use of money and earn and purchase useful articles to improve their standard of living.²⁰

The same report noted that the mission produced no staple foods and only a small quantity of perishables; its major industry was undeveloped as there were no paddocks for the cattle and it had no secondary industries. Its buildings (staff housing, school, hospital, storage facilities) moreover were of a temporary nature, being constructed from salvaged iron and bush timber. The native camp contained about 20 old huts, which had 100 visiting natives in addition to the resident population of 175 Aborigines.²¹ People lived outside their huts in the dry season and there were no latrines available at the camp. And a regular feature of camp life was the evening ‘song and dance.’

This report had quite an impact on Roper River Mission. CMS found that it was obliged under the conditions of its licence to make tobacco available to Aborigines, though Welfare Branch now took responsibility for the costs involved in

¹⁹ CRS F1 1949/461, 1949-53, CMS Roper River, Review Report – Acting District Superintendent, April 1951:8.

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ To alleviate crowding at Roper River, Mr Leske – missionary-in-charge of Roper River Mission – took 75 Nunggubuyu Aborigines back to Rose River and began a mission there in September 1952 (CRS F1 1949/461, 1949-53, CMS Roper River, Leske to the Department of Native Affairs, September 1952).

its supply.²² Missionaries resigned themselves to the fact that tobacco use was one of the democratic freedoms entailed in citizenship. They aimed therefore to train Aboriginal people to make more responsible choices with regard to the freedoms that were available to them. And they preached against its use, especially to Christians.²³ The second impact the report had was that it put pressure on CMS to introduce a cash economy at Roper River Mission. It did at the end of 1951, despite the fact that the mission had no independent economic base to support a wage system.²⁴

Though infrastructural improvements were made throughout the 1950s with capital works assistance from government, progress was slow. A Welfare Branch report in 1957 noted that new staff housing, an infirmary, a girl's dormitory, communal ablution facilities and a cookhouse had been completed. But it was critical of the fact that little native housing had begun.²⁵ Some paddocks had been built for cattle, but stocks provided only for local consumption. The gardens had been wiped out by flood and there were still no secondary industries. Though the mission had

²² CRS F1 1949/461, 1949-53, CMS Roper River, Memorandum to Department of Native Affairs 50/182, December 1950. NTRS 870/P1, 1944-82, General Records, Correspondence between Roper River Mission and CMS House, February and April 1951.

²³ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, June 1952.

²⁴ The introduction of a wage system began in a limited way toward the end of 1951 at Roper River Mission along with the opening of a sales store operating one afternoon a week (CRS F1 1949/461, 1949-53, CMS Roper River, Review Report, December 1951). By the late 1950s adults could earn between 5/- and 10/- per week and children 2d to 6d for duties performed on behalf of the mission. The wage system was delivered primarily in the form of training allowances and rations were still distributed until 1957 (NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, June 1957). Sometime in the mid 1960s the system of direct payments of pensions, child endowments and other entitlements to Aborigines was fully implemented (CRS F1 1966/281, 1965-70, CMS Roper River, Review Report, December 1967). Prior to this time these monies offset the running costs of the mission.

²⁵ CRS F1 1957/1461, 1957-59, Review Reports, Administrator NT to Canberra, November 1957, folio 47-8. The review report based on inspections carried out in July and September 1957 noted that only six native residences were of an acceptable standard. They were two room structures with stone floors, variously made from sawn timber, mud and bindii grass. And only one had an old stove on which to cook (CRS F1 1957/1461, 1957-59, Review Reports, Roper River Mission 1957 - District Welfare Officer Ryan, folio 26-38).

been urged by Welfare Branch to purchase crocodile skins and native artefacts, they had stopped the practice because they could find no market in which to sell them. The report was also critical of the school. It was substandard, with no desks or equipment other than a blackboard.²⁶ Though commending the fact that employed Aborigines were now responsible for purchasing their own supplies, the report stated:

It is an involved system of wage payment ostensibly to give wards experience at handling money; the experience is not of a prolonged nature as almost all the wages paid are received back within ten to fifteen minutes [in the sales store]. If an able-bodied ward refuses to work and gets food, he becomes indebted to the Mission to the extent of 10/- per week. This applies to visiting wards also unless they have money when they arrive. After paying their board several wards deposit the balance in tins kept in the store to purchase clothing and other items at a future date.²⁷

These credit arrangements, the report implies, were not providing Aboriginal people with real experience in the use of money. It was also implied that the value of the training facilities (that is the cookhouse, laundry, girl's dormitory and infirmary) was lost because there was little integration of this education in hygiene and home-management with Aboriginal camp life.²⁸ Specifically the communal dining room had no tables, chairs or crockery, so food distributed at the cookhouse was taken back to the native camp to be eaten. The dormitory girls also spent the bulk of their daytime at the camp. It would be 1964 before Aboriginal people would have housing of a higher standard, which included their own cooking and ablution facilities.²⁹ Then

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.* p10.

²⁸ *ibid.* p3, 5, 8.

²⁹ CRS F1 1962/2398, 1959-65, Roper Mission reports, CMS report to the Director of Welfare – Darwin, June 1964, folio 139-141; CMS letter to the Director of Welfare – Darwin, September 1964, folio 142-3.

efforts would be directed to 'building up the family' as an independent economic unit.³⁰ This phase was a short one, given that the financial strain of operating a cash economy brought the mission to an end in 1968.

Missionaries were also aware that training in the material areas of their work was divorced from reality.³¹ One of their reports to CMS emphasised the fact that mission and camp were wholly 'segregated' in the 'minds of the people' and they did not apply what they learnt in one domain to the other. Children would come clean to school and church but would not sustain this in the camp. Mission homes were kept in perfect condition, but Aboriginal people would not follow the same principles in their own. Girls were trained at the cookhouse to set out meals on tables and learn what rooms were for, but it was 'a waste' as the house-building project did not keep up.

But missionaries also had very limited knowledge of social arrangements in the camp. They were aware that some sections of it were home to different Aboriginal language groups, though only one is identified in reports. For example missionaries noted that the 'top camp children' were less acculturated than others, retaining the 'old fears and superstitions' handed on by their Ritharngu parents.³² Yet there were clearly a variety of Aboriginal languages still in use at the mission in 1954, as Aborigines made gospel recordings in Alawa, Mara, Nunggubuyu, Rembarrnga, Ritharngu and Pidgin English among others.³³ And though reports note that missionaries arranged weekly visits to the camp, no further details are provided about this.³⁴ It seems as if missionaries were either reluctant to intrude too much on the camp, or perhaps they felt out-of-place and unwelcome.

³⁰ CRS F1 1962/2398, 1959-65, Roper Mission reports, CMS letter to the Director of Welfare – Darwin, September 1964.

³¹ NTRS 870/P1, 1944-82, General Records, Roper River Mission to CMS, March 1960.

³² NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, December 1957.

³³ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, January 1954.

³⁴ *ibid.* June 1952.

As the delivery of material improvements always lagged behind what was required, evangelism and education in Christian and civic values were the primary ways in which the separation of mission and camp could be addressed. And missionaries invested their energies in developing a range of social-cum-religious activities, with the aim of fostering new forms of leadership and new habits of association among Aborigines. Aboriginal adults were encouraged to attend prayer and bible-study groups and confirmed Aboriginal Christians were asked to contribute to the evangelical activities at the church and school.³⁵ Aboriginal women would take the children's chorus singing sessions and Aboriginal men would assist with the youth fellowship groups.³⁶ When a girl-guide and boy-scout club were begun, older Christian Aborigines were recruited to run these church-registered social groups.³⁷ And a church committee was formed with Aboriginal membership in 1954.³⁸ Aboriginal interest in these activities however always declined after a month or two, causing missionaries to complain that they had to take responsibility for running everything at the mission.³⁹

Missionaries thereby gave church life a heightened significance at Roper River Mission, seeing it as the way in which they could draw Aborigines into one morally authoritative centre. The Aboriginal response to evangelism was moreover a very positive one, but they would take it up in ways that did not affirm the church as an authoritative institution. Nor would their response confirm that waged labour was the activity through which new resources and place (including schools, hospitals and housing) were realised. Rather Aboriginal people would appropriate the tools of

³⁵ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, April 1949, June 1952, November 1953, May 1954; NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, December 1957; NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, October 1962, May 1963, April 1964, April 1967.

³⁶ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, June 1944, May 195; NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, April 1963, August and September 1964, February and April 1965, April 1966.

³⁷ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, April 1964, April 1965, April 1967.

³⁸ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, May 1954.

³⁹ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, November 1962, April and May 1963, April 1966, April and November 1967, March 1968.

evangelism and incorporate it into their own modes of organisation and exchange. It is to the way in which Aboriginal evangelists sought to establish and affirm social relationships at the mission through the acquisition and deployment of Christian knowledge that I now turn.

Organised Displays Of Knowledge And Camp Evangelism

In the following discussion on camp evangelism I first highlight the varied ways in which Aboriginal people utilise the display of ritual knowledge in public (i.e. unrestricted) performance. I do so in order to explore some of the organisational tendencies that are characteristically engendered through ceremony, which has a bearing on the ways in which sociality and status can be realised.

Keen (1994:146, 150), in his description of public (*garma*) ceremony among the Yolngu, offers a detailed account of the ways in which they can be variously ‘put together’ from different ritual elements and therefore directed to different ends. Public ceremonies are compiled from a complex of related stories, songs, dances, designs and objects, which Keen argues, are the building-blocks employed to realise a ritual in its most basic form (ibid. 150, 166). Participant’s choices regarding the ritual elements used in performance depend on a number of factors. Choices are determined by the identity of those involved in, for example, circumcision or mortuary rites, dispute settlements or exchanges of sacred objects and in the coming together or parting of different groups (ibid. 138). Choices also depend on the intent of the organisers to mark their own or another’s prestige, to indicate an affiliation to a group and place or to lay claim to another group’s ceremony and country (ibid. 150). There is then, according to Keen, a great deal of flexibility entailed in the framework of ceremonies that allows for the adoption of other ritual genres, including Christianity, into public performances (ibid. 138).

An important observation I make here is that knowledge is clearly not abstracted practice among Aboriginal people. Rather knowledge is a resource that is embedded in social contexts involving contextually relative and group-centred kin networks, which is deployed in collaborative and competitive ways. On the one

hand, ceremonies provide Aborigines with a 'matrix for sociality beyond the everyday' (ibid. 294), extending ties (of ownership or identity) through the exchange of names, ritual elements and the 'discovery of previously unrecognised similarities' (ibid. 74). But on the other hand, the dissemination of ritual knowledge is also controlled in a way that separates gender, age and group-centred networks. Specifically, Keen notes, people take care to maintain (often minute) differences of ritual form in order to separate groups from each other (ibid. 133; see also Marett 2005:203). They do so because the assertion of (an exact) similarity of ritual form is a way to lodge a potential claim to the resources of another group (ibid.). It is by these means that one group can control the religious affairs of another, because they can 'hold' and 'look after' the countries and ceremonies of those without the requisite knowledge and competence to perform (ibid. 96, 181, 248-9; Williams 1987:46). The possession then of extensive ritual knowledge is highly valued, conferring status on those who are perceived 'to know' more than others (Keen 1994:136). As a function of this status leaders are expected to 'look after' those who 'work for' or 'help' them, being expected to share what is in their control, including ceremonies, religious knowledge and land-based resources (ibid. 95; Williams 1987:44).

The social network is therefore, Keen argues, not a 'continuous web of intersecting and unbounded kindreds' (ibid. 295). Rather it tends to a 'vertical' control of religious knowledge favouring senior male leadership (ibid. 292), which is moreover made 'grainy' through patrification (ibid. 295). The most direct control of religious affairs lies then in the network centred on a patrilineal group, or part of one, and its close uterine relatives (ibid. 295). This tendency to verticality via the control of religious affairs is however modified by another organisational influence. Specifically control is modified by the fact that co-operation in performance and shared ritual frameworks (in addition to varied relationships with Dreaming entities) create 'multiple, cross-cutting strings' that connect different groups to each other (ibid. 166). Factions embedded in groups drawn from 'networks of cognatic kin of both moieties,' also incline people to support the claims of close kin rather than group (ibid. 128, 219, 294). Matrification in addition gives strong interests to people

in the affairs of group-centred networks other than their own (ibid. 67), and expands outwards to create kin relations between groups (ibid. 184).

There is then a tension between these organisational tendencies to lateral extension and verticality that reflects a range of rhizomic relations between people, places and countries, which are determined by a variety of forms of linkage (see Rumsey 2001:40). These tensions between co-operation and control are also reflected in the custodianship of ritual estates, which is discussed in the section below on boss-worker associations. My concern in this and the following section is to address how these tendencies, to extend sociality via kin networks and to control affairs via patrification, were the means through which Aboriginal people organised relations at the mission. I therefore explore the ways in which Aboriginal evangelists directed this tendency to co-operation and control to different ends and how each nevertheless deflected the putative hierarchy of the church.

Though clusters of related patrilineal groups would stage Christian services to affirm their leadership roles at a settlement-wide level, Aboriginal evangelists would first mark their connection with the mission and direct their newly acquired knowledge to kin networks in their camps.

This latter dynamic is most evident in the way that Aborigines, as Gabarla proposes, felt it appropriate to learn to ‘talk Christian way about God-in-Sky’ when they resided with missionaries (Lockwood 1980[1962]:134; and see chapter 3). And like other Aborigines drawn to its resources, Gabarla took a biblical name (Barnabas) to indicate his relationship with the mission (see chapter 3). Aboriginal people were also inclined to accord to missionaries some of the characteristics of leaders, given that they viewed knowledge as a resource provided by those with the authority to hold and transmit it. They were then willing to respond to missionaries’ requests to carry out various tasks at the mission, including evangelism, in return for a share in the different resources that were realised through these new forms of activity. Hence Aborigines interpreted work as a form of help given to a leader, which ensured that he ‘looked after’ you in turn (see also Austin-Broos 2006). In this way Aborigines sought to secure a viable environment for themselves and kin by ‘working for’

missionaries who could bring into being a variety of new resources in ways that cults could not.

Aboriginal people therefore tended to view evangelism as the primary way through which they honoured their obligations to missionaries. And despite the fact that missionaries tried to orient Aborigines to the value of waged labour during the 1950s, Aborigines continued to view evangelism as the principal activity that supported the mission. This was reinforced by the emphasis that missionaries gave to church life, seeing it as the medium through which new habits of association and Christian values could be instilled in Aborigines. And it may have appeared to missionaries that their efforts were proving successful, given the willingness of Aborigines to take up opportunities to learn more about Christianity.

For example, only 16 Aborigines had received baptism and confirmation prior to the 1940s and it had been a decade since the bishop's last visit.⁴⁰ Despite these low numbers, the majority population at the mission attended morning service. By the mid 1940s however baptism and confirmation classes became a regular feature of mission life, in an effort to increase the number of adult Christian witnesses.⁴¹ Appeals were often made at Easter services, or in the months prior to the bishop's visit, for people to get baptised and confirmed and the response to this was positive.⁴² Classes would then ensue, being held separately for older youth and adults so that they had sufficient instruction to receive the sacraments. Scripture was taught in story form, illustrated with lantern pictures and film-strips; while chorus singing, extemporary prayer and bible-reading were also regular aspects of instruction and church service. Numbers did increase, and by 1958 close to half the adult population

⁴⁰ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, August 1939.

⁴¹ *ibid.* September and November 1944, April 1947, April 1949, April 1950, July 1953; NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, February 1957.

⁴² NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, April 1949 – 9 people responded. In April 1950 – 14 people responded.

was confirmed (34 of 82 – two-thirds were women).⁴³ And by 1962 the number of confirmed members was 44 out of population of 90 adults.⁴⁴

A number of older Christians were also encouraged to contribute to church services. James Japanma, Umbariri, Grace and Elizabeth regularly gave gospel-readings and songs often in several languages, including Pidgin English, Mara, Nunggubuyu and Ritharngu.⁴⁵ Others such as Barnabas, Moredecai, Willie Gudabi, Lobar, Deborah, Una, Winnie and Francis are noted in records as providing a strong Christian influence at the mission.⁴⁶ And it was in the early 1950s that a range of gospel recordings (audio) were made by Aborigines in their own languages, including Alawa, Mara, Nunggubuyu, Rembarrnga, Ritharngu, Buan, Wardiri, Andiliaugwa and Pidgin English.⁴⁷ Surprisingly no recordings were made in Wandarang or Ngalakan, yet a number of Aborigines listed above did claim a primary affiliation (via father) with these languages. Both moreover are common to Roper River while Buan (central Arnhem), Wardiri (Borrooloola) and Andiliaugwa (Groote Eylandt) are not.

Film-strips, gospel recordings and the songs and bible-stories learnt in classes were moreover very popular media for evangelising beyond the church. There are frequent references in mission reports to those Aborigines who took up such work. For example Grace Garunjie, who already preached to Nunggubuyu people when they came for visits to the mission, began to use the recordings when she visited her Nunggubuyu relatives at Rose River.⁴⁸ Winne Gurtima used the Ritharngu

⁴³ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, May and June 1958.

⁴⁴ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, May 1962. (No breakdown of the ratio of male to female is given.)

⁴⁵ *ibid.* January and November 1944, December 1945, July and December 1947, April 1949.

⁴⁶ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, December 1950, May 1954.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* January 1954.

⁴⁸ *ibid.* July and September 1947, March 1948, May 1949; NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, December 1956.

translations to preach at Urapunga, where some of her Ritharngu kin resided.⁴⁹ Gabarla, no doubt, found the Alawa recordings useful when he undertook an itinerant ministry to Nutwood Downs (where his brother Minimere resided), and to Roper Valley and Hodgson Downs where other Alawa countrymen of his lived.⁵⁰ And James Japanma regularly preached to his countrymen amongst Ngalakan and Mara language groups, quite often at Roper Bar where his mother resided.⁵¹

While there is little data in mission reports about how these activities were organised it seems clear that Aboriginal people favoured evangelising in their own languages with those who shared this affiliation, especially if they were not close kin. In this respect the gospel recordings served to differentiate between language groups residing in the camp and beyond the mission, even as evangelists were telling the same bible stories to diverse groups. This mode of differentiation resembles the way in which, as Keen notes (1994:133, 138), minute differences between ritual forms are actively maintained so that leaders and groups can retain their autonomy in the performance of ceremonies. Language differentiation therefore aided in the proliferation of valued roles among Aborigines at the mission, providing more evangelists with opportunities to display Christian knowledge in their own kin-groups and networks. The evangelical ‘work’ they took up enabled them to demonstrate standing at the mission and beyond by giving them occasions to be ‘focal individuals’ among their relatives (Anderson 1998:200). They could be, as Anderson describes the phenomenon of prominence among Aborigines, ‘social reference points’ and ‘mediators’ between their domestic groups, kin networks and the larger ‘world order’ of the mission (ibid. 204). They were moreover ‘helping’ to support missionaries who ‘looked after’ them by including Christian knowledge within the repertoires of ritual knowledge they already possessed and revealed in appropriate contexts. It is the Aborigines listed above moreover, who came to the mission in their youth, who are also remembered as having been the first Aboriginal people to receive Christian knowledge and mediate between missionaries and their

⁴⁹ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, January 1955, October 1956.

⁵⁰ NTRS 870/P1, 1944-82, General Records, March 1968. See also Cole 1968:23.

⁵¹ NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, September 1944, July 1947.

kin. And both the sons and daughters of these early evangelists are remembered today for having kept Christianity going after the missionaries left.

A final observation I make here is that attendance at church services gradually declined as the number of confirmed adults increased. It is noted in mission reports that it was mostly Christians who came to church by the early 1950s.⁵² And by the late 1950s only 30 to 50 per cent of those were attending, while at least one section of the camp (Ritharngu) was having separate gospel services to the rest.⁵³ Though Aboriginal people were willing to take a junior role while they were learning about Christianity, their evangelical efforts beyond the church also indicate that they did not wish to have their roles always defined by missionaries. And this phenomenon is even more marked in the next decade, when Aboriginal men took up opportunities to stage Christian services at the mission in a context beyond the church. These multi-group events differed from previous evangelical activities, as the clusters of patrifilial groups involved in them sought both to generate prestige and affirm their unity in relation to the mission. In doing so they were interpreting the mission as a site of performance, and evangelism as the activity that maintained it. It is to this occurrence that I now turn.

A boss-worker form of association

It was quite usual, as the foregoing account indicates, for Aboriginal people to see themselves in a junior capacity while they were learning about Christianity from missionaries. It was also appropriate, as one Aboriginal man (FA) put it, for

⁵² NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, December 1953, January 1954, December 1954.

⁵³ In 1958 out of an adult population of 82, 34 were confirmed (NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, May and June 1958). Only 30 per cent (approx 11) of the congregation were attending church services at that time (ibid.). In 1962 there were 44 confirmed Christians, but attendance at weekly church services never rose above 50 per cent (approx. 22) of the adult members (NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, May 1962). In 1965 there were 45 adult Christians out of an adult population of 90. Less than 50 per cent (20) attended church services or committee meetings (ibid. April 1965; CRS E242/6 [K22/1/1], 1961-73, Mission Returns, 1965. NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, February 1954, June 1958 mentions that 'top camp' held their own services.

Aborigines to see themselves as leaders on ‘the working side’ of this relationship, after 50 years of mission operations.⁵⁴ This interpretation is premised on the way in which Aborigines configure ownership as extendable through participation in multi-group events, the prototype of which is based on the mediation of ritual estates. In the following discussion of the custodianship of ritual estates I pay attention to the way in which prestige and unity are simultaneously realised through the organisation of ceremony.⁵⁵

In the southeast Arnhem region the primary criterion of membership in a ritual estate is patrilineal descent, which associates a totemic group with a set of Dreaming entities (Morphy and Morphy 1984b:48-50; Merlan 1981:142, 1982). The presence of named and unnamed patrilans is common in this region, with the latter often being identified in terms of semi-moieties or coupled subsections (Merlan 1982; Morphy and Morphy 1984b:48, 50-51; Elkin 1971:115).⁵⁶ The patrilineal descent group has an internal authority structure, which is relevant to people’s statuses both within and beyond the patrilan (Morphy and Morphy 1984b:51). And their ownership consists in control over the stories, objects and rituals associated with Dreaming entities at particular places, which provides individuals with opportunities to be the organisers of significant events (Keen 1994:125, 150; Myers 1991[1986]:127, 157).

⁵⁴ NTRS 219, OHI, TP 560, taped interview with Francis Good of the Northern Territory Government Archives Service, oral history division, made at Ngukurr in 1986.

⁵⁵ As noted in Chapter 2, footnote 37, I refer to the ownership and management of Aboriginal ceremonies and ritual estates as custodianship due to the propensity among Aboriginal people to render ‘ownership’ inclusively. This occurs particularly through the differentiation of roles (e.g. *junggayi*, *darlnyin* and *mingirringgi*) that have supplementary as well as complementary functions.

⁵⁶ According to Heath (1978:17) the Nunggubuyu, Ngandi and Wandarang language groups did have named patrilans, as did the Ngalakan according to Morphy and Morphy (in Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982). The Mara to the south of Roper River had unnamed patrilans, which were referred to by their semi-moiety affiliation (Heath 1981:2). The Alawa however utilised coupled subsections to express the father-child transmission of cults and estates, according to Elkin (1971:113-5). It is also the case currently at Ngukurr that only a few patrilan names are in use (see chapter 2 in the section ‘Patronymic Families and Prominence,’ footnote 33).

Though ritual estates are owned by patriclans, rights in them are distributed among a set of cognatic kin (Keen 1994:125). Individuals have relations with more than one estate by virtue of matrilineal and grandparental links, having different roles to play with regard to each (Bern and Layton 1984:72). Thus three categories of differentiated responsibilities in relation to country and ceremony are generated, with *darlnyin* (via MM) playing a supporting role to both *junggayi* (manager via MF and FM) and *mingirringgi* (owner via FF) (ibid. 79). All three categories moreover are used in southeast Arnhem Land to designate a wider set of people than those connected solely by ties of descent to an estate or a body of ceremonial law (Morphy and Morphy 1984b:49). For example individuals in the correct categories of semi-moiety and subsection and with requisite knowledge can be included as custodians for ritual estates that they are not connected to by descent (ibid. 59-60). Hence ownership can be extended to incorporate others in a cognatic totality of differentiated responsibilities (Bern and Layton 1984:80-2) which, via the extensive travels of Dreaming entities, generates extended networks of related estates and related people across a region (ibid. 71; see also Myers 1991[1986]:155).

The tension between co-operation and control, previously discussed with regard to publicly performed ritual knowledge, is also reflected in the custodianship of ritual estates. On the one hand Aboriginal people often seek to render ownership in ritual estates inclusively, deploying for example forms of linkage based on classificatory kinship, adoption and residence to do so. Hence the combination of distinct though inter-dependent roles of *mingirringgi*, *junggayi* and *darlnyin* extend sociality in larger cognatic sets of kin, even as such aggregations frequently maintain a patrilineal bias. On the other hand, the solidarity of cognatic aggregations is undercut by a tendency to control. Specifically ritual estates and the ceremonies performed for them belong to particular senior men, despite the fact that owner-manager categories can be generalised to include any person in the correct semi-moiety (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1990:24-5, 1982:10; Elkin 1971:118, 120). Hence it is senior men who exercise equality with other fully adult persons by offering ceremonial roles and a share in rights in ritual paraphernalia to others in these events (Keen 1994:192-3, 217-8, 221-4; see also Myers 1991[1986]:127). And

it is they who decide when to reveal important knowledge to juniors, which establishes their authority as bosses for the specific individuals that they 'look after' (Keen 1994:95, 244-6; see also Myers 1991[1986]:223).

It is also the case that this prototype of ownership is extended to different contexts and situations other than ritual estates. Sansom (1982:131), in particular, supports this view when he proposes that the culturally established modality for action that brings association into being among Aboriginal people is ownership of a particular 'business' or 'slice of action' in the 'staging of events.' The kinds of 'things owned' among Aborigines include the signs and symbols that 'attest to a person's rightful capacity to initiate the staging of events' (ibid.). Moreover trouble that requires the help of others to resolve is also owned as is the obligation to perform particular deeds to honour indebtedness (ibid.). It is, however, the socially acknowledged capacity to win and keep 'the agreement of others to one's initiatives' that affirms the leadership of an individual and constitutes a group as one countrymen through their agreement to perform specified parts in group ventures (ibid. 131, 134-5). Here too then organisers and performers realise distinct statuses and complementary through their joint though differentiated participation in a group event. Aboriginal people sometimes characterise these differentiated roles as a reciprocal, hence inter-dependent, relationship between bosses and workers.

Staging and participating in group ventures and events is then a significant mechanism of social organisation among Aborigines, which reflects the same oscillation between co-operation and control as ritual estate custodianship. Group ventures allow for the revelation of locally owned knowledge and skill, establishing and affirming in the process varied connections between people and between people and place. Participation in contextually relative kin networks and multi-group events therefore generates an elaborate differentiation of social space, both in terms of relatedness and in terms of the prominence they realise for some individuals more than others. If, in addition, the latter are contexts in which Aboriginal men compete to demonstrate autonomy and prominence, then they generally restrict this arena to their own gender (see also Anderson 1998:204; Dussart 2000:85-90). And for those

who achieve prominence as bosses through competition they must also fulfil the structural principles that determine ascribed status. Especially important are criteria of age, gender, descent ties to land and direct descent links to an old or deceased boss (Anderson 1998:206).

At a time when missionaries were emphasising the importance of church life, Aboriginal people I propose utilised these modes of extending sociality via multi-group events and controlling affairs via patrification to organise relations at the mission. They sought to realise their responsibilities to missionaries by extending their concept of boss-worker to them. In doing so they deflected the putative centralised hierarchy of the church. Hence Aborigines appropriated the tools of evangelism to incorporate 'gospel ceremony' into their own modes of organisation and exchange. And it was Aboriginal men with a history of residence at the mission who undertook the staging of multi-group Christian events. They were attempting to negotiate their standing relative to missionaries, as the original owners of Christianity, and relative to other Aborigines as yet unfamiliar with it.

Though evangelism in contextually relative kin networks would continue at Roper River, it is significant that it was Aboriginal men who found a new way to realise prominence and relatedness at a mission-wide level in the 1960s. They did so by displaying knowledge about God and 'gospel-wei' at the Aboriginal-run Christian 'village services,' held outdoors generally every Wednesday and Sunday night. It was Gabarla and his sons (PG and SG), the sons of Djangardba (EA and FA), their brother-in-law MT, the sons of Ulagang (RL and AL) and the son of Umbariri (CH) who were involved in leading these multi-group events. The services included a film show, singing, bible-reading and prayer. Mission reports note their popularity as 100 to 200 Aborigines frequently attended them.⁵⁷ They were bringing together then one

⁵⁷ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, March 1966, February 1968, March 1968, November 1968; NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, April 1966, March 1969; April 1970, January 1971. Cole (1968:25) notes that 'open fellowship' gatherings became very popular at Roper River after two African evangelists had visited in 1959 and 1963 and conducted outdoor 'revival' services every night for a week.

to two-thirds of the population, attracting people from most of the different languages groups residing there. These are in the order of men listed above Alawa, Nunggubuyu, Mara-Andiliaugwa, Ngandi and Wandarang. Many Ngukurr Aborigines fondly remember these services today. Not only were they lively events that provided a good opportunity for social interaction among all age groups, they were also the context in which kin taught them about Christianity. They were in addition affording Aboriginal men, particularly those born at the mission, opportunities to endow themselves with status as co-custodians of Christianity, having their roles validated at a settlement-wide level by clusters of related patrifilial groups.

Staging gospel services enabled the father-son groups listed above both to affirm wider kinship networks at the mission as well as their valued roles in relation to it. In the first instance they were all related in some way to ZZ (wife of Umbariri) and two of her brothers. Specifically 4 of ZZ's children and 4 of her brothers' children were married to those of the G (x2), A (x4) and L (x2) families. In the second instance these patrifilial groups were affirming their standing relative to others at the mission, being core members of the three 'large cognatic families' that Bern identified as important social units in contexts of ritual competition and settlement politics (1974:118, 122). The relationships between the leading men of these patrifilial groups and the cognatic associations they brought into being at village services is represented in Table 1 below.

| Leaders of patrifilial groups | Marriages with Z family | Smaller families identified with patrifilial groups | Cognatic family |
|--|--------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| G family (single patriline) Gabarla + PG, SG | 2 | UU, Q, PW, DL | G + UU |
| A family (patriline + other agnates) EA, FA (sons of Djangardba) | 4 | K, Y | A + L |
| L family (single patriline) RL, AL (sons of Ulagang) | 2 | Close association with A family | A + L |
| H family (single patriline) CH (son of Umbariri) | 1 | Close association with Z family | H + Z |

Table 1: Leaders of patrifilial groups in Christian village services

Bern named these cognatic stocks differently and saw them operating in relation to ritual and settlement politics during the early 1970s.⁵⁸ I have named them the G+UU, A+L and H+Z families for the purposes of this study and discuss their operation specifically in relation to Christian village services during the 1960s. Hence Table 1 above only indicates how the G, A, L and H families were specifically related to ZZ and her brothers. The kin networks being constituted as groups through these events brought together one to two-thirds of the population (i.e. 100 to 200 participants) on a regular basis (weekly or twice weekly). In contrast, the more recent arrivals to the mission (Rembarrnga and Ritharngu language groups) continued to differentiate themselves from the families above by holding separate camp services, which were also led by men at this time.⁵⁹

In the section below I discuss further the way in which settlement-wide prestige was pursued at Roper River, but I first draw attention to some important aspects of life at the mission. The first to be noted is that the Aboriginal men involved in leading multi-group Christian services were all, by and large, also competitors in ritual politics. And their sons followed them in both their ritual and Christian activities.⁶⁰ They were then interpreting the mission as a site of performance by treating the staging of Christian services and ceremonies as the principal activities through which relatedness and prominence were established. They were moreover seeking to demonstrate their autonomy, relative to missionaries and non-Christian (or recently Christian) Aborigines, by being the organisers of such

⁵⁸ Bern (1974:115) also found that ZZ had many more cognatic descendents spread through all of Ngukurr's core families, which underpinned their solidarity.

⁵⁹ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, June 1958, September 1969, October 1969, March 1970. The same two men, WD and CJ, are mentioned in these reports as taking responsibility to hold the camp services. WD, though not Ritharngu, was married to a Ritharngu woman.

⁶⁰ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, March 1968. Missionaries were unaware of the extent to which Christian Aborigines they knew, particularly men, were involved in the 1965 *Yabaduruwa* ceremony analysed by Elkin (1971) and the ritual politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s discussed in Bern (1974). *Yabaduruwa* and *Gunapipi* ceremonies were always conducted outside the mission precincts and it was only mortuary and 'open' or 'fun' corroborees that were held at the mission itself.

events at the mission. The second is that while multi-group Christian events affirmed the prominence of organisers, so too did cash embody greater autonomy than Christian or ritual performances. Hence both negated the importance of church life for different reasons, causing missionaries to frequently complain about ‘backsliding’ among their Christian members.⁶¹ Before commenting on the eventual demise of the mission, I first address how Aborigines sought to encompass it by utilising both Christian services and traditional ceremony as sites of sociality in which to pursue relatedness and prominence.

Exchange, Autonomy And The Value Of Worker Roles

In the following, I outline how Aboriginal people sought to proliferate leadership roles at the mission among themselves through co-operative performances of ritual and Christian events. My account is premised on the way in which Aborigines define owner-manager roles (or boss-worker roles) in reciprocal terms, allocating authority to both even though they are also distinct statuses. In this regard reciprocal exchange, as a transaction between those who ‘look after’ and those who ‘help,’ is the means by which Aboriginal leaders demonstrate their autonomy to act for a place and people. The application of an owner-manager model to relations at the mission therefore enabled Aborigines to create equivalences between themselves and missionaries even as they pursued distinction at a settlement-wide level.

In the first instance I draw from two interviews with FA, (one of the sons of Djangardba) who proposed, as mentioned above, that mission life was organised in terms of a relationship between European and Aboriginal leaders. In commenting on mission arrangements during the 1960s he suggests that Aborigines attempted to exchange knowledge about their ceremonies with missionaries.⁶² Though missionaries gave new knowledge and ‘gospel ceremony’ to Aborigines, FA says, they could not get really ‘deep into’ Aboriginal ones and fully ‘come in with us.’ In

⁶¹ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, March 1968.

⁶² NTRS 219, OHI, TP 560, taped interview with Francis Good of the Northern Territory Government Archives Service, oral history division, made at Ngukurr in 1986.

the same interview FA also speaks of Aboriginal ceremony and gospel-wei 'as one.' He describes how he was 'run up' to the 'European service' in the morning and then 'run down' to the ceremony ground in the afternoon when he was in his teens. In offering this description, FA proposes that there was no difference in 'working for that ceremony' at the church or at the *Yabaduruwa* and *Gunapipi* ground. As he saw it God gave both kinds of 'business' to people, though Aborigines had not known their connection to this creator entity before the arrival of missionaries.

This was not a difficult conclusion for FA to reach given the way that he describes how Nagaran (a spirit-entity akin to a giant that travelled through the middle reaches of the Roper region to the coast) made and 'threw out' the *Yabaduruwa* to different places (Elkin 1971:142-161).⁶³ This is why, he says, 'different groups have their own' *Yabaduruwa* and their own *gulinga* (ritual paraphernalia associated with a totemic estate) 'as well' (ibid. 144). Moreover FA, as *junggayi* for episodes of Nagaran's journey, and some of the *Yabaduruwa mingirringgi* stated that there are variants of the *Yabaduruwa* ceremony established by the creative acts of Sandridge Goanna, Black Goanna and Plains Kangaroo (ibid. 129, 159). They created other regions and ceremonies, which are owned by the people of those places (ibid.). And the interaction of these and other creator entities, socially categorised in kin, moiety, semi-moiety and subsection terms, brings different groups of Aborigines into association with each other (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 2001:15, 1982:8-9).

An observation that I draw from FA's two interviews is that there is a plurality of knowledge options available to Aboriginal people. The paths of access to them however, via father, mother or missionary in the above cases, can only be successfully pursued through sustaining relatedness with the owners of valued knowledge and participating in relevant events so that it is revealed. I also note that

⁶³ This interview occurred when FA flew to Sydney to be the principal informant for Elkin's analysis of a *Yabaduruwa* ceremony, filmed at Roper River Mission by Cecil Homes in 1965. The filming was arranged through AIAS and both FA and his brother EA were responsible for organising it (Bern 1974).

being on the 'working side' of a relationship with missionaries did not denote for FA either a subordinate or dependent condition. This is evident where he describes his transition from a junior to senior status as occurring around the age of 35 (late 1950s) when, as a man, he took over his mother's ceremony (*Yabaduruwa*) as manager (*junggayi*).⁶⁴ Why he offers this role as an indicator of his authoritative status, rather than his ownership of his father's *Gunapipi* ceremony, is important and corresponds to the way that Waipuldanya also emphasises his status as manager for his mother's *Gunapipi* ceremony (Lockwood 1980[1962]:86-9).

The managerial role in ceremony in southeast Arnhem Land is an authoritative one (Elkin 1971; Maddock 1972:36, 38, 41). Though a patriclan own (*mingirringi*) the sites and rites of an estate it is the manager (*junggayi*) who governs the operations of this identification. While a patriclan demonstrates its ownership of a ritual site through its display of ritual knowledge (totemic designs, dances and songs) it is vulnerable to the site's totemic power because it shares in its substance (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982:12; Maddock 1972:36-8, 41). Hence, managers demonstrate their authority, and the necessity for their intervention between an owner and a representation of his or her Dreaming, through their ability to constrain and mediate the danger of a site's totemic power (Maddock 1972:36-8, 41; Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982:11). In addition it is managers who, by painting the correct designs onto the bodies of owner-actors in performance, transmit important knowledge to the owners and are paid for this work (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982:11). Moreover, in cases where owners are too young to know and perform their ceremonies it is the managers who have to maintain relevant ritual knowledge until the former can fulfil their obligations to perform (*ibid.* 10-11). Owners are further restricted in relation to the areas of land they own as it is the manager who can petition the site's spirit entity for bounty (Merlan 1982).

Owners and managers have complementary and inter-dependent roles to play in relation to ceremony and with regard to their reciprocal obligations. This is most clearly expressed in the moiety-controlled ceremonies of *Gunapipi* and *Yabaduruwa*,

⁶⁴ NTRS 219, OHI, TP 560.

where the *Dhuwa* owners of *Gunapipi* will be managers in the *Yirritja* owned *Yabaduruwa* and vice versa. The capacity to display and transmit knowledge, moreover, constitutes equivalence between senior ritual experts and a distinction between a senior and junior status, whether one is acting as an owner or manager. Given this configuration of mutual responsibility to perform, protect and transmit valued knowledge, neither owners nor managers can activate their rights without the help of each other. The role of manager, however, tends to be emphasised in east Arnhem Land by virtue of their mediation of an owner's totemic identification with specific sections of country enacted in ceremony.⁶⁵ It is they who, Aborigines say, 'have the last say' in relation to the way a ceremony should be conducted and in how payments or gifts to do with ceremony and country should be distributed. The same understanding exists among women at their ceremony ground. When I attended a *Gunapipi* ceremony in 1999 the head *junggayi* woman referred to her role as founded on her ability to 'really handle im.' In other words she could perform particular operations and be in contact with certain things that the *mingirringgi* could not. Moreover, she and the other *junggayi* helpers emphasised that they 'worked very hard' on behalf of the *mingirringgi* owners who had to pay them for their efforts. Returns came in the form of gifts at the time of the ceremony but also from the reversal of positions when the next *Yabaduruwa* ceremony would be put up.

FA's view, then, that Aboriginal leaders operated on 'the working side' of a relationship with missionaries indicates the way in which he and others attempted to encompass the mission through reciprocal exchange. He perceived that the work he did as a layreader in the 1950s and 60s for missionaries' gospel ceremonies 'helped' to sustain the mission and would lead in time to the recognition of his seniority there. This understanding is apparent when FA explains that after many years of staging Christian services at cattle stations in the region and at Roper mission he argued with the Chaplain about the latter's continual supervision of what he was doing. He told the Chaplain, 'I want to take that service myself. I've received enough guidance from

⁶⁵ The intervention of managers does extend beyond the ceremony ground at Ngukurr. For example *junggayi* frequently monitor paintings, for sale at the Arts Centre, to ensure a person is not painting his or her own Dreaming.

you already. Why can't you let me take that service without following me all the time.'⁶⁶ The Chaplain did not agree and from that time FA says, he 'really pulled away' from Christianity. As I interpret it, his capacity to demonstrate autonomy and authority in this domain of activity, capacities recognised by his control of his mother's ceremony at the time, was undermined.

Though FA was able to demonstrate his autonomy with regard to the staging of Aboriginal ceremonies and the filming of the 1965 *Yabaduruwa*, he did not realise the same degree of prominence at a settlement-wide level that his brother, EA, did.⁶⁷ His father, Djangardba, one of the oldest living bosses still active in Roper ceremony at the time, had groomed FA for ritual prominence and backed his initiatives. The Chaplain, however, did not. In response FA pursued an alternative path, becoming a Welfare Officer with the Northern Territory government. Though based in Darwin, he continued to be involved in settlement affairs at Roper River for the rest of his life. In commenting on his shift to welfare concerns, FA mentioned that an older brother, DA, had yet another kind of 'business' in Darwin, pursuing trade union issues and land rights.⁶⁸ But Djangardba's younger son, EA did gain recognition at a settlement-wide level. It is noted in the work of Bern (1974) and Gerritsen (1981; 1982a) that EA came to prominence as the intermediary between Aborigines and missionaries at Roper River. According to Bern (1974:160-162), EA achieved his position because of the strength of his kin base and because other potential candidates were uninterested or had lost the role by incurring the displeasure of missionaries.⁶⁹ According to Gerritsen (1982a:22), EA's prominence was a result of

⁶⁶ NTRS 219, OHI, TP 560.

⁶⁷ The Bishop of Carpentaria selected FA, along with James Japanma, Gabarla and his son, SG, as possible candidates for ordination in 1953 (Harris 1998:78; Sandefur 1998:72). However, the stipulation that the candidates would need six years of theological training was more than the men selected were willing to undertake (Harris 1998:78; NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-.73, Mission Reports, May 1955).

⁶⁸ NTRS 219, OHI, TP 560.

⁶⁹ It was FA, EA's brother, who had lost his position, Bern says (1974:162) because of a complaint he made against missionaries to the government. But see my earlier discussion about FA's choice to

the way in which control is extended from an Aboriginal ritual domain to a modern resource sector. Neither, however, acknowledges the extent to which EA was involved in Christian activities and thereby miss its significance. He had been baptised, confirmed, licensed as a layreader and was a consistent stager of well-attended village Christian services throughout the 1960s and into the 1970s.⁷⁰ His prominence was widely affirmed at the mission then by his capacity to attract large turnouts from clusters of related patrifilial groups to the Christian services he staged without the supervision of missionaries. It was also validated by his membership on all Station Councils between 1962 and 1972 (Bern 1974).⁷¹ And it was further validated by his seniority as a cult organiser throughout the 1960s (see Bern 1974; Elkin 1971). EA was able to demonstrate his capacity for leadership by taking up a major role in Christian, secular and ritual affairs. His authority was thereby endorsed at a settlement-wide level by doing so, although it was never a position of command or absolute control. This is due to the fact that the ongoing dynamics of competitive status relations among Aborigines ensure that leadership is continually tested, requiring continual endorsement from all those implicated in its material presentation (see also Dussart 2000:88).

Other men, including FA, also demonstrated their autonomy and achieved some degree of prominence through the roles they took up in relation to important

withdraw from Christianity because his status was not being recognised by the Chaplain at the mission.

⁷⁰ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, February and March 1968, November 1968, March 1969, January 1971.

⁷¹ A Station Council that included Aboriginal representatives was set up in 1961-2 (CRS F1 1962/2389, 1959-65, Roper Mission reports, 1961-2; Cole, 1968:26). Two years later CMS reported to the Welfare Branch that a 'civic consciousness is arising' among Aborigines because of the prominent part that the Station Council takes in administrative affairs (CRS F1 1962/2389, 1959-65, Roper Mission report, 1964). A Church Committee was already established in 1960, which offered representation to Aborigines in the administrative and spiritual matters of Church life (NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, Report 1960). This was not the first time a church committee was formed, but the one begun in 1954 seems to have been disbanded due to the lack of Aboriginal interest in it.

events at Roper River Mission. For example Gabarla achieved seniority within the mission regime by also holding unsupervised weekly Christian village services and taking a lead in conventions. But he did not have the extensive kin base that EA did and in ritual matters he only had a minor role, as an owner-helper, to play in *Yabaduruwa* celebrations in this specific area of Arnhem Land (see Elkin 1971). Neither was he a member of the Station Council, though he was regularly recruited to the Church Committee. And his sons, like FA, migrated to Darwin and other parts of the Northern Territory to pursue opportunities opening up in government departments. MT also played a minor role in the 1965 *Yabaduruwa*, given that his traditional country is further to the northeast of Roper River. But he took a major part in running the annual dry-season cattle station ministry and the weekly village services at the mission, largely unsupervised by missionaries. Though younger than EA, MT's (b. 1935) dedication to Christian activities and the kin-based support he received from his affines, the A (emergent patronymic) family, would finally see him ordained in 1973 as Anglican minister for St. Matthew's Church at Ngukurr. And he began to play a larger role in secular affairs when the Citizens Club was established in 1969. Yet others, such as WD, who had a minor managerial role in the 1965 *Yabaduruwa* (see Elkin 1971), also because his traditional country lies well to the north of Roper, sought to establish his credentials within the mission by evangelising to the more recently arrived 'top-camp' residents. He too, like Gabarla, had no involvement with Station Councils, but was a regular member of Church Committees.

The willingness of Aborigines to take up major and minor roles, particularly in each other's ritual and Christian multi-group events, was a significant dynamic that enabled them to realise widespread relatedness and different degrees of prominence at Roper River Mission. Christian village services, moreover, offered a means to reorganise relations at the mission by allocating distinct though equally valued statuses to missionaries (the original owners of Christianity) and to the Aboriginal men who ran them (the new co-custodians of Christianity). At the same time evangelism in kin networks, beyond the context of church and village services, maintained the relative autonomy of residential groups (i.e. Rembarrnga and

Ritharngu) while affirming that work was reciprocal service performed for a boss and through which resources were realised. Missionaries, however, did not recognise that Aboriginal people were generating a relational form of authority, akin to the way in which it is achieved through co-operatively performed ceremonies. In this respect ritual bosses take the lead in ‘following up’ the Dreaming and ‘working for’ their sites, ceremonies and kin. And kin reciprocate what bosses do for them by ‘working for’ and ‘following’ their leaders in their ritual, Christian and other forms of business interests. In this regard some workers may also pursue prominence in minor ways, but may not seek the wider responsibilities to place and group that leadership carries.

There is in addition a striking contrast concerning the way in which Aborigines and missionaries configure autonomy. The former realise it as a mature and rightful capacity to act for others, while the latter construe it as a form of moral and economic self-sufficiency that underpins the values of a white and Christian society. Missionaries therefore could not appreciate how autonomy and authority could be an outcome of participation in ceremonies and Christian services. Rather, individuals in their view were morally obligated to earn a living and deploy its benefits to support their dependents and community institutions such as the church. Hence the relationship between self-sufficiency and economic societal viability was to them both a transparent and exclusive one, which did not include other types of socialities or forms of organisation. It is to these issues that I address my final remarks.

Cash, self-sufficiency and the demise of a mission settlement

Missionaries at Roper River were not inclined to recognise Aboriginal forms of sociality or their lateral forms of association (see also chapter 3). Nor were they disposed to recognise the ways in which Aboriginal people reorganised themselves through co-operatively performed ceremonies under conditions of settlement. Even in the late 1960s missionaries were of the view that Aborigines continued to have a distorted understanding of the values and practices of white society. And though they attempted to orient Aborigines to the idea that earning cash enabled individuals to generate self-supporting family units and community organisations, missionaries

failed to achieve this objective even with regard to the church. Mission reports in these years indicate how missionaries attempted to grapple with a range of anomalies and contradictions that a cash economy brought into being.

Two difficulties confronting missionaries related to the way in which a cash economy generated confusion about voluntary and contractual service to the mission and about the use of money. For example it had been the practice at Roper River since at least 1936 for Aborigines to contribute to the upkeep of the church through financial donations, even from their allowances.⁷² And despite the decline in church attendance in the 1960s, missionaries were nonetheless surprised to find that the ‘non-Christian’ sector continued to contribute as much financially as ‘Christian members’ to the upkeep of the church.⁷³ Missionaries seemed to think that only Christians were morally obliged to support church life. Yet, the majority of the population, whether identifying as Christian or not, continued to view donations to the church as the way in which they did their part to help the mission. They did not however see themselves as morally bound to attend it. Nor were the financial contributions of Aborigines sufficient to generate a self-supporting church. It continued to rely on donations from CMS and from Anglican parishes in the south for its upkeep.

⁷² NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54, Mission Reports, December 1936. This report confirms that a Christmas offering of £7.15.0 was collected ‘as usual’ from the station worker’s allowances and was used to pay for materials for a new church building.

⁷³ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, March 1964. Aborigines, whether confirmed or not, made financial contributions to the Church consistently. Regular mention is made of the monthly church donations in the Church Minute Book, recorded during the 1960s and 1970s. Donations start at approximately £20/\$20 per month and were about \$90 per month by the early 1970s (ibid.). For several months \$250 a month was collected during 1968 (ibid. April 1968). A Welfare survey conducted in 1967 estimated that there was a fortnightly income of \$11.60 per head of a population of 259 (including children) (CRS F1, 1966/281, 1965-70, CMS Roper River, Needs Survey Report 1967). Wages ranged between \$4 and \$8 from welfare benefits and between \$20 and \$75 from mission or non-mission employment. Two mission workers earning \$50 and \$75 each attracted a staff subsidy. People paid rental and services charges (food, medical etc) to the mission in the region of 25 per cent of their income (ibid.).

Another example of confusion occurred when a number of 'Christian stockmen' rebuffed the chaplain's request that they voluntarily build some seating for the church.⁷⁴ Their response was that the chaplain should simply purchase them from the offerings they gave every week. Missionaries found themselves having to explain to Aboriginal people that voluntary giving (whether as donation or service) was a fundamental precept of church life. But so far as Aborigines understood the new arrangements of a cash economy, they were not obliged to work without a return in tangible form such as money or rations.

The withdrawal of rations and introduction of service charges had in fact led to a flurry of complaints from Aborigines to the Welfare Branch in the late 1950s, claiming that missionaries were no longer 'helping' them.⁷⁵ One letter was particularly critical about the lack of reciprocity from missionaries. Addressed to the District Welfare Officer (Northern Territory administration), it stated:

All the old people want to know if you will be going down to Roper River Mission any time; if you are ... they ask me to ask you to send or take some plug tobacco for them. 2/6 is not enough to buy tea, sugar and tobacco with – and a mosquito net. Mr. Leske [superintendent] won't give them tea, sugar, tobacco, blanket for nothing ... they got to buy with 2/6. I ask him for a pair of trousers and a shirt ... so I'll have clothes to wear – he wouldn't give me after all I did in and around the mission. ... Nobody likes Mr. Leske – he fines us 5/- or 10/- [for infringing mission rules]. ... No hope of saving money even if we want. ... That is the kind of boss he is. ...

⁷⁴ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, December 1962.

⁷⁵ Welfare Branch received several letters from Aborigines at Roper River Mission complaining about the superintendent (CRS F1 1957/1461, 1957-59, Review Reports, Review report August 1957). They stated that he 'wasn't helping' Aborigines anymore and that he sacked Europeans who were assisting them (ibid.). Another said Aborigines 'wished' the superintendent 'would just go;' no one could 'get on with' him and he wasn't feeding them (ibid.). Welfare Branch also received complaints from Aborigines that the mission withdrew rations from them as a punishment (CRS F1 1954/73, 1953-5, CMS Roper River, June 1954).

That is why nearly all the young men want to go out and work on the [cattle] stations.⁷⁶

This letter underlines the point that Aboriginal people continued to interpret work as a form of service exchange, which constituted and gave substance to relationships between themselves and missionaries. Hence, as the letter above makes explicit, all the work that Aborigines did 'in and around the mission' should have been reciprocated with ongoing care in the form of rations and other resources. The introduction of a cash economy did not orient, in effect, Aboriginal people to recognise the relationship between earning a living and economic societal viability. Money could be assimilated instead to the values of service exchange (see also Sansom 1988), where work done for a boss ensured that he looked after you in turn (see also Austin-Broos 2006). Or where a donation to the church was the way in which the majority of the Aboriginal population did their part to support the mission.

Money however also embodied greater autonomy to realise other socialities, not least of which involved gambling and the forms of exchange it supported (Peterson 1991:84). But missionaries were appalled by its prevalence among Aborigines, which had increased with the onset of a cash economy and which they regarded as a misuse of money. They equated gambling with covetousness and believed that it operated as a counter attraction to the church.⁷⁷ It had led they felt to a decline in weekly donations and diverted cash away from the families it should have been used to support.⁷⁸ The fact that groups of 40 or more would gather openly on the street with stakes of \$500, even during church services or carol singing, was particularly alarming because it undermined missionary efforts to render autonomy as a form of moral and economic self-sufficiency.⁷⁹ The irony seemed to be lost on missionaries that Aboriginal people were exercising autonomy in the same way as other Australians, who similarly determine for themselves how to spend their cash.

⁷⁶ CRS F1 1957/1461, 1957-59, Review Reports, Correspondence from Roper River, folio 61.

⁷⁷ NTRS 870/P1, 1960-71, Church Minute Book, April 1965, March 1968.

⁷⁸ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, March and November 1969.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*

The introduction of a cash economy and particularly the payment of social service benefits directly to Aborigines in the mid 1960s led to the financial collapse of Roper River Mission. It also produced a corresponding decline in the numbers of Aboriginal people being employed.⁸⁰ Though the mission attempted to recoup funds by charging Aborigines for services and goods, it was insufficient to meet the running costs of the mission. When funds were short in 1964, 1965, 1967, and twice in 1968 an additional capital assistance grant from the government paid workers' wages.⁸¹ The final lay-off in 1968 confirmed for CMS their resolution to hand over administration of the settlement at Roper River to the government.

At no time were missionaries inclined to validate Aboriginal values concerning reciprocal exchange, whether in relation to secular or Christian activities. The putative encompassment of the mission within Aboriginal forms of organisation and exchange were not therefore ultimately successful. For example Aborigines such as FA found that missionaries did not validate them as co-custodians of Christianity. Though convinced that ceremony and gospel-wei 'went together,' FA found that the chaplain rebuffed this suggestion and he was told that he could not 'serve two masters'.⁸² As FA saw it, however, God had given the Dreaming to Aborigines and missionaries had brought knowledge of God to Roper River. Participating in ritual and Christian events was not then a matter of serving two masters for FA. It was, rather, a matter of honouring obligations to known others who had contributed to his transition to a senior status. Hence FA continued to interpret autonomy as an outcome of the reciprocal help that occurred between a boss and worker or an owner and manager. When forced to make a choice between these traditions, FA withdrew

⁸⁰ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, January 1964, November 1965, November 1967, January 1968, July 1968.

⁸¹ In May 1958, 55 of 90 Aboriginal adults were employed. This included 30 men and 25 women (NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, May 1958). By the early 1960s only 36 of 100 adults were employed (ibid. November 1967). In November 1967 the Aboriginal workforce was reduced to 6 (NTRS 870/P1, 1967-69, Reports, November 1967). 29 workers were rehired after this lay-off but only 3 were women (ibid. June 1968).

⁸² NTRS 219, OHI, TP 560.

from Christianity rather than have his status and practice defined by the chaplain and beyond negotiation.

Neither however did missionaries successfully assimilate Aboriginal people to modes of socio-moral discipline entailed in agricultural and waged labour, either during the protection or assimilation eras. Both eras produced instead the incorporation of Aborigines as a minority population within the Australian nation-state. They would now have to confront the difficulties of negotiating the meaning of self-determination, which made issues of autonomy even more problematic. Chapter 5 addresses this theme.

Summary

This chapter has provided an account of the assimilation era and its impact on Roper River Mission during the 1950s and 1960s. It has been framed in terms of the European perception that Aboriginal dependency on European resources had largely eroded an Indigenous authority structure premised on custodianship of tribal law. Assimilation initiatives therefore sought to encourage Aborigines to learn the value of earning an income specifically in terms of the higher standard of living that it could realise. If Aboriginal people assumed these values and practices they could be located as autonomous subjects within a hierarchy of relations premised on the capacity of individuals for economic independence.

But the introduction of limited modern amenities and a cash-economy did not induce Aborigines to become economically self-sufficient or to perceive that material benefits were realised through earning a living. Rather Aboriginal people responded by interpreting the mission as a site of performance, and evangelism as the activity that supported it. Hence work was for them a form of service exchange performed for a boss who reciprocated with resources, whether in the form of goods, money or Christian knowledge. Aborigines could therefore incorporate 'gospel ceremony' into their own modes of organisation and exchange, which enabled them to allocate an equivalent value to the worker roles they performed to sustain the mission.

The staging of Christian services beyond the context of the church also produced a relational form of authority at the mission, because it affirmed the capacity of specific clusters of related patrilineal groups to be the organisers of these events. The co-operative unity of wider sets of cognatic relations who participated in these performances was also affirmed. Thus Aboriginal people were able to differentiate social space in terms of relatedness and prominence, augmenting and surpassing individual capacities through laterally extending networks of support. It was also by these means that Aborigines rendered autonomy as a reciprocal form of help transacted between different groups of people and between those in a relationship of senior to junior.

Though 'gospel ceremony' became a significant means of generating status and accessing resources that could not be attained through cult activities, missionaries did not validate it at this time (chapter 6 pursues how CMS subsequently revalued Indigenous culture). Rather, they maintained that the relationship between individual and societal self-sufficiency was an exclusive one, which did not realise other forms of sociality and organisation. Confronted by a demand to submit to an authority beyond negotiation, Aborigines such as FA withdrew from worker roles in Christian events in order to protect their autonomy and status. Chapter 5 address how boss and worker roles would be revalued again as an autonomous secular authority began to administer the Roper River settlement.

CHAPTER 5:

THE AMBIGUOUS VALUE OF AUTONOMY

This chapter addresses the transition from a mission to government regime, beginning in 1968, and its effects on the Aboriginal population at Ngukurr (previously Roper River Mission).¹

A major part of the chapter concerns the ways in which Aboriginal people responded to government initiatives during the 1970s, which aimed to bring into being a self-managing ‘community’ at Ngukurr. This devolution of responsibility could occur, it was felt, if Aborigines adopted structures of corporate management through which administrative and commercial authorities are realised. Aborigines would then achieve ‘community’ autonomy through its incorporation in centralised hierarchies, this being the organisationally powerful way in which collective action can be directed to social, political and economic development.

The assumption that Aboriginal people would realise autonomy through its incorporation in community organisations would however prove problematic at Ngukurr. It would conflict with an existing social form for realising autonomy as a progressive status achieved through nurturance and pose challenges to individuals and kin-groups to realise autonomy as a capacity for self-sufficiency. Both the strike at Ngukurr in 1970 and the establishment of the Yugul Cattle Company (YCC) in 1971 exemplify the types of issues pertaining to control and forms of value that emerged with these community-focused initiatives. Though Aborigines would attempt to negotiate roles and statuses in their new relations with government by going on strike, they would not have the power to define dependency as a mutual, rather than subordinate, condition. And their attempts to credential themselves as workers for and owners of Ngukurr, according to both European and Aboriginal

¹ The name ‘Ngukurr’ refers to the whole ridge upon which the town is situated (CRS F1 1968/2613, 1960-69, Proposed transfer of Roper River, CMS Ngukurr to CMS Darwin, February 1971). But like many Aboriginal words it may describe the type of land where the town was built, which is a rocky ridge (see also Sandefur 1998:75).

criteria, would not be endorsed by government. As a result of the strike's failure to achieve its aims, Aborigines would recognise their dependency on an externally funded administrative-economic apparatus and seek other means to localise control over community resources.

My analysis of the YCC provides an illustration of the way in which localised control emerged in response to the attempt to invest collective interests in a community venture at Ngukurr. Though intended to operate as an organisational platform in which community autonomy and property could be incorporated, the cattle company served in lieu of a resource council to promote incipient factionalism among Aborigines. It became, like other centralised management structures, a locus of struggles to protect autonomy, fostering the control of resource niches by patronymic families. Institutional conflicts engendered through resource struggles at Ngukurr distil a particular dynamic about autonomy, making its contemporary social forms problematic as cultural categories acquire new and ambiguous values in the context of community organisations and administration.

By elucidating the way in which organisational tensions emerge between laterally extended and centralised hierarchical forms, this chapter demonstrates the way in which autonomy is now configured and expressed as an affirmation of prominence in relation to one resource niche. Rather than realise a fully adult status through reciprocal exchange, autonomy affirmed through resource control confirms instead both the dependency of Aborigines on government transfers and the power of some over others at Ngukurr.

I first outline the institutional changes taking place at Ngukurr in 1968, which subordinated Christianity to a secular and centralised administrative authority.

Institutional Changes At Ngukurr

The Commonwealth Government assumed administrative control of Roper River Mission on the 1st October 1968, after several months of negotiation with CMS.² The Department of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch now became responsible for funding and managing the town, renamed Ngukurr according to the way in which Aborigines had always known the area.³ Welfare Branch engaged public servants to fill the administrative roles previously carried out by missionaries, while a CMS chaplain and two nursing sisters continued to attend to the church and clinic.⁴

Welfare Branch retained much of the mission structure of administration, including its wage system, its service charges, Station Council and Aboriginal-run village meetings (Bern 1974:37-41). It even continued with the same plans for the social and economic development of Aborigines that CMS had used, employing Aboriginal people in community labour gangs maintaining sanitation, construction

² CMS withdrew from the secular management of all its Arnhem Land missions (Umbakumba and Angurugu at Groote Eylandt, Rose River Mission latterly Numbulwar, Oenpelli and Roper River Mission latterly Ngukurr) during the late 1960s (Harris 1998:13). Nevertheless they maintained a presence in the form of Chaplains and, later, Bible translation workers at most of these places.

³ At times in this chapter I will be referring to arrangements or events that predate the handover of Roper River Mission to the Welfare Branch in October 1968. For the sake of clarity I will refer to the settlement as Ngukurr throughout the text rather than Roper River Mission.

⁴ The Department of the Northern Territory Welfare Branch, established by the Commonwealth Government, replaced the Department of Native Affairs in 1951 as administrator for Aborigines in the Northern Territory. Welfare Branch was itself replaced by the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) in 1972. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) replaced the DAA in 1990. As noted in chapter 2, ATSIC's National Board of Commissioners disbanded in June 2004, its Regional Councils in June 2005 and its programs were transferred to mainstream government departments in July 2004.

and mechanical work.⁵ It fared no differently than CMS in failing to develop, as it hoped, enterprises in tourism, market gardening, poultry farming and a piggery.

Welfare Branch also separated secular administration from Christian and traditional affairs. This took effect when the Station Council was reformed under a Welfare Branch superintendent. Though missionaries were recruited to the council alongside non-Christian welfare staff, they could no longer use it to reinforce Christian standards as they had done during the 1960s.⁶ Aboriginal membership on council moreover was no longer premised on the assumption and demonstration of Christian ideals.⁷ Hence Christianity and church life was subordinated within a bureaucratic regime. The reformed Station Council was also instructed to separate secular administration from traditional matters. A Welfare Branch report states that the 'new council' could not 'adjudicate on tribal issues, especially marriages.'⁸ Rather, Aboriginal people were to have their own meeting for this.

In creating an administrative authority that was clearly separate from Christianity and Aboriginal tradition, Welfare Branch control impacted as much on

⁵ CRS F1 1968/2613, 1960-69, Proposed transfer of Roper River - Giese, Director of Social Welfare, Consultative Report concerning Roper Mission, September-October 1968.

⁶ Missionaries at Ngukurr had established the Station Council, with equal Indigenous and non-Indigenous representation, by 1962 (CRS F1 1962/2389, 1959-65, Roper mission reports 1960-61 and 1961-2; Cole 1968:26). This Station Council operated to inform Aborigines about administrative matters and to support disciplinary ideals by imposing fines for gambling, the improper use of facilities, negligence in attending to the care of houses, children, dogs, and for sexual misconduct (NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, 1962-4).

⁷ Missionaries had used the Station and Church Council (formed 1960), annual Christian conferences as well as Aboriginal-run 'village meetings' throughout the 1960s as fora in which to speak out, or encourage Christian Aborigines to speak out against any practice that they considered to be inconsistent with Christianity (NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, 1960-70; NTRS 870/P1, 1957-71, Correspondence 2, 1960-70). Aboriginal members could be expelled from the council for breaching the mission's moral standards (NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, July 1963). They could be readmitted to council after they had been accepted back into the church (ibid.).

⁸ CRS E750/T266, 1968-71, Organisation and Development of Roper River, folio 68.

Aborigines as it did on missionaries. As Christianity was no longer the organising logic of this regime, the only fora left available to missionaries to evangelise were poorly attended church services, its subordinated church committee and Christian conventions. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss how CMS reformulated its concept of mission to revalue the cultures of other people and how Aborigines at Ngukurr have responded with characteristic dynamics associated with lateral forms of association.

For Aboriginal people, however, the impacts of an autonomous secular administrative authority differed from those affecting missionaries. Aborigines continued to stage *Gunapipi* and *Yabaduruwa* ceremonies in addition to Christian village services, even after the handover of administration to the Welfare Branch.⁹ And they interpreted Welfare Branch's formal respect for ceremony as indicative of government's willingness to 'help'.¹⁰ This respect seemed to imply an endorsement of the social forms of autonomy and authority that Aboriginal people realised through performances of ceremony and Christian village services. Hence the same clusters of related patrifilial groups participated in Christian village services (see chapter 4), as a means to affirm at a settlement-wide level both the unity of participants and the leadership roles of Aboriginal men who organised them.¹¹ Leadership roles and unity became increasingly difficult to affirm by these means however, due to the fact that there were now new arenas and goals of competition brought into play at Ngukurr.

Not least among these was the expectation among Aborigines that the transfer to Welfare Branch control would lead to significant material improvements at

⁹ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, September and November 1968, March, September and December 1969, March, April 1970, January 1971. Bern (1974:224) provides a list of cult performances (total 11) held at Ngukurr from 1957 to 1971. Performances of *Yabaduruwa* and *Gunapipi* ceremonies were generally alternated from one year to the next.

¹⁰ Sam Thompson, when asked if whites had ever told Aborigines to stop their ceremonies, offered the view that 'government was helping' by encouraging Aborigines at Ngukurr 'not to stop' performing them (NTRS 219, OHI, TP559).

¹¹ NTRS 1102, Vol 2, 1955-73, Mission Reports, September and November 1968, March, September and December 1969, March, April 1970, January 1971.

Ngukurr, especially with regard to housing, employment and economic enterprises. These expectations were influenced by their familiarity with labour conditions in the Northern Territory generally and a political climate that emphasised their rights to equal treatment as citizens.¹² A more significant expectation among Aborigines was that they would have autonomy with regard to managing Ngukurr and the land surrounding it (Bern 1974:432-3; 1976:216).¹³ Their concerns about land were fuelled by the fact that the mission's lease of 320 sq kms of the Arnhem Land Reserve and its property reverted to the Crown after the handover of administrative control to the Welfare Branch. Though CMS had tried to have this lease transferred to Aborigines at Ngukurr, the attempt was not successful (Sandefur 1998:52).

Welfare Branch seemed to be unaware of the extent of Aboriginal expectations concerning autonomy and unappreciative of existing social forms for its realisation. Though they aimed to devolve responsibility to Aborigines for the delivery of community services they were more concerned to generate a structure for its management, rather than address issues of material improvement. And though they sought to generate a structure through which the productive capacity of land could be incorporated to benefit all Aborigines at Ngukurr, they would fail to appreciate that the desire to protect individual and kin-group autonomy would pose a challenge to its realisation at a community-wide level.

¹² Some of the relevant legislation aiming to reverse legal discrimination against Aborigines was the Commonwealth Electoral Act (1962) giving federal voting rights to Aborigines, the Social Welfare Ordinance (1964), which elevated Aborigines in the Northern Territory to the status of Australian citizens and conferral on the Commonwealth Government of concurrent powers with the States in Indigenous affairs (1967). The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) formed in 1957, giving 'Aboriginal advancement' organisations in many States added political thrust. Lippmann (1996[1981]:30), among others, acknowledges their efforts to have resulted in the 1967 referendum to change two clauses in the Federal Constitution that discriminated against Aborigines.

¹³ Collman (1988:229) mentions the fact that one of the Aboriginal activists who played a vital role in both the Newcastle Waters and Wattie Creek disputes had been involved in trade union and land rights work in Darwin. He is referring to DA, one of the sons of Djangardba and originally from Ngukurr, who was also instrumental in organising the strike there in 1970.

Below I address the ways in which these divergences between Aboriginal and government expectations produced a discourse about autonomy at Ngukurr, as reflected in the case of the pastoral strike and the founding of the YCC. First, however, I outline what outcomes government initiatives sought to achieve among Aborigines during the latter years of Welfare Branch administration and after the transition to control by the DAA (Department of Aboriginal Affairs). Though each administrative regime occurred under different policy directions in Aboriginal Affairs, both assimilation (latter years) and self-determination initiatives nevertheless aimed to give practical effect to Aboriginal self-management.

Collective action as 'real autonomy'

Though Welfare Branch assumed administrative control at Ngukurr while assimilation was still the policy direction in Aboriginal affairs, they had employed the term 'self-management' in relation to this community from as early as 1965. They approved of the fact that CMS sought to change its 'paternal mission-settlement organisation,' by developing structures through which a population could manage itself, at least in part.¹⁴ In this regard Welfare Branch and the Commonwealth Government were influenced by the larger international context of enacting policies to validate the political rights of Indigenous and minority groups.¹⁵ In keeping with the international spirit of endorsing a path to decolonisation, Prime Minister McMahon declared in 1972 that Aborigines were entitled to 'decide to what degree and at what rate' they would identify themselves with Australian society (cited in Sanders 1982:5). His policy objectives moreover recognised that Aborigines

¹⁴ CRS F1 1962/2389, 1959-65, Roper mission reports, Investigation Officer to Acting Director Welfare Branch, January 1965.

¹⁵ In 1966 Australia ratified both the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (ICCPR) and the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR), accepting the obligation to implement their terms (Netheim 1998:199). Article 1 of both covenants specifies that 'all peoples have the right of self-determination' by virtue of which they 'freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development' (ibid. 202). Article 27 of the ICCPR also upholds the 'right [of ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities] to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practice their own religion, or to use their own language' (ibid. 201).

‘should be encouraged ... to preserve and develop their own culture, languages and traditions ... so that they can become living elements in the diverse culture of the Australian society (ibid.).

His successor Whitlam, with a Labor government, gave more substance to these aims in the latter months of 1972. In declaring self-determination as the new direction for Aboriginal Affairs, Whitlam made a clear break with the assimilatory practices of previous governments. He proposed that it was up to Aborigines ‘as communities and individuals’ to ‘decide the pace and nature of their future development’ (cited in Sanders 1982:4). A significant initiative of the self-determination policy was the legislation it enacted to enable the development of incorporated local Indigenous organisations both to manage community affairs and deliver government-funded service (Sanders 1982:5). Another was the establishment of the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission to advise on investing land in Aboriginal groups, especially in the Northern Territory (ibid.). A third initiative replaced the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory with the newly created DAA. Its responsibilities included allocating service funding to and directing development programs for Aboriginal people.

The term ‘community’ was comprehensively adopted at this time by the DAA and in Commonwealth and State legislation enabling Aboriginal groups to form incorporated associations and councils (see also Smith 1989:2-4, 15-6). The concept, often unelaborated by bureaucrats, nevertheless defined a minimum unit capable of sustaining a self-determination policy, being intrinsically tied to the notion of equitable service delivery, economic development and active participation in decision-making at the local level. Though the focus on community as a unit of organisation was (and is) a significant aspect of self-determination initiatives, it was not an innovation of this policy direction. Both Welfare Branch and CMS had also taken steps to generate organisational platforms for the purposes of collective action among Ngukurr Aborigines.

Welfare Branch not only employed the concept ‘community’ in relation to Ngukurr, prior to the DAA takeover, they aimed to bring this unit of organisation

into being in a specific way. They were urged by the Minister of the Department of the Interior to develop an administrative structure that would be different to ‘that of a settlement.’¹⁶ Specifically, it was felt, that there had to be some formal structures to encourage ‘participation ... in the management of community affairs’ if a ‘devolution of responsibility’ to Aborigines was to occur.¹⁷ There also needed to be some form of incorporated group established so that CMS could transfer its assets of the store and its stock to the Aboriginal community. It would also benefit from the formation of an entrepreneurial group, possibly operating a cattle project. ‘Real autonomy’ could then be realised at Ngukurr if responsibility for its management was jointly vested in a local authority, an incorporated society, an entrepreneurial group and in government.¹⁸

It is evident from the foregoing that the new tools for realising ‘real autonomy’ at Ngukurr in the late 1960s are management structures that have the power to direct the working capacity of individuals toward collective ends. In this regard both the latter years of assimilation initiatives and self-determination policy directions share the aim of encouraging Aborigines to engage in forms of autonomy that foster its incorporation in organisations. Late assimilation and self-determination initiatives also share the aim of stimulating the growth of indigenous organisations through which legitimate ‘community’ authorities can be realised and Aboriginal engagement in practices of self-management achieved. It did not seem to occur to Welfare Branch however that their focus on generating an institutional domain of autonomy might pose difficulties for a population already attuned to its realisation through other social forms. In other words the attempt to stimulate the growth of organisational platforms for the purposes of collective action was discontinuous with the attempt to generate mechanisms by which individual Aborigines (and families) could realise autonomy as a capacity for self-sufficiency.

¹⁶ CRS F1 1968/2613, 1960-69, Proposed transfer of Roper River, Admin. Darwin to Interior, Canberra, September 1968.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

The following section describes how Aboriginal people responded to Welfare Branch control in terms of the institutional conflicts that its organising logic brought into being. A significant aspect of this conflict was made explicit in the Ngukurr strike of 1970, which entailed a struggle on the part of individual Aborigines and kin-groups to pursue opportunities to be self-sufficient. It also entailed a struggle for Aboriginal people to define dependency as a mutual rather than subordinate relation. Though Aborigines would attempt, as they had done with missionaries, to render their relationship with government in terms of reciprocal ‘helping,’ they would find that their own modes of differentiation and prestige would not be validated. Rather, the cultural categories of boss and worker (among others) would acquire new functional values for Aboriginal people through engaging a bureaucratic regime (see Sahlins 1985:31, 138).

The Ngukurr Strike: A Struggle To Define Dependency

The years of Welfare Branch control at Ngukurr were turbulent (1968-1971) because institutional changes were in fact slow to occur. Aboriginal people expected that control of Ngukurr’s affairs would be largely in their own hands from the outset and they hoped that the transfer to Welfare Branch would result in significant material improvements. Their expectations for autonomy with regard to their own affairs, however, were unfulfilled and largely misunderstood by the Welfare Branch and later the DAA. And little in the way of additional government funding was made available to Ngukurr, other than continuing to pay training allowances, child endowments and pensions to Aborigines.¹⁹

In assessing the situation at Ngukurr in 1968, Welfare Branch reported that Aboriginal people lacked sufficient competence for ‘any transfer of responsibility’

¹⁹ Training allowances, child endowment and pensions were the three main sources of income for Ngukurr’s population, all supplied by the Commonwealth Government (Bern, 1974:39, 43). Minimum award wages and unemployment benefits were finally introduced in 1974 (ibid. 41).

for the delivery of ‘services to the whole community’ to occur.²⁰ They would continue therefore to employ the three areas of jurisdiction that CMS had established to involve Aborigines in community affairs (see also Williams 1987:7, 47). These were the Station Council, Church Committee and Aboriginal-run Village Meeting, where Aborigines were recruited to work alongside missionaries in all but the latter context. Welfare Branch would also continue with the practice of having an equal number of Aboriginal representatives on Council to work alongside the ‘European heads of all departments of activities.’²¹ One addition to this administrative structure was the Roper River Citizens Club, which was registered as an incorporated association to manage the community store in 1969 (Bern 1974:173). A further addition was the Aboriginal-run Yugul Cattle Company (YCC) established in 1971, which did not receive a lease until 1972 (Thiele 1982:32).

Welfare Branch, like CMS, also defined Aboriginal people as trainees in relation to white managers, the latter being ultimately responsible for the organisation of community labour gangs. These managers were accountable to the Welfare Branch superintendent, as the government’s representative at Ngukurr, and not to any local body such as the Citizens Club or Station Council (Bern 1974:92-4). Aborigines moreover were not fully integrated in staffing and management roles. Out of a workforce (classified as trainees) of approximately 85 Aborigines, only 2 were employed as staff (*ibid.* 39-42). And for the 3 or 4 Aborigines given supervisory roles, they were themselves supervised by white managers (*ibid.*). Whites, in addition, took the lead in defining what the business of the Station Council should be and what procedures it should employ (*ibid.* 169-71).

Aboriginal membership on Council was monopolised by senior men of Ngukurr’s ‘core’ families, by which is meant those with a history of residence at the mission prior to the 1940s (*ibid.* 170-2). It functioned however, on the rare occasions

²⁰ CRS F1 1968/2613, 1960-69, Proposed transfer of Roper River, Admin. Darwin to Interior, Canberra, folio’s 181-184, November 1968.

²¹ CRS E750/T266, 1968-71, Organisation and Development of Roper River, Station Council report, folio 23.

when it did meet, to articulate tensions between welfare staff and Aborigines related to the unequal distribution of power within Ngukurr and between it and government (ibid. 163, 165). The Citizens Club was then the only organisation where the majority Aboriginal executive actually controlled and competed to control valued resources at this time (ibid. 174). But the shop became insolvent in April 1970 due to its mismanagement by Europeans, which led to government assuming control over it (ibid.). Though the Club's Aboriginal members took responsibility for organising entertainments, they had left the running of the shop to a European manager and a European secretary (ibid.).

Aboriginal people clearly had little autonomy with regard to the management of Ngukurr. They were also to find that they had little autonomy with regard to land and its resources in the Roper region, which in part culminated in the strike of 1970. This asymmetry in power was underlined by the way in which government defined the viability of economic ventures and determined how the productive capacity of land could be utilised. Though individual Aborigines and kin-groups attempted to engage in practices of economic self-sufficiency, they found their efforts rebuffed as government agents considered them to be incompatible with the aim of stimulating community development.

These efforts to sustain individual and kin-group autonomy occurred both prior to and at the time of the hand-over to Welfare Branch in 1968.²² For example in 1963 a number of Aboriginal men made applications for loans to Welfare Branch in order to establish small economic enterprises in fishing, crocodile shooting, trapping and mustering.²³ It is noteworthy that some of these applications to muster horses and cattle were made on the basis of people's connections to traditional country.²⁴ Government reports reveal however that they did not wish to validate any 'accretion

²² CRS F1 1968/2613, 1960-69, Proposed transfer of Roper River - Admin. Darwin to Interior, Canberra, November 1968:2.

²³ CRS E242/6 [K22/1/1], 1961-73, Mission Returns, October 1962, January 1963, June 1963, December 1963.

²⁴ *ibid.*

of power' in 'small ritual groups' on the basis of tribal associations with country.²⁵ Rather they aimed to encourage Aborigines to identify as Australian citizens and consider 'the Northern Territory ... [as] their country in the broad sense.'²⁶ Nevertheless a number of 'land-owning groups' made applications to take out leases on traditional country in 1965, after a government assessment of the region's pastoral potential (Thiele 1982:32).

What is significant about these actions during the 1960s is that individuals and groups were attempting to maintain an essentially domestic mode of production in the vicinity of Ngukurr, with only sporadic engagement within a wider market economy. By doing so, they were continuing to endorse their own modes of organisation as kin networks centred on a patrifilial group, being relatively autonomous in political and economic terms (see also Keen 1994:295; Collman 1988:106; Peterson 2005:10-12). But the loans were not approved nor the applications heard, as a domestic mode of provisioning was not of interest to the government at the time (Thiele 1982:32). Rather profitability, in their view, could only be guaranteed if a lease area was sufficiently large enough to have a carrying capacity of 1000 head of cattle, giving a stocking rate of 2 beasts per 5 sq kms (ibid. 33).

Applications for land leases were made again in 1968, this time by two different Aboriginal groups. Welfare Branch were of the view however that a 'conflict ... existed' between the two requests, given that neither group of men was aware of the other's application and that areas of each lease overlapped.²⁷ One lease area was significantly larger than the other, covering the southeast portion of the reserve. The second was for a smaller region of traditional significance to the other group of applicants. Welfare Branch held a meeting at Ngukurr with this 'tribal

²⁵ CRS F1 1962/2389, 1959-65, Roper mission reports, Assistant Director Long to Director Welfare Branch, December 1964.

²⁶ CRS F1 1962/2389, 1959-65, Roper mission reports, Assistant Director Evans to Director Welfare Branch, May 1963.

²⁷ *ibid.*

group' to encourage them to consult with the other group of applicants, rather than 'press for immediate action' on their own.²⁸ In doing so they hoped to stimulate among Aborigines a collective interest with regard to the development of Ngukurr. What occurred instead highlighted for Aboriginal people the government's ownership of land and its resources.

This occurred also in 1968 when Aboriginal men found themselves prohibited from trapping horses, as the mission's lease and its property (excluding the shop and stock) had reverted to the Crown (Bern 1976:216; Thiele 1982:31). A number of men went out to do so anyway but were unsuccessful in finding any horses (Bern 1976:216). In what seems to have been a bid to credential themselves according to European notions of ownership, four Aborigines applied for and received horse brands in 1969.²⁹ This, however, did not resolve the issue of ownership or give Aborigines a licence to trap. At the same time as they received the brands, Aborigines were informed that they would first have to prove ownership of any horses they caught.

The issue of land and ownership of its productive capacity came to a head in February 1970 when government placed a ban on mustering cattle by Ngukurr Aborigines within the Arnhem Land reserve (Bern 1976:216). The unresolved issue of a land lease and the two mustering bans prompted Aborigines to send a delegation of men to Welfare Branch headquarters in Darwin to make government aware of their dissatisfaction.

Three men from two of Ngukurr's three large cognatic families were selected for this task (i.e. two from the A+L and one from the H+Z families).³⁰ The Minister

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ CRS E750/T267, 1969-71, Roper River economic resources, Giese, Director of Social Welfare, August 1969.

³⁰ The G+UU cognatic family were not particularly involved in this action as a good deal of their traditional country lay to the south of Ngukurr and fell outside the mission-lease area. The basis for people's interests and right to act being premised on ownership of country would become even more marked when the Yugul Cattle Company (YCC) was established.

of the Interior responded to the delegation by visiting Ngukurr to listen to their demands. Aborigines requested that they be self-governing, that the population be given a land lease similar in size to that of the mission (320 sq kms), that they be given ownership of the cattle and horses in the vicinity of Ngukurr and be provided with better funding for housing and equipment (ibid. 217). One Aboriginal man summed up these aims at a Village Meeting in the following way: 'We just work and get money from government. We don't do nothing for this place. You going to run this place – No? ... We should be able to stand on our own backbone' (cited in Bern 1976:217). The only demand the Minister would address related to infrastructural improvements, but his proposals failed to prevent the strike held between early March and early April 1970 (ibid.).

Bern (1976) provides a description and analysis of the Ngukurr strike, arguing that Aborigines were seeking to have their economic and political autonomy restored to them. The strike and the granting of a pastoral lease to Ngukurr early in 1972, however, did not achieve this aim. Rather, Bern argues, the demand that government deliver European education, higher wages and material goods to Aborigines contradicted their demand for independence from bureaucratic control (ibid. 222, 224). Hence Welfare Branch viewed the strike as irrational and claimed not to understand what Ngukurr Aborigines wanted (ibid.). The Minister of the Interior wrote to express his disappointment at their action, stating that it would make it difficult for improvement plans to be implemented without their co-operation (ibid.).

It is evident that both Bern and the Welfare Branch interpret autonomy in a similar way, rendering it as a capacity for collective self-sufficiency realised through economic independence. They regarded the strike as entailing contradictory, hence irrational, demands given the obvious dependency of Aboriginal people on government funding. I propose however that there was nothing contradictory about the strike action from an Aboriginal perspective. This view is premised on the way in which Aborigines construct autonomy as a progressive status realised through reciprocal 'help,' often enacted between different groups of people in ceremony (see

chapter 4). Aborigines were attempting to legitimise their relations with government and their ownership of Ngukurr according to their own and European forms of practice. Hence, the strike enabled them to constitute themselves as workers, whose labour Ngukurr could not do without. But they were also characterising work in a distinctly Aboriginal way, investing it with the value of ‘working for’ place (see Austin-Broos 2006).³¹ In this regard Aboriginal men drew on their own forms of association specifically pertaining to the ownership and management of important sites, rather than interpret dependency as subordination. And by construing their role in Ngukurr’s development as a crucially productive one, they were attempting to define the government’s role as a recipient of this action (cf. Redmond 2005:236).

The applications for horse brands and leases as well as the attempts to trap horses and muster cattle were then important actions undertaken by Aborigines during these years of transition from CMS to Welfare Branch control. On the one hand, such action indicates the ongoing desire of Ngukurr Aborigines (as individuals and patrifilial groups) to work the land and to legitimise, according to European criteria, their ownership of it. On the other hand, such action indicates that individuals and patrifilial groups sought to retain autonomous control of traditional country, as a basis for their rightful ownership of all sorts of business (ceremony as well as enterprise ventures) in relation to it. Aboriginal people were seeking, through the range of action described above, to put in place new forms of agreement with government as a basis for an ongoing relationship with them. But they were also trying to endorse their own modes of differentiation and prestige by interpreting work as constitutive of bringing a social group and place into being.

Neither the strike nor the attempts to set up small group enterprises were successful for Ngukurr, given that Welfare Branch and the Ministry of the Interior did not recognise or wish to validate the broader aims of such action by Aborigines.

³¹ Austin-Broos (2006) discusses some of the conflicts the Arrernte confront in everyday practice as they try to reconcile the different demands of kinship service (‘working for’) and paid employment (‘working’). As Austin-Broos describes it, ‘working for’ and its reciprocal ‘looking after’ ‘produce and reproduce the social group and the place of which they are a part’ (ibid. 6).

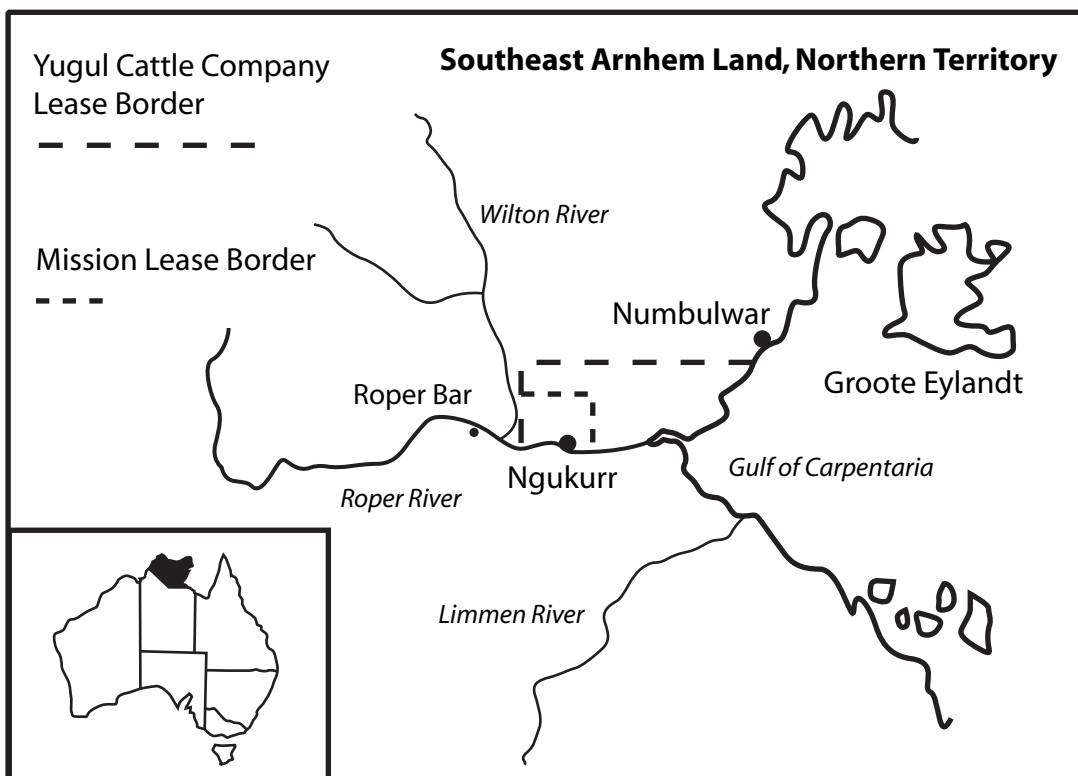
Such efforts at participation were 'too modest,' 'local' and 'mixed,' as Cowlshaw notes in relation to Bulman, for state officials seeking to bring the entity 'community' into being (1999:227, 242, 249-51). Hence the only aim that government did address was Ngukurr's infrastructural development, rather than negotiating with Aborigines an adequate foundation through which they could develop new forms of esteem and wealth. Ngukurr Aborigines found that they did not have the power to redefine their positions as trainees in their relations with government, nor invest their roles as workers with value commensurate with the status of traditional owner-manager associations.

The strike also brought to the fore some of the tensions inherent in trying to sustain a unity of interests as it compromised the autonomy of individuals and groups to do so. The strike began to falter shortly after its commencement for lack of widespread agreement about how it should proceed. By the end of the first week it became clear that the men were divided as to whether the strike should continue (Bern 1976:219). Some of the senior men chose to return to work in order to support their local store. As mentioned above it was in financial crisis at the time and some of these men had vested interests in its management. By the third week only 40 per cent of the workforce continued to strike (ibid. 219). Women, in contrast, were differently positioned to men during the action. They viewed it as 'men's business' and in that regard were not overtly opposed to it (ibid. 220). They would not, however, support the proposal that they withdraw children from school and relocate to a nearby billabong in order to make the strike effective (idem. 1974:439-40). The strike therefore could not succeed given that few were prepared to support any action that impinged on their individual and autonomous interests.

Though collective action could not be sustained at Ngukurr, the factors impinging on it were nonetheless repositioned as internal concerns once the strike ended. Its failure to secure a land lease for 320 sq kms, in addition to the failure of attempts to set up small group enterprises, left Aborigines with no choice but to try to amalgamate their applications. And nothing less than 5000 sq kms would be considered economically viable for a pastoral venture under the new amendments to

the Crown Lands Ordinance of 1970 (Thiele 1982:32). The two lease areas are shown on Map 6.

More importantly, no funding would be forthcoming for ventures considered to be unprofitable or incompatible with the aim of community development. How Aborigines continued to struggle with the government demand that the productivity of land should benefit all Ngukurr's Aboriginal residents when the YCC was established is discussed below. The case is indicative of the way in which Aborigines do take control of the task set them by government to engage in practices of self-management and redefine it in their own terms. As I demonstrate, Aboriginal people would redesign organisational platforms such as the YCC by utilising its resources to enhance the status of bosses and the patronymic families they bring into being. Though the differentiation of resource organisations as kin-locales affirms Aboriginal control, such action also engenders problems for the realisation of an institutional domain of autonomy or its construal as a progressive status realised through 'helping.'



Map 6: Lease areas

(Sources Bern 1974; Thiele 1982)

Before addressing these latter issues of conflicting social forms and values, I first discuss how a particular constitution of Aboriginal leadership emerged as a result of the institutionalisation of resource competition at Ngukurr.

The YCC: resources and institutional conflict

In order to address how Aboriginal people redesign corporate organisations, I focus on the operations of the Yugul Cattle Company (YCC) as they occurred within the broader context of centralised resource management at Ngukurr. Of particular interest is the way in which competitive status relations among Aborigines now played out in this context where material resources are fixed in relation to one centre. I do so in order to draw out the ways in which individuals and groups acted to protect their autonomy and to indicate how this pattern of competition helps to inhibit the realisation of a centralised and hierarchical administrative organisation.

The operations of the YCC provide an apt case from which to consider the task of collective self-management, because government support for the venture entailed the condition that it should benefit all Ngukurr's Aboriginal residents. But the requirement that a lease cover a region significantly greater than any owned by a traditional group was very much at odds with the interests expressed by Aborigines as I have outlined them above. The stipulation that Aboriginal people organise themselves to claim such a large region in the name of the community also created a number of dilemmas for them (see Map 6 above). One ongoing difficulty was the inherent conflict between the demands of managing a commercial enterprise and the additional objective of running an enterprise to benefit the whole community (see also Cowlshaw 1999:230; Peterson 2005:14). Another difficulty Aborigines had to confront was that the scale and range of skills required for a large pastoral operation ensured that it would never be free from the plans formulated by government advisers. Thiele (1982) provides an extended treatment of this aspect of the YCC in his account of its establishment and demise. I am concerned, however, to draw out two further issues here, apparent but unexplored in his work. The first issue is that the YCC venture was not completely supported at Ngukurr, despite its application for a lease in the name of the community. The second issue is that government and

its advisers expected that the YCC would employ a corporate management structure, founded on hierarchical and centralised control of resources and decision-making.

With regard to the first issue, there was in fact little agreement among Aboriginal groups about how collective interests could be vested in the YCC venture. Those with traditional land outside the lease area were excluded as shareholders when the company was incorporated in 1971 (Thiele 1982:39-40). The Aboriginal Director of the company made this decision once the YCC was incorporated, contrary to an earlier proposal that all Ngukurr's families would be included as shareholders (*ibid.*). The decision was premised on the idea that only those families with traditionally important land within the lease area were entitled to have a say in its running (*ibid.* 40). Hence the Director's decision initially affected 30 per cent of Ngukurr's population, as it excluded those families described by Bern (1974:103-4) as 'non-core' who took up residence at the mission after the 1940s. It also excluded another 15 per cent of Ngukurr's 'core' families for the same reason (percentage inferred from statistics given in Bern 1974:113-4).³² In other words only 6 of 11 families were to be included as shareholders in the cattle-company.

But the rationale that shares in the YCC would go to traditional land-owning families within the lease area was not adhered to once the company got underway. Specifically, a complaint was lodged with Welfare Branch that the owning families of two areas of traditional country within the lease were not included in the company (Thiele 1982:40). In addition the remaining core families were divided on the issue of whether or not the Council should run the YCC. And finally some families within the core group wanted to maintain their independence altogether by a system of mustering royalties or rents (*ibid.*). Though there was in theory general support for the YCC venture, no individuals or families were prepared to relinquish any interests in land in favour of a higher order unity such as a community. Rather than foster an institutional domain of autonomy, the YCC served instead to individuate families who sought to affirm their own forms of land ownership.

³² See above section on the Ngukurr strike and chapter 2 where the term 'core' families employed by Bern (1974) is used to describe Aborigines who took up residence at the mission prior to the 1940s.

The venture nevertheless went ahead, despite the disagreements outlined above. A lease was approved at the end of 1971, though individuals from only two of the largest core families (i.e. the A and H families) were ever listed as shareholders in the company (ibid. 42).³³ The Aboriginal Capital Fund (ACF) allocated a grant to the YCC in 1972 and the Australian Agricultural Consulting and Management Company (AACM) was commissioned to oversee its operations. The AACM were now accountable to the newly created Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA), which had taken over responsibility for service funding and development programs from the Welfare Branch. And pastoral work commenced at Ngukurr in the 'dry' season of 1973 (ibid. 33).

With regard to the second issue, the structure of the YCC only partially reflected some of the forms typical of corporate management within the wider Australian population. For example, a European manager and an Aboriginal Director were appointed to run the YCC. Both of these men, however, were unable to coordinate their roles with that of their workers, as the latter refused to be dominated by European or Aboriginal bosses (ibid. 44-5). Work therefore only proceeded on an ad hoc basis resulting in low productivity and frequent misuse of equipment. Thiele argues that the inadequate work practices of the YCC reflect the legacy of European control over Aboriginal lives, which had failed to generate new authority structures among them for managing a commercial venture (ibid. 36). He also notes, as a contributing factor, the lack of an authority hierarchy among Aborigines with regard to directing labour-power or sanctioning workers who did not perform specific tasks (ibid.).

This interpretation of the YCC's failure, in my view, takes insufficient account of the way in which leadership was now being constituted in the context of resource dependency or the impact of this on the production and reproduction of

³³ The YCC lease was in fact withdrawn in 1973 while the Woodward Inquiry into Aboriginal Land Rights in the Northern Territory went ahead (Thiele 1982:33). The YCC did not have tenure over the land on which it operated, a fact that was raised but not resolved by the AACM's auditors in 1976 (ibid. 60).

social relations. As Peterson (2005:10-12) argues vis-a-vis Aborigines entering the cash economy in a substantive way in the 1970s, social relations become more focused on the circulation of goods in the absence of a domestic mode of production or market economy. Hence people activate networks of kin in order to access resources because there is an almost complete detachment from productive activity. Moreover the ability to procure and allocate resources to kin becomes an important basis of a boss's power (see also Macdonald 2000:96-99; Austin-Broos 2003a:125).

The pursuit of allocative power was clearly evident in the operations of the YCC, where one Aboriginal man was able to capture its resources – at least temporarily – despite the very different intentions of the AACM and the DAA. This occurred in the following way. An Aboriginal man, EA, the YCC's Chairman of the Board of Directors and head-stockman dominated the running of the company up to 1975, even though the AACM and DAA controlled its funding. His leadership was achieved through his consistent efforts to have an Aboriginal-run venture established at Ngukurr. He was the primary signatory on applications for a land lease in 1965, 1968 and 1970. Moreover, EA's leadership was grounded in his extensive kin base at Ngukurr and his seniority as a cult organiser. He was, in addition, a regular member of the Station Council (1962-72) and he regularly led the village Christian services (see chapter 4). EA was therefore well positioned to assume control of the company when funding was allocated in 1972, having demonstrated his capacity and right to act in Christian, secular and ritual affairs throughout the 1960s. It must be noted, however, that EA's leadership did not entail the capacity to command others – rather his status depended on his ability to maintain a power base by servicing the needs of kin (see also Cowlshaw 1999:241, 252).

The YCC had two good seasons (1973 and 1974) under EA's control, when it was well resourced with funding and employment opportunities. As Chairman of the YCC, EA had ultimate control of hiring and discipline and could overrule the European manager appointed by the AACM (Thiele 1982:51). EA also had a vehicle at his disposal and could use the YCC's credit arrangements at the store for personal purchases (ibid. 41, 59). He had virtually a monopoly on communications with AACM consultants, solicitors and other government agents who rarely sought to consult with other families

at Ngukurr (ibid. 42, 48). He took sole responsibility for nominating the YCC's shareholders and appointed his brother-in-law as its second Director (ibid. 32, 40, 42). His own relatives (brothers, sons and some male affines) made up the bulk of YCC workers and received award wages and rations (ibid. 32, 35, 39). Neither the core families, then, nor even the shareholding members ever controlled the YCC in equal measure.

I underline here that the YCC's failure to vest control equally in all the families (or even the core ones) at Ngukurr was not a result of EA's proclivities. Rather, EA's control of the YCC is consistent with the way in which resource organisations at Ngukurr operated (and still operate) as a focus for competitive status relations, particularly among Aboriginal men. And as Peterson notes (2005:12), the ready support found for economic and development projects in Aboriginal communities implies no major commitment on their part to the objectives or success of such schemes.

Throughout the 1970s men also competed to control the resources of the Citizens Club, Ngukurr Township Association (an Aboriginal-run Council) and the Housing Association, as these organisations came into existence. They too operated in the same way as the YCC. Individual men from different families utilised them as niches to demonstrate their autonomous status by directing its resources to kin. For example at the time that EA controlled the YCC, the H family controlled the Housing Association at Ngukurr (ibid. 26). In addition, members of the H and A families alternated as Council President during the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, a key position from which each in turn controlled its activities and directed its benefits to kin (Gerritsen 1982a:22). Those in smaller families, in contrast, protected their interests by successfully controlling one business or service delivery niche and keeping it out of the hands of other families. For example the K family successfully maintained a tourist venture to an outstation near their traditional estate (ibid. 22). One of the small Alawa families successfully ran the 'pictures' two nights a week (ibid. 26). The patriclan cores of a number of Mara families were acknowledged as traditional owners in the Limmen Bight Land Claim in the early 1980s (Bern and

Larbalestier 1985). And the patrician cores of a few Ngalakan families were acknowledged as traditional owners of Ngukurr in the Roper Bar Land Claim also in the early 1980s (Aboriginal Land Commissioner 1982).

This feature of individual control is a significant aspect of the way in which competitive status relations play out in contexts where resources are concentrated in relation to one centre. Moreover, once control of a niche has been established competition shifts to ensuring that other resource niches are kept out of the hands of one's rivals. An alternative way to ensure equity is to allow non-Indigenous personnel responsibility for service delivery, replacing them with a new set when sufficient Aboriginal people agree that they have exceeded their authorisation (Myers (1991[1986]:281).

In order to elucidate further the effects of resource concentration and competition at Ngukurr, I outline how other individuals and groups responded to EA's control of the YCC and how he sought to protect his autonomy in turn. In the first instance, senior men of other families (even the shareholding ones) actively withdrew from the YCC, rather than accept a subordinate role in its structure once EA had become its Chairman (Thiele 1982:39, 42). Having protected their autonomy by doing so, they then moved by the end of 1974 to limit the extent of EA's influence in the community. Specifically, 4 families asked the DAA for assistance to start up outstations on traditional country so they could muster cattle independently for the YCC (ibid. 53). Yet other families demanded that the YCC be put under Council control, a move the AACM and EA resisted for different reasons (ibid. 42). From the perspective of AACM the Council was already a focus of conflict among Aborigines, which would be detrimental to the YCC. From EA's point of view Council control of the YCC would usurp his autonomy. Though a number of his relatives were well placed on it, EA was not at this time.

By 1975, EA's control of the YCC was visibly in decline. With the Council now Aboriginal-run and land rights legislation in place, the population at Ngukurr no longer needed to assert a unity of interests in relation to land (Thiele 1982:36). In addition, the AACM and a new European manager had put a brake on spending, reducing the workforce and refusing them and EA use of company vehicles (ibid.

58). In response to this loss of status, EA withdrew from the running of the YCC in 1976, allowing a member of the rival shareholding family (H) to become Director in his place (ibid. 60). To withdraw from the company was not an admission of defeat on EA's part. Rather it signalled that he was not prepared to accept a subordinate role in relation to European control. It also freed EA to be publicly critical of the fact that the European manager dominated the company. He conducted a series of public meetings to propose to the community that the AACM and the European manager be sacked and the YCC put under Council control (ibid. 59). Though EA had resisted Council control previously, it was now his only way to ensure that the company would be Aboriginal-run and not completely in the hands of a rival family. In this move he was widely supported by many at Ngukurr, who similarly wished to protect their autonomy from European intervention.

At the end of 1976, by which time EA had died, the YCC was Aboriginal-run again and utilising the book keeping facilities of the Council (ibid. 62). The YCC was never, however, a 'community' venture. Its control continued to be disputed, now by different branches of the A family (see chapter 2, Diagram 1). Specifically, EA's eldest son, as the new Director of the YCC, sought to run it independently of Council. But he was continually challenged to relinquish it by EA's brother's son in his role as President of the Ngukurr Township Association (ibid.). The YCC ceased operations in late 1978 and its assets were transferred to the Yugul Mangi Resource Centre (YMRC). Set up as an independent body to fund Ngukurr's outstations in 1979, the YMRC became another significant resource niche for demonstrating autonomy in a system of competitive status relations at Ngukurr.

As I have outlined above, centralised resource management does not generate corporate associations among Aboriginal groups or at a community-wide level (see also chapter 2). In other words Ngukurr Aborigines have not opted to invest in an institutional domain of autonomy to mobilise collective action or realise a community form of authority. Rather they invest in building extended families and kin networks through resource acquisition and allocation (Peterson 2005:12; see also Macdonald 2000; Austin-Broos 2003; Smith 2005). This phenomenon of factionalism has been

widely reported and often criticised in the literature on Aboriginal Australia with regard to its impact on the effectiveness and accountability of Indigenous organisations (e.g. Martin 2003:11-12, 2005:196-99; Martin and Finlayson 1996:5; Finlayson 1998; Dodson and Smith 2003:8; Smith 2001:18, 43, 2002:9, 2005:183).

As Merlan notes (1997:2-3), an underlying assumption in much of the literature on Aboriginal Australia is that conflict is endemic to the local and small-scale nature of Indigenous forms of organisation. There is equally the assumption that ‘solidary’ or ‘corporate’ type groupings within the Aboriginal polity are being fragmented and conflict increased as a result of Indigenous engagement with State-linked institutions such as land councils and other corporate bodies (ibid. 3, 13). Merlan’s own view, however, is that the intercultural context in which development and land claims occur transform Aboriginal concepts of attachment to country, often through the demand that the groups involved constitute bounded wholes (ibid. 10-12). This, she argues, is a major factor generating the forms and intensity of conflict evident among Aborigines and between them and resource developers and agencies of the State today (ibid. 1-2, 7, 13).

Martin (2003:10, 2005:192-4) also utilises Merlan’s concept of an intercultural social field to argue that it is no longer relevant to talk in terms of an autonomous Indigenous domain of value and action, particularly with regard to contemporary Aboriginal organisations (see also Hinkson and Smith 2005 - whole edition). Rather Indigenous organisations, being quintessentially intercultural products, form important sites around which Aboriginal values and practices are engaged, contested and transformed (idem. 2003:1-2, 5-6, 2005:187-188, 190, 198). What Martin does not address are the transformations that have occurred to Indigenous patterns of leadership, authority and autonomy that have emerged in the historical processes of Aboriginal encompassment within a developing nation-state. He therefore does not address what implications these transformations have with regard to the way in which governance structures might be improved in Aboriginal

communities.³⁴ Specifically overlooked is the fact that many Aborigines are socially located within an Indigenous domestic moral economy, which makes self-determination initiatives attractive for the possibilities they afford to realise other socialities (Peterson 2005:13). Also overlooked is the difficulty for Aborigines of sustaining values and practices in meaningful form in a context of resource dependency.

Why centralised hierarchies foster a tendency to control rather than co-operation among Aboriginal people is discussed below. I pay particular attention to the difficulties that are involved for them in trying to mediate the form of hierarchy that centralised community management brings into being. I will address these issues through the next evolution in administrative arrangements, which occurred at Ngukurr in 1988.

Tensions In Mediating Hierarchy And Relatedness

When the Northern Territory was granted self-government in 1978 it implemented the *Local Government Act 1978* in an effort to incorporate localities outside its major urban areas (Rowse 1992:60; Sanders 2004:3). Intended to be more flexible than municipal local government, the amended *Local Government Act 1985* enabled Aboriginal communities to utilise some of their own organisational structures for the purposes of community management (Rowse 1992:64; Wolfe 1989:42-4). Hence at Ngukurr in 1988 the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council (YMCGC) was established and divided its population into 7 'tribal'

³⁴ I refer here to the demand made by Martin (2003:9-10, 2005:193-5), and other CAEPR authors, that Indigenous organisations must be made to operate according to a set of objective criteria, with clearly specified rules, regulations and forward-looking charters, if good governance is to be achieved in Aboriginal communities. See also Dodson and Smith (2003:12-15) who specify areas of 'corporate best practice' that need reform in Indigenous and regional governing bodies. They argue that clearly elaborated and enforced rules concerning the roles and responsibilities of Indigenous governing boards, executive management and staff would facilitate organisational accountability and performance. Also see Finlayson (1998:9-10) who argues that 'community organisational accountability' is often too oriented to Aboriginal kin-based obligations rather than constructs of impersonality, creating tensions within Indigenous organisations.

constituencies based on language affiliations between people and country. It chose a 'no-vote' scheme provided for in the legislation by opting to appoint members to council by agreements made between eligible members of specific language groups (Wolfe 1989:66, 98). It also chose the boundary of the area under its administration and some of the functions that would be under its control (ibid. 42-4).

Wolfe (1989:67) in particular argues that the 'no-vote' electoral choice is a cause for concern. Though it can be interpreted as recognising that Aboriginal people utilise a different means to identify leaders, minority interests could be excluded by the practice of reserving seats on council for language groups (ibid. 66-7). Small groups could also be excluded she argues given the extent of the Yugul Mangi boundary, which covers a huge area including large Aboriginal communities, outstations and pastoral excisions (ibid 66). She underlines her point by noting that outstation people were already opposed to control by Ngukurr's council because of what they regarded as inequitable distribution of funding and resources (ibid.). But the major issue with regard to community governance in Wolfe's view is that it seeks to enhance managerial efficiency by subsuming all resource agencies under one centralised authority (ibid 69-70). It tends therefore to 'concentrate power, prestige and ... assets' in the council and concomitantly makes fewer roles available to Aborigines in the allocation of resources (ibid.).

Wolfe draws attention to the fact that centralised community management undermines co-operation between Aboriginal groups in the interests of efficiency (ibid. 70). I would also note that this dynamic was already in evidence prior to the existence of the YMCGC. I therefore argue that the organisational logic of centralised management promotes incipient factionalism among Aboriginal groups — a situation that is not unique to Indigenous Australians being premised on the scarcity of resources (Nicholas 1965).³⁵ The distinctive dynamics of factionalism at Ngukurr, since the 1970s,

³⁵ I am obliged to Diane Austin-Broos for directing my attention to the work of Nicholas (1965) on factionalism. His comparative analysis of this phenomenon in several different settings leads him to the view that factionalism is not a phase in the transition from an indigenous political structure to an introduced one. Rather the form it takes is 'strongly affected by the previous system' of institutionalised conflicts and constitutions of leadership (ibid. 58). Moreover the form conflict and

pertains then to the way in which centralised hierarchies render ineffective forms of interdependence and hierarchy premised on reciprocity and nurturance.

This proposal is borne out by the fact that the YMCGC scheme retained three characteristics also evident in its Aboriginal-run predecessor, the Ngukurr Township Association (NTA). According to Bern (1990:17), a European employed as Town Clerk retained control of the YMCGC's administration particularly with regard to budgets and priority setting. Council membership continued to be dominated by men and competition for leadership continued to alternate between the leading men of two prominent families (ibid). Hence the organisation of the YMCGC in terms of language-based constituencies had little discernible effect on the pattern of competition at Ngukurr. Rivalry between leaders of families continued as each sought to secure an unassailable position from which to control the allocation of resources to kin. The oscillation between co-operation and control, which invigorates competitive status relations among men in the performance of ceremonies (or previously Christian village services), is not therefore a feature of community management (see chapter 4). Rather sites of performance cannot be proliferated when towns such as Ngukurr are a single source of resources, which are controlled by government structures external to them. As a corollary, fewer Aborigines can have a role in the distribution of resources and community organisations become a site for demonstrating pre-eminence in relation to one place. There has, moreover, been little discernible effect on this pattern of competition at Ngukurr through the implementation of the 'administrative clan system' as senior men continue to dominate Council via leadership of CDEP 'clans' (see chapter 2).

Yet there is a structural equivalent between sites of performance and resource niches. This is due to the way in which Aboriginal people differentiate social space in terms of relatedness. In this regard rhizomic organisation generates relatively stable forms of Aboriginal association such as patronymic families and contextually

leadership takes in the next generation will also be influenced largely by the present factional system (ibid.).

relevant kin networks, the former of which are most implicated in resource politics at Ngukurr (see chapter 2).

As discussed in detail in chapter 2, a crucial dynamic that brings patronymic families into being is the capacity of male bosses to engage in competitive status relations with each other and to direct the benefits of competition to kin (see also Austin-Broos 2003). They do so by differentiating resource niches as kin-locales, utilising them to increase their own and their relative's status. This dynamic also enhances reciprocal relations within families, as bosses recruit followers to their mobs through their capacity to provision them with jobs, funds and other goods (Gerritsen 1982a:18, 25, 31). Followers in turn support their boss by backing his initiatives in an effort to expand his re-distributive capacities. Hence bosses and patronymic families (or lines within them) circumvent centralised hierarchy in order to protect their autonomous interests in relation to a place. Moreover groups form temporary coalitions with other each to challenge the control of other families. A brief alliance between the A and PZ families (the latter being one of the traditional owners of Ngukurr) occurred in the mid 1980s as both sought to wrest control of the council away from the H family (Gerritsen 1982b:68). Nevertheless, the PZ and other traditional owning families have also emerged as a prominent group in their own right in Ngukurr's political life. Ironically then it is bosses who operate as a force for (a limited) unity at Ngukurr, rather than collective action being mobilised through organisations such as the NTA or the YMCGC.

This politics of factionalism however is problematic for several reasons, not least of which is a decline in co-operation between Aboriginal groups. Competition is more prevalent and does not operate as a force for equality, as some families have clearly been more successful in dominating resource allocation in their communities than others (see Gerritsen 1982a, 1982b).³⁶ Yet as Gerritsen (1982a:31) so rightly points out, autonomy secured by these means is a consequence of the rational pursuit

³⁶ See also Smith and Finlayson (1997) on the forms of conflict generated through land claims. See in particular Smith's account (1997:102) of the way in which some native title parties, to the disadvantage of other claimants, can secure personal financial benefits.

of self-interest in contexts where resources are scarce and originate from agencies external to communities. It is to the ways in which autonomy is now configured in this context that I address my final remarks.

Autonomy in a context of resource dependency

Self-management initiatives, unlike previous interventions into Aboriginal lives, introduced an explicit focus on issues of autonomy paradoxically at a time when the economic dependency of Aborigines was complete. The content of autonomy was then and continues to be premised on its incorporation in organisations, which is seen to mobilise collective action and facilitate Aboriginal self-determination. Though the co-opting of imputed Aboriginal social constructs such as ‘tribe’ and ‘clan’ is seen to facilitate community management, these ‘units’ have not operated successfully as constituencies within Ngukurr. This is due to the fact that such units do not reflect Aboriginal dynamics of lateral association wherein kin networks continually transcend an administrative demand that groups be fixed and finite. Neither does the ‘CDEP clan system’ encompass the orientations and practices of the Aboriginal population at Ngukurr, though an administrative apparatus has sought to subsume all secular community facilities within this centralised hierarchy (see chapter 2).

Rather Ngukurr Aborigines are oriented to fulfilling the demands of an Indigenous domestic moral economy in the absence of a domestic or market mode of production (Peterson 2005:11-12; see also Austin-Broos 2003). Hence reciprocity becomes a central structuring factor in economic activity, to the extent that the circulation of goods and services is primary in the production and reproduction of social relations (Peterson 2005:12). These dynamics, as Peterson notes, have two interrelated aspects, which cannot be understood apart from each other (ibid. 14). One aspect relates to the reproduction of relations internal to an Indigenous social order and the other relates to the asymmetrical relations between it and the encapsulating society (ibid. 14, fn9 p17).

This latter aspect was most clearly evident in the case of the strike, where Aboriginal people attempted to apply the relations of an Indigenous domestic moral economy to their new relations with Welfare branch. In doing so they utilised their own modes of differentiation and prestige, premised on the interpretation of work as constitutive of bringing a social group and place into being. Hence they were disposed to define the role of government as the recipient of Aboriginal work, rather than interpret dependency as a subordinate condition. But the attempt to encompass government agents within Aboriginal practices of 'reciprocal helping' was not successful. Rather the demand that Aborigines realise a 'community' form of autonomy through centralised management brought two social orders with different systems of prestige into conflict with each other. The asymmetry of power between these orders entailed (and continues to entail) a major struggle for Aboriginal people to sustain values and practices in meaningful form. Aborigines could not invest their roles as workers with value commensurate with the status of traditional owner-manager associations nor could they sustain a unity of interests, as it compromised the autonomy of individuals and groups to do so.

There was nevertheless wide spread support among Ngukurr Aborigines for the YCC as a community enterprise, despite the difficulties entailed in sustaining unity. Its popularity was due to the fact that it was one of the first organisations at Ngukurr that had resources, which were in significant part in Aboriginal control. Hence the YCC, like other resource organisations, was attractive for the possibilities it afforded to realise a kin-based sociality. It was also a focus of competition, particularly among men, for the possibilities it afforded to realise status through allocating resource to kin. Neither the YCC nor other resource organisations have ever succeeded in bringing an institutional domain of autonomy into being at Ngukurr. In other words individuals and families seek to affirm their standing by controlling resource niches in order to protect and demonstrate their autonomy in relation to a place. If they cannot do so then individuals and families withdraw from it, rather than accept a subordinate role in its management.

The form of autonomy that withdrawal and control protects does not reproduce the centralised hierarchies of corporate management structures. Nor does

it reproduce a relational form of authority premised on ritual and service exchange, which was sustained both traditionally and under a mission regime (see chapter 4). Rather autonomy as a status realised through reciprocal help and authority as a form of relatedness realised through ritual enactment must be contravened where prestige is premised on the independent control of a resource niche. This arises from the fact that autonomy as a status realised through independent niche control impacts on the reproduction of a range of Aboriginal values and meanings. Specifically distinctions of status pertaining to leadership are altered when premised on the affirmation of standing in relation to one centre, which in turn alters the relations between that category and others (see Sahlins 1985:138). The functional values now attaching to 'boss' and 'worker' in particular are no longer interpreted as entailing equivalence, of the sort generated between a ritual manager and an owner (see chapter 4 of this work). Nor is the category 'worker' invested with the same value that it had under a mission regime, when Aborigines interpreted their position as being 'leaders on the working side' of a relationship with missionaries (ibid.).

These changes of interpretation emerge because the affirmation of standing at a place does not entail the differentiation or interdependence that can obtain between owners and managers who reciprocally work for each other's sites on each other's country. Such a system, occurring throughout a region of ritual estates with multiple sacred sites, provides manifold opportunities for Aboriginal people to embody distinct statuses and values in different times and places. It supports, moreover, transfers of authority among ritual seniors and the autonomy of group-centred networks across a region, through their enactment of differentiated connections to varied sites. This system therefore mediates the tension between egalitarianism and hierarchy, by rendering the latter as a capacity grounded in senior personnel to build the autonomy of junior kin. Autonomy and authority are thereby realised as nurturance and relatedness respectively, being grounded in reciprocal transactions that enable a transition from dependency to responsibility. The reciprocity entailed in being Aboriginal leaders on the working side of a relationship with missionaries or in the traditional owner-manager form of land relations is not therefore realised through centralised management or independent control of a resource niche.

Control of a resource niche does enhance a senior man's personal power at a place, making him 'boss' for a 'mob' or family. It does not, however, realise a 'community' form of authority as it contradicts both the form and value of extensive sociality rendered as relatedness. Nor do bosses realise any significant authority over the mobs they provision. Though they demonstrate their status by directing resources to kin they are in the first instance fulfilling the demands that are expected to occur among relatives (see also Collman 1988:148). Provisioning of this sort does not necessarily grant to others the requisite opportunities to become fully equal, a feature that is a necessity for authority to be legitimately expressed among Aborigines (see Myers 1991[1986:222-4). A boss now providing resources to kin does not necessarily transform their situation of dependency by increasing their capacity to take responsibility for others. Bosses then often find themselves provisioning kin who will not in turn 'work for' them (Austin-Broos 2003a:129). And they find themselves contravening different sets of values. Relatives will regard them as 'hard' or 'selfish' if they act in an impartial manner. Yet when they do affirm kinship over community they will be accused of 'cheating,' having contravened both the value of extensive relatedness and the ideal of equality between groups.

In short, the values attaching to the categories of boss and worker are markedly ambiguous for Aboriginal people at Ngukurr. On the one hand, work is positively valued when it is associated with the provisioning that bosses do for kin as it demonstrates their autonomous status. Such status, however, realises little authority both within and between groups. In the latter instance families contest resource control by others, as it conflicts with the reproduction of social relations associated with an egalitarian autonomy (Peterson 2005:12). On the other hand, work is negatively valued when it is associated with a minor or subordinate role, one that does not guarantee a fully autonomous status. Rejecting such a position, a strategy that men pursuing pre-eminence consistently utilise, is then the only means of transcending the social disjunction between boss and worker.

The form of autonomy that is produced through controlling a resource niche is problematic for the following reasons. It is not an equivalent of the form of autonomy

described in chapter 2 of this thesis, where its development is a concomitant of reciprocal interactions with others. Though premised on contributions made to kin, its unidirectional form does not entail increasing the capacity for reciprocal exchange, nor provide an experience of a 'continual progression toward autonomy' (Myers 1991[1986]:240). The affirmation of standing in relation to one centre produces asymmetry in social relations, giving autonomy a highly ambiguous value as other values and categories cannot be brought into meaningful relation with each other. Asymmetry in social relations has then transformed Aboriginal dynamics of rhizomic organisation to the extent that 'vertical control' predominates as a basis for status in resource politics (cf. chapter 4). There is concomitantly less co-operation between groups whose interests are more often rival rather than common in this context (see also Nicholas 1965:46).

Moreover the constitution of leadership through resource control does not realise authority in a form that can be exercised over the collective working capacity of individuals at Ngukurr or in a form that supports a continuing representative legitimacy for its population. As stated earlier, Aboriginal people have not opted to invest in an institutional domain of autonomy to mobilise collective action or realise a community form of authority. This phenomenon is frequently interpreted, Rowse notes (2002:207), as indicative of an Aboriginal incapacity to engage in practices of self-determination or a rejection of the tools that have been presented to them to achieve it. Both interpretations ignore the fact that Aboriginal motivations are not necessarily encompassed within the constitutional objectives of organisations (e.g. statistical equality, accountability and civic engagement) designed to facilitate Indigenous self-determination (see also Peterson 2005).

It is therefore important to explore those contexts wherein Aboriginal aspirations are expressed and experienced in order to delineate the kinds of activities that Aborigines do engage in and the forms of value and status that these activities sustain. Already explored in chapter 2 are the ways in which sociality and autonomy are channelled in the direction of relatedness through reciprocal interactions with kin, focused on domestic and public spaces. What was not pursued but of equal importance is the general

aspiration of *gudbinji* that Aborigines at Ngukurr pursue through reciprocal exchange and through which they reproduce and manage social relations. Also not pursued were the authorising processes operating in contexts beyond resource politics that support an experience of *gudbinji* and the constitution of autonomy as a progressive status realised through nurturance. Further questions attending this exploration are: What constitutions of leadership are supported at Ngukurr whereby an authorising constituency of people can be mobilised to validate particular actions? Do these authorising processes and constitutions of leadership reveal further transformations in Aboriginal dynamics of organisation, particularly with regard to forms of status and reciprocity?

Chapters 6 and 7 pursue these themes in the domain of Christianity, as Fellowship and Church operate as distinct social orders due to the way in which each employs forms of rhizome and centralised hierarchy (respectively) as their organising logics. Moreover this juxtaposition allows for an account of Indigenous dynamics of sociality that are brought to bear on Fellowship meetings and Church funerals, which reveals both the centrality of reciprocity in the reproduction of social relations and its contemporary forms.³⁷

Summary

This chapter has described the transition from a mission to bureaucratic regime at Ngukurr, when a new field of political relationships with government emerged during the 1970s. The chapter has elucidated how two social orders with different modes of value creation were brought into conflict when government-directed initiatives sought to bring into being a self-managing ‘community.’

Both the strike at Ngukurr and the establishment of the YCC exemplified the way in which conflicts pertaining to control and forms of value emerged from initiatives designed to facilitate the emergence of an institutional domain of

³⁷ Church services are conducted alongside traditional mortuary rite for the majority of funerals at Ngukurr, irrespective of whether the deceased or family of the deceased identify as Christian. Funerals bring together then both Christian and non-Christian Aborigines in a joint undertaking and constitutes an important locus for the expression of intra-Aboriginal conflicts and motivations.

autonomy. A significant failure of the strike, I have argued, was its inability to define the role of government as a recipient of Aboriginal action. Hence Aboriginal modes of differentiation and prestige, premised on the interpretation of work as constitutive of bringing a social group and place into being, were not endorsed. Rather dependency on an externally funded administrative-economic apparatus came to signify a subordinate condition, promoting factionalism as a means of localising control over community resources.

These dynamics pertaining to control and conflicting forms of value are in marked contrast to those operating during the mission regime. As I have shown in chapter 3, the attempt to locate Aboriginal people within a hierarchy of colonial relations through settlement and agriculture was not particularly successful in orienting Aborigines to realise autonomy as a capacity for self-sufficiency. The disinclination of Aborigines to take up permanent residence, the frequent use of 'bush-breaks' by the mission and the instability of its social hierarchy served to affirm an Aboriginal predisposition to realise sociality through spatiality. Hence an Aboriginal autonomy of life in group-centred and overlapping networks of kin was supported in the course of reciprocal visiting and the integrated activities of hunter-gathering and ritual.

I have also shown in chapter 4, that efforts to orient Aboriginal people to realise autonomy as a capacity for economic self-sufficiency during the assimilation era were similarly unsuccessful. Missionaries gave Church life a heightened significance due to the fact that it had no independent economic base to support a wage system and to inculcate in Aborigines the economic values of white society. Hence Aborigines were disposed to interpret the mission as a site of performance, and evangelism as the activity that supported it. Aborigines were, by taking up the tasks of evangelism, defining the mission as dependent on their action, while they honoured their obligations to the missionaries who 'looked after' them. This reciprocity continued to be enacted when Aboriginal men took up the task of regularly staging Christian services beyond the context of the church. This incorporation of Christianity into Aboriginal modes of organisation and exchange

enabled Aboriginal men to constitute themselves as the new co-custodians of gospel-service and give themselves an equivalent status to missionaries (as ‘leaders on the working side’). And it was also the means by which related clusters of patrifilial groups demonstrated their autonomy and authority to act for a place and people.

The nexus of reciprocal relationships premised on ‘helping’ could not be sustained in the context of a community understood as an economic actor. In the first instance, this focus on collective action did not jell with attempts to promote autonomy, as self-sufficiency, among individuals and families. In the second instance, the YCC and its resources served to heighten rivalries between families rather than promote co-operative action. As a corollary, a new pattern of status has emerged premised on the differentiation of resource niches as independent kin-locals and the allocative power of ‘bosses’ (usually men) to redistribute resources to kin. This in turn has given the categories of ‘boss’ and ‘worker’ new functional values that no longer entail equivalence and reciprocity. They have become instead socially disjunctive positions. And because bosses now contravene some values of autonomy – when they attempt to mediate the different demands of kinship and community – their expressions of authority are often deemed to be illegitimate. The implications for community governance are then significant, given the convergence of governance and economic functions in the Ngukurr CDEP ‘clan system’. Though the administrative clan system pervades a good deal of Ngukurr’s political and public life, it does not reflect the orientations and attitudes of the majority Aboriginal population.

A shift to the domain of Christian practice underlines these conclusions and provides a point from which to explore the relevant dynamics of sociality that Aboriginal people bring to a public space. Chapter 6 pursues this account – taking as its focus the way in which nightly Fellowship meetings operate as a kin-locale to authorise that form of autonomy realised through relatedness. Of additional interest is the extent to which constitutions of leadership at Fellowship reveal transformations in Aboriginal dynamics of organisation, particularly with regard to forms of prestige and reciprocity.

CHAPTER 6:

FELLOWSHIP, PERFORMANCE AND *GUDBINJI*

This chapter provides an account of Christian Fellowship services at Ngukurr, where activity is focused on public space beyond the context of patronymic families and residential groups. Open-air meetings are conducted in the centre of town on a nightly basis, where participants enact their relatedness with God and each other in order to realise *gudbinji* (happiness, well-being). Participants are concerned to render sociality as relatedness through reciprocal interaction; a phenomenon discussed in chapter 2 in relation to women's basketball competitions and others sorts of engagements with kin.

A major part of this chapter considers the way in which participants bring Indigenous dynamics of sociality to bear on each meeting's form. The basis upon which participants engage in Fellowship activities reflects a rhizomic organising logic, where sociality is extended through repeated co-operation with others in an order of performance. Hence participants make reciprocal performances of song repertoires at nightly meetings central to their practice, utilising them to negotiate and re-negotiate their roles and standing through regular displays of Christian 'messages.' It is by these means that Fellowship participants sustain the appearance that people are related and that public life involves the same mutuality as occurs in domestic relations.

A second theme of the chapter explores the way in which autonomy is configured as a capacity for nurturant action through enacting relatedness with God and kin – all of whom are mutually entailed in constituting each other's well-being. In this respect Fellowship participants utilise the evangelical tradition of adult witness to proliferate roles and niches through which they can demonstrate their expertise and capacity to act for others. And it is by these means that Fellowship operates as a kin-locale, deflecting the hierarchy of church organisation and its institutionally legitimised order of authority.

By addressing these aspects of meetings the chapter ascertains how Fellowship operates as a different social order to the church and other European-derived hierarchies. This is evident from the way in which Fellowship participants do not render autonomy as a capacity for political or moral self-sufficiency – characteristic of self-management initiatives pursued by Australian governments and by Christian organisations such as the Anglican Church and CMS. Also discussed is the way in which rhizomic organisation is transformed through Fellowship.

I first outline how Christianity is positioned relative to other activities and forms of organisation at Ngukurr.

Christianity In The Context Of Ngukurr

Christianity is widely accepted at Ngukurr as an important Aboriginal tradition, even though it is acknowledged that missionaries brought this knowledge to Arnhem Land. Though Aborigines generally do not perceive themselves to be born into a Christian world, they nevertheless regard ‘gospel wei’ or ‘bible wei’ as local custom premised on their long history of engagement with a mission regime (60 years). This acceptance of ‘gospel wei’ as local custom is evident not only among Aboriginal Christians but also among non-Christian Aborigines at Ngukurr. For example, Church services are conducted alongside traditional mortuary rite for the majority of funerals, irrespective of whether the deceased or family of the deceased identify as Christian.¹ It is taken for granted that the Aboriginal minister at Ngukurr has a role to play in relation to death.² Moreover many Aborigines I engaged with professed a belief in God and Jesus Christ, as they had been taught about Christianity from kin, even if they did not claim a Christian identity. They viewed Christianity as capable of providing a viable moral order akin to Aboriginal

¹ Only one funeral out of twenty during the time of my fieldwork did not have a Church service. The family observed only traditional mortuary rites, although the minister did go to the graveside to say prayers for the deceased infant.

² I refer to the Aboriginal parish priest at Ngukurr as ‘the minister’ in keeping with local custom, although the Anglican tradition refers to its second order of ministry as priests, vicars or rectors.

‘law,’ despite the fact that the tradition originated with *mununga* (whites).³ In this respect, Christianity is seen to provide a ‘road’ or ‘way’ that is similarly imparted by kin or in ceremony. It is frequently proposed by many Aboriginal people that initiation ceremonies in particular teach youth the same moral code that is to be found in the Ten Commandments.

As local custom, however, Christianity is kept distinct from traditional ceremony and mortuary rite. The minister informed me that he and other senior men agreed during the 1970s to keep Church services and mortuary rites separate. Though traditional rites are performed both before and after the Church service, they stop at the edge of the Church grounds where the coffin is divested of its ritual paraphernalia (see chapter 7). Aborigines moreover do not necessarily take up an exclusive commitment to Christianity to the point where they reject *blekbala kalja* (Aboriginal culture). Not only are the kinship and subsection systems considered to provide ‘good law’ by specifying proper relations among people, Aboriginal languages are also valued and used for the production of Fellowship songs. Moreover, it is generally the case that being a good relative mediates people’s actions to the extent that Aboriginal Christians support sons, brothers, grandsons and so on by playing their part in ceremony and its attendant negotiations when initiation and mortuary rites involve their kin.⁴ Hence Christianity and *blekbala kalja* are both widely respected traditions at Ngukurr.

³ Aboriginal ‘law’ and culture are not defined locally as religion; they are understood as providing a system for social order and the means of learning about one’s identity in relation to others and in relation to different contexts and activities.

⁴ A case in point during my fieldwork relates to the minister who took part in negotiations about the forthcoming initiation of his grandsons even though he had openly stated at various times that he did not ‘involve’ himself ‘in ceremony’ anymore. Another case concerned a Christian mother I knew who was unwilling to deny her sons the opportunity to extend relatedness in a northern Arnhem group who wished to circumcise them. Despite the fact that she gave priority to a relationship with God in her own life and expressed some ambivalence about having her sons circumcised she nevertheless participated in the event in order to enable their transition to adulthood. Her decision came after a good deal of negotiation with her family, who wished the event to occur and who were also Fellowship members.

Institutional authorities at Ngukurr also respect Christianity and *blekbala kalja* as important local practices. For example at the quarterly courts at Ngukurr all defendants I have heard take the oath on the bible rather than swear on their honour to tell the truth. Lawyers often plead for a more lenient sentence, offering the fact that a defendant has sought to correct unlawful behaviour by taking up Fellowship and other Christian activities. The court tends to accept such statements as indicative of a person's willingness to take responsibility for their actions. Magistrates too endorse kinship and bush living, ordering youth offenders to accompany a senior relative to an outstation so they can be kept away from further trouble. The magistrate who consistently did this also impressed on all offending male youth that they learn about their countries and ceremonies during these times. Moreover police endorse self-help among kin by not intervening when seniors occasionally publicly flog youths for property damage.

Blekbala kalja is supported at the Ngukurr Community Education Centre (CEC). Though it has introduced a cultural studies unit to the curriculum, taking children on bush excursions and teaching Aboriginal languages, Christian education forms no part of the school program. The school did on occasion, however, accommodate visits by Aboriginal Christians to address children's improper behaviour during my fieldwork. One such visit by Fellowship members was prompted by the fact that children had taken up a style of swearing using kin terminology, to which adult Christians felt they should respond. The Yugul Mangi Community Government Council (YMCGC) as discussed in chapter 2, also accommodates some principles of Aboriginal kin-land based relations for the purposes of community management. Though it recognises the importance of Christianity at Ngukurr it does not, as a government funded secular institution, officially support any religion or church. The Council has, however, accommodated Christian activities, building the open-air stage in Japanma Park where nightly Fellowship meetings are held. The structure is available for any community activity at Ngukurr. Although the brightly lit sign over it, which declares '*Jisas im laibala*' (Jesus is alive), leaves no doubt in anyone's mind what activities are principally pursued there.

Christianity at Ngukurr has grown into the space assigned to it by Aboriginal people, being respected but kept distinct from traditional rite. It is, moreover, assigned to the institutional space termed religious within the existing political and juridical structures of Australia. It has therefore no bearing on administrative arrangements or other political and legal authorities, being a private practice whose ‘canons of conduct’ must not ‘offend against the ordinary laws’ of Australia.⁵ Freedom of religious practice, enshrined in Section 116 of the 1900 Act to constitute the Commonwealth of Australia, parallels the way in which cultural expression is also endorsed as a fundamental right under the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cwlth). It too occupies an institutional space that is subordinate to the ordinary laws of Australia, where ‘customs’ must not be ‘so repugnant to natural justice, equity and good conscience’ that they cannot be given juridical sanction (cited in Povinelli, 2002:164).

Aboriginal people at Ngukurr are well aware that *blekbala kalja* is always subordinate to *mununga* law and they frequently complain of the fact. Some also regard Christianity as yet another *mununga* constraint on *kalja*. The frustration of trying to reconcile different ways was poignantly expressed in one man’s comment to me that ‘no one is perfect but we Aborigines gotta be really really good — we can’t break any law.’ Despite such feelings expressed by a man who was once a layreader for the church, Christianity has continued to be practised at Ngukurr during the last 30 years of secular administration. In the following I outline how an Indigenous Church has been supported, paying particular attention to the way in which Fellowship has also been encouraged as a distinctively Aboriginal form of Christian expression.

⁵ The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) website provides this definition. See <abs.gov.au/high_court_of_Australia/definition_of_religion>.

The development of an Indigenous Church

Christian practice continues today at Ngukurr, having been maintained by Aborigines after the withdrawal of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) from settlement administration in 1968. CMS and the Anglican Church have continued to support Christian life at Ngukurr to the present. Both they and other religious organisations, however, have sought new ways to work with Aborigines as a result of self-determination initiatives in Australia since 1972 and the shift to decolonisation processes globally since the 1960s. A major influence for this direction came from the Catholic Church's proposal, emerging from the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), that revelation and the seeds for salvation existed in non-Christian traditions and could be a preparation for the Gospel. Mainstream Christian organisations have also been influenced by the growth of Indigenous Christian Churches in Asian and African contexts, which have criticised the missionary practice of dictating how the Gospel be received and understood by converts (Ward and Stanley 2000:2-3, 10). As a result both the Anglican Church and CMS now hold to the view that non-Christian cultures can provide some useful elements for transmitting the Gospel.⁶ They have, in addition, sought to support the development of an Indigenous Church at Ngukurr and in other Arnhem Land communities. In order to bring a self-managing Indigenous Church into being, CMS and the Anglican Church have pursued new ways of promoting Christian leadership among Aborigines. They have also

⁶ It must be noted that a good deal of conservatism still exists within many mainstream Christian churches and mission organisations who maintain that many elements of non-Christian cultures do not offer a valid path to salvation (see for example Thompson 1980; Bos 1980 and 1981; Carrington 1985; Rosendale 1989 all published as Nungalinya Occasional Bulletins). They speak in terms of the bondage in other cultural systems, which through their emphasis on the ritual expiation of demonic and divine forces keep people enslaved by tradition (see especially Thompson 1980; Bos 1980). But equally modern culture and its emphasis on material success are not seen to be capable of supplying the necessary ingredients for real liberation and a real expression of identity under God.

contributed to the work of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), who pioneered Bible translation into Kriol in Australia at Ngukurr.⁷

The training of Aboriginal clergy had not been addressed particularly well during the mission regime. This was due to the fact that the Anglican Church expected candidates to undergo six years of seminary training and examination within an educated Western rectory model before ordination (Harris 1990:857-8; 1998:79-80). They did, however, alter these requirements during the 1970s, giving seven Arnhem Land men the opportunity to undertake a six-month training course in ministry.⁸ Only one, however, was ordained in 1973 and he was from Ngukurr. His dedication to Christian activities during CMS's regime, particularly MT's involvement in the cattle-station ministry and the Aboriginal-run village services, made him a likely candidate for ordination (see chapter 4). It also established him among the Ngukurr population as a leader in Christian matters.⁹ He has been the incumbent priest of Ngukurr parish since 1973 and was made a canon of the Anglican Cathedral at Darwin in 2000.

The Anglican Church altered training requirements again in the 1980s, as no further ordinations had occurred among Aboriginal people. It became apparent at a conference held with the bishop of the Northern Territory at Numbulwar (formerly

⁷ Ngukurr was chosen as the best site in which to develop a Kriol orthography, grammar and lexicon in 1973. It was considered the best site for this work because of the long engagement between Aborigines and Europeans in the Roper region. The gradual spread of Pidgin English through the mission, cattle stations and army camps during World War II give a five-generation time-depth to the growth of Kriol in the region (Harris 1998). The Bible Translation Program got underway in the 1980s, and with the support of the Bible Society the *Holi Baibul* (a complete New Testament with some of the Old Testament) was published in 1991. The Kriol Bible Translation Program was coordinated from Ngukurr by two CMS missionaries from 1991 to 2005.

⁸ Prior to 1973 one Anglican priest was ordained at Thursday Island in 1970, and two men were made deacons in Western Australia: one in 1925 and the other in 1969 (Harris 1990:857-60).

⁹ MT also attained the respect of senior Aboriginal men at Ngukurr for 'going through' all the relevant traditional initiations for a male, which has been crucial to his acceptance locally as a leader for the Church and in many matters concerning the community.

Rose River Mission) in 1983 that there was a lack of agreement between what the Anglican Church, CMS and Aborigines recognised as leadership. In some Arnhem Land communities it was women who had sustained a Christian ministry in the absence of a priest after the withdrawal of CMS from administration. And in others there were still non-Indigenous chaplains running the church. Aboriginal people wanted those who had emerged as Christian leaders within their own populations to be ordained (Harris 1998:79-80). It was agreed that through a series of short-term courses at Nungalinya College (Darwin), founded in 1973 in part to train Aboriginal and Islander peoples for church leadership, this could be achieved.¹⁰ Two women from Ngukurr were ordained as deaconesses in 1984 (both alive but retired at present) and three men (two from Groote Eylandt and one from Numbulwar) were ordained as priests in 1985 (Harris 1990:860-1).¹¹

The indigenisation of St. Matthew's Church at Ngukurr has been successful. It is self-supporting, raising revenue by renting rectory accommodation to visitors to Ngukurr and through raising funds from the voluntary donations of its own and allied Protestant congregations in the south. It is a parish within the Anglican diocese of the Northern Territory to which it pays an annual contribution as laid down by that body. St. Matthew's Church is a bona fide Aboriginal organisation, having its own council of local Aboriginal members, and has received funds from ATSIC for community resources such as the church bus (see chapter 7 for further discussion of the church).

¹⁰ Nungalinya College is an interdenominational Christian organisation based on a partnership initially formed between Anglican and Uniting Churches. Subsequently the Catholic Church became a member of the venture. It provides to Aboriginal and Islander people accredited training courses in theology, ministry and church leadership though it is not the sole avenue to ordination or church leadership.

¹¹ These ordinations replaced non-Indigenous chaplains working in Arnhem communities that had previously been CMS missions. Two of these men died in the 1990s and a third has not been active in ministry for some years due to ill health. There have been three further ordinations of Aboriginal men, which occurred in 1988, 1989 and 2003 (www.northernterritory.anglican.org). They minister at Nungalinya College, Oenpelli and Numbulwar respectively.

Christian expression at Ngukurr is largely consistent with a conservative Anglican tradition and specifically the low-church evangelicalism of CMS. More emphasis is placed on bible interpretation and prayer, although the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist are also important. More emphasis is also placed on adult witness, to the extent that it is not common practice to have children baptised at Ngukurr.¹² This feature of evangelical practice is pivotal to the way in which Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr configure autonomy as a progressive status realised through nurturant action, which is discussed in detail below.

The tradition of confirming adults in the faith after proper instruction, allowing them to receive the Eucharist for the first time, is also maintained. It is generally the case at Ngukurr that adult candidates (teenage and above) are baptised and confirmed usually within a two-day period, concluding with a Eucharist service. It is difficult to give an accurate total for the number of Christians living at Ngukurr from the *Baptism and Confirmation Register* of St. Matthew's Church. Ngukurr teenagers, many of whom are educated at Kormilda College (Darwin) or Slade College (Qld), often receive baptism and confirmation while at high school but are not recorded in the local register. Aboriginal men also are often exposed to evangelical activities within the prison system and will maintain a Christian identification when they return to Ngukurr. I can estimate conservatively, nevertheless, that at least half the adult population still living have been baptised and confirmed (approx. 300).¹³ Approximately one third of them entered into Christianity between 1970 and 2000 (baptism 114 and confirmation 105). But it is more significant, in my view, that half of these baptisms and confirmations occurred during the 1990s (baptism 64 and confirmation 49).

¹² The rate of child baptism has dropped since the 1970s at Ngukurr. Between 1970 and 1999 only 12 children have been baptised whereas 105 adults have received both baptism and confirmation during this time. This is in marked contrast to the period 1945-1969 where the high baptism rate (162) was predominantly of children (116). The confirmation rate of adults for 1945-69 was only slightly lower (94) than in recent years. See footnote 13 below for sources.

¹³ Figures are based on a cross reference of three sources. These are the *Baptism and Confirmation Register* of St. Matthew's Church and its *Births, Deaths and Marriages Register* in addition to the genealogical data collected from families living at Ngukurr during 1999-2000.

In keeping with the spirit of self-determination initiatives, CMS and the Anglican Church have also sought to support Aboriginal forms of Christian expression. In this regard they recognise the widespread popularity of Fellowship meetings in Arnhem Land communities and acknowledge their importance to Aborigines. For example, all visiting dignitaries from both these organisations did attend Fellowship meetings at Ngukurr during the course of my fieldwork. Moreover they were invited by Aboriginal people to ‘give a message’ at these services (and did so), rather than at the church. Neither have CMS or the Anglican Church sought to impose their liturgical forms on Fellowship meetings. Though the Anglican Church has suggested that Eucharist services could be incorporated into the Fellowship form, Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr have chosen not to do so (see also Sandefur 1998:292).¹⁴ Nor have CMS and the Anglican Church sought to oppose what Aboriginal Christians do include at Fellowship meetings. For example, faith healing through the laying-on of hands, though not an Anglican tradition (whether evangelical or high-church), is a popular feature of Fellowship nights. The Anglican Church has supported this feature of Aboriginal Christian expression by giving permission to local clergy to consecrate their own oil for anointing (ibid. 135).

The spread of Fellowship meetings and faith healing throughout Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory is often attributed to the Elcho Island Christian Revival of 1979 (e.g. Bos 1988; Sandefur 1998).¹⁵ Led by the Rev.

¹⁴ I have been unable to ascertain why this decision was taken, but it may reflect both the lack of emphasis on Eucharist services during the mission regime and the emphasis that has always been placed on singing and prayer at the church and at Aboriginal-run camp and village services. Eucharist services were not a marked feature of church life during the mission regime because missionaries at Roper River were not always ordained priests. Many CMS recruits for North Australia had difficulty fulfilling the same training requirements for ordination as their high-church counterparts. In order to ‘solve the problem of providing the sacraments on CMS missions’ specifically in North Australia (Harris 1998:125), the Anglican Church waived some criteria and ordained a number of missionaries who had given long service on CMS missions in Arnhem Land. It was not the rule however for these ordained men to minister to non-Indigenous congregations after their mission had ended, just as it had been for missionaries returning from overseas service in the 19th century (Harris 1998:124).

¹⁵ This revival should not be confused with the Elcho ‘adjustment movement’ of 1957, which has been interpreted by anthropologists, especially Ronald Berndt (1962:23-5), as a local attempt to reconcile

Djiniyini Gondarra, a local Yolngu Methodist minister, the revival utilised some Pentecostal forms of religious expression such as faith healing and visions and made nightly singing sessions at Fellowship meetings central to its practice. Christian leaders at Elcho saw themselves as having a mandate to bring Christianity to the rest of Australia (McIntosh 1997:278-80), and the 'Black Crusade' as it became known spread from the Northern Territory to Western Australia (Bos 1988:426). Though Ngukurr Christians did not play a major part in this revival, their involvement with Nungalinya College, the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress (UAICC) formed in the early 1980s, and regional circuits of Christian conventions ensure that they have been exposed to varied influences. Nevertheless, Ngukurr Christians perceive the Fellowship form to be an outcome of the camp singing and Aboriginal-run Christian village services that were a feature of the Roper River mission regime (see chapter 4). They also perceive faith healing to have many similarities with traditional curing practices and will often employ both simultaneously as a defence against sorcery.

Though Ngukurr Christians regard Fellowship and Church services as equally valid varieties of their religious expression, it is my view that the two forms do stand in marked contrast to each other as different social orders. The significant difference between these forms pertains to the way in which services are organised. Church leadership at Ngukurr is hierarchical and institutionally endorsed by the Anglican Church of Australia, while egalitarianism is central to the way in which an authorising constituency of Fellowship participants is brought into being. Moreover this structuring generates an alternative pattern of leadership, participant involvement and objectifications of the major principles around which Christian life coheres to those of the church. Before addressing these dimensions of Fellowship practice, I first outline how Aborigines support a Christian program at Ngukurr.

Christian and traditional Aboriginal forms to one another and as a means to integrate Aboriginal and European worlds.

The Christian program at Ngukurr

The Christian program, as it has been developed at Ngukurr, has a weekly calendar of events that brings local Aborigines together in nightly Fellowship, twice weekly Bible Study on alternate days for children and adults and Sunday morning Church service. Regular attendance at Fellowship, Bible Study and Church service express a person's commitment to Christianity and are central activities for those wishing to be baptised, confirmed and gain a licence as a layreader. Participation in even two of these gatherings ensures that a person is exposed to orthodox Christian beliefs through bible reading. A lectionary is used by the minister for preaching at the Church, which is a three-year cycle of bible readings incorporating passages from Old and New Testaments relating to all the important events in the Church calendar. The lectionary is also followed systematically at Bible Study but only in an informal way at Fellowship. All meetings are conducted in Kriol, being the vernacular at Ngukurr, although the majority of people can also speak English. It is common for 'light' and 'rough' forms of Kriol to be jointly used at public gatherings, which accommodates both English and Kriol speakers.¹⁶ There are, in addition, periods (usually annual) when Fellowship meetings are conducted in people's yards, rather than at the park and periods when 'action' nights are held at Fellowship for youth.¹⁷ There are moreover occasional church services including funerals, baptisms and confirmations and occasional visits to the school to give Christian instruction to children.

¹⁶ Light Kriol, a term that is used by Aborigines to describe one variety of language use, is recognisably closer to English than Aboriginal languages and relatively easy for a non-speaker of Kriol to understand. In contrast, 'rough' or 'heavy' Kriol contains significantly more Aboriginal language words and cannot be understood without proficiency in it. It is commonplace for Aboriginal people if they are not bilingual to use a light form of Kriol when interacting with English speakers; that is they use as much English words as they know (Munro 1999:6).

¹⁷ 'Action' songs are a particular style favoured in Arnhem Land communities where bodily movements are choreographed and performed by rows of dancers (older children and adults) in conjunction with the singing (see also Slotte 1997:124 on Ramingining and Hume 1989:212 on Yarrabah).

The annual calendar of events, which brings Aboriginal groups together in the region, include Fellowship weekends and conventions held at Ngukurr and at other Aboriginal communities, especially Numbulwar, Minyerri and Oenpelli. These are arranged spontaneously during the year depending on resources among other factors. There is also the annual Bible Camp, which is rotated through the Arnhem Land parishes of the Anglican diocese of the Northern Territory. These are Groote, Ngukurr, Numbulwar and Oenpelli, which were once CMS missions, and Minyerri and Lake Evalla where CMS provided an itinerant ministry. The annual Bible Camp has been operating for over twenty-five years.

Relative to the rates of adult baptisms and confirmations, attendance at Fellowship, Church and Bible Study are quite low at Ngukurr. Adult Bible Study groups attract between 4 to 10 people, but they wax and wane depending on the numbers interested in receiving baptism, confirmation or licences as layreaders. Church services are occasionally not attended at all or attract between 5 and 15 people. Attendance is often higher at Christmas, Easter and during Pentecost when services attract between 20 and 30 people. Nightly Fellowship also can often be poorly attended, attracting as little as 4 or 5 people. During the course of my fieldwork, however, regular attendance was between 15 and 30 participants. Participation at Fellowship is expanded when the minister calls for a convention or when someone in the community requests a healing service. Attendance is also frequently boosted when visiting dignitaries such as the bishop, come to the service, when youth are brought to the service to perform 'action' songs or when the Fellowship group hosts an evening barbeque for the community. Numbers then can range between 50 and more than 150 people attending.¹⁸ The annual practice of having Fellowship in people's yards also tends to boost attendance.

¹⁸ I note here that women's attendance for particular episodes of *Gunapipi* and *Yabaduruwa* ceremonies can also be fairly small at Ngukurr. The nightly sessions at the women's ceremony ground for a *Gunapipi* I attended ranged between 20 and 30 individuals, primarily from a couple of related patronymic families. It was not until the finale that larger numbers of women attended (i.e. 60 to 80). So far as I have been informed this is also the case at the men's ceremony ground.

It is not a significant issue in my view that Fellowship attracts slightly higher attendance rates than the church. It is significant, however, that Fellowship is a nightly occurrence, providing Christians with a regular forum for joint action and association. In this regard Fellowship meetings themselves contribute in a major way to the maintenance of a Christian program at Ngukurr, being the locus in which people negotiate varied roles in relation to Christian activities. The organisation of the Christian program is represented in Diagram 2 below.

As diagram 2 shows, Fellowship participants take specific responsibility for leading Fellowship meetings, bible study for adults and children, hosting Fellowship conventions to which other communities are invited, taking Fellowship and healing services to other communities when requested and conducting Fellowship nights for youth and in the yards of local residents at Ngukurr. Fellowship participants also contribute to funerals by leading the singing at the minister's direction. There are moreover a significant number of regular Fellowship participants on the Church Council. Fellowship participants however do not constitute a bounded group nor do the same people consistently act together in every Christian activity. Rather it is the case that matters to do with ministry in the parish and at Ngukurr is consistently dealt with at Fellowship meetings

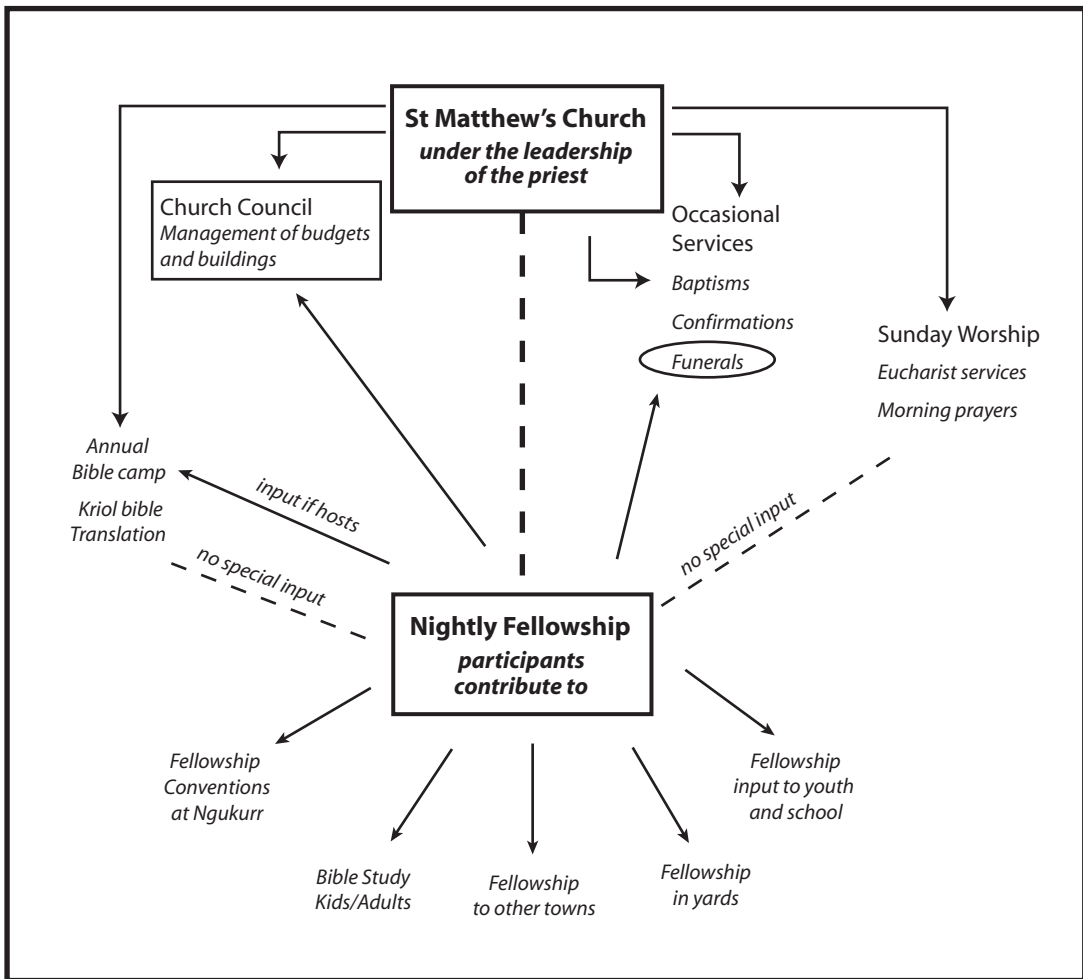


Diagram 2: Fellowship involvement in the Christian program

Specifically I observed that participants spontaneously raised issues of concern at Fellowship such as the need to address the matter of children's new style of swearing. Arrangements were then made to bring them to Bible Study and nightly Fellowship for 'action' songs.¹⁹ Several members also decided to host a community meeting to inform people about what they were doing and recruit further support. Fellowship participants negotiated these matters without any specific direction from the minister, although his input was valued. Fellowship meetings were, moreover, the forum where matters to do with the hosting of local conventions and annual Bible Camp were discussed and where arrangements were made about funeral and healing services both at Ngukurr and in other communities. Hence Diagram 2 illustrates how nightly Fellowship operates as a focus for decision-making and action through the contribution of participants to many of the ministries, maintenance projects and events of the church.

There are two important implications that I draw from the way in which Aboriginal people contribute to Christian life at Ngukurr. The first is that participants are primarily engaged in activities that allow them to articulate social relationships through reciprocal performance and to 'help' kin and others through nurturant action (Fellowship visits to others, 'action' nights for youth, singing at funerals) and Christian teaching (bible study, preaching at school). The second implication relates to the first in terms of the way in which reciprocal performance and nurturant action proliferates roles and niches through which Christians can demonstrate their expertise and capacity to take responsibility for others. In this regard it is not coincidental that Christians at Ngukurr make the evangelical tradition of adult witness a central feature of their practice. This is due to the fact that adult witness is also consistent with the way in which Aborigines configure 'genuine autonomy' as a senior status (Myers 1991[1986]:110), based on the capacity to 'look after' those

¹⁹ Adult Fellowship members at Ngukurr do not perform 'action' songs as a rule either at nightly or regional events yet they do have repertoires of 'action' songs. These were used during the course of one month at Fellowship in 2000 as a means to 'help' teenagers and children by providing them with a counterattraction to 'bush club' – a local gloss for locations where youth interact beyond the social exposure of adult kin (see map 3 chapter 2).

‘who are as yet unable to be equal’ (ibid. 175; and see chapter 2 of this work). Though autonomy is also culturally constructed as a given in human life (Myers 1991[1986]:107), it is not fully realised without the contribution of significant others and given proper expression as relatedness. Moreover it is not coincidental that God’s grace is rendered in Aboriginal English as *kindness*, given that it is through His nurturant action that humans receive the greater gift of life and well-being. It is these dimensions of Ngukurr Christian practice that are constitutive of *gudbinji* and which makes Fellowship, in my view, a distinctly different social order to the Church.

In the following I address how Fellowship operates to constitute its own authorising processes through the performance of valued activities and through which participants endow themselves with status and *gudbinji*. I therefore begin with a description of chorus singing at Fellowship, paying particular attention to the methods entailed in the practice of taking turns to perform song-sets, which enables participants to render sociality as relatedness.

Fellowship At Ngukurr

Nightly Fellowship is a joint venture that brings Aboriginal Christians together to ‘share messages’ (exchange) with one another and to engage God’s grace (locally glossed as *kindness*) to make people *gudbinji*. It is a socially interactive gathering where participants sing choruses, pray and give bible readings over the course of three or four hours. No single person such as the minister takes responsibility for leading the group. Rather individuals and small groups of kin take it in turns to open and close the meeting with prayer, perform song repertoires and provide a bible reading for each other. This latter task is often performed by the minister, but not exclusively. He also usually leads healing services at Fellowship meetings, although other members can perform them (see chapter 7 for a description of healing service). Not all meetings necessarily include a bible reading or faith healing. Performing song-sets in turn is the principal activity at Fellowship. It can be

said that Fellowship has not occurred if members do not come forward to sing their song-sets and join in the sets of others.²⁰

Fellowship meetings begin after dark (about 7pm or 8pm) in the park next to the Community Council offices, opposite the general store at Ngukurr. Constant pedestrian traffic passes by as people head in one direction to the basketball courts and in the other to the game-shop for take-out food and other entertainments. Powerful lights at the rear boundary of the park illuminate an enclosed structure, which opens up on three sides to form a stage from which people sing and preach with the aid of microphones, amplified keyboards and guitars, song-books and bibles (see Photographs 3 and 4).²¹ The singing and preaching can be heard throughout most of the town. More participants arrive when they hear the sound of the instruments being tuned-up, some going straight to the stage to perform and others congregating in small groups of kin on *kalikos* (blankets or tarpaulins) around the stage.

²⁰ On a couple of occasions at the Fellowship stage no performance ensued though a number of people had gathered there. One night after a spell of rain I joined about 4 or 5 men sitting on the bitumen at the side of the stage. We ‘yarned’ for a few hours as we sat listening to a tape of Fellowship music that one of the men had been sent from another community. Another night a few of us at the stage realised that no one else was coming because all the instruments had been taken to another community for a funeral. Again we sat chatting for a few hours. On neither occasion did anyone consider that Fellowship had occurred, although we had a pleasant time. Conversely I never attended a Fellowship gathering that only consisted of a bible reading or healing session.

²¹ The church has purchased some of this equipment, but keyboards, small amplifiers, microphones and bibles (in Kriol and English) are popular privately owned items. Individuals or families invest in such items so they can have bible study as well as song writing and practice sessions at home. Synthesiser keyboards are especially popular as their pre-programmed tunes feature is a basis for song writing.



Photograph 3: Nightly Fellowship



Photograph 4: Nightly Fellowship

A particularly lively night that I attended was already underway as I parked my troop-carrier next to the Council buildings. Several male musicians were on-stage with a number of singers sitting along its edge.²² A husband (RX) and his wife (JX) were singing *Praise the Lord Alleluia* from the front of the stage, hand microphones plugged into the amplifier. RX's Ritharngu countryman AO, and his wife (UO), accompanied them. The two couples were sharing a folder of photocopied and handwritten songs, which was laid out in front of them.²³

As the song came to an end PG called out 'anibodi bin open im?' referring to the practice of officially beginning the meeting with a short prayer often after a few warm-up numbers. RX responded to her request with a spontaneous entreaty in Ritharngu, after which he and his wife continued to lead the singing. They had compiled a good repertoire of songs from their involvement in regional Christian conventions and had worked over some of this material into their own Aboriginal languages. They favoured the gospel-islander style tunes from the north rather than the country-and-western variety, which are very popular in the southern regional circuits.²⁴ In contrast AO and UO were more recent participants at Fellowship and did not yet have much of a repertoire of songs. The more experienced members therefore were helping them to learn new choruses by encouraging them to sing. AO in particular was being encouraged to sing up on the verses he knew well, with RX,

²² Only men play instruments at Fellowship, but everybody sings.

²³ Though people occasionally use the *Kriol Song Buk* at Fellowship participants have shown a marked preference for singing songs they have collected in Fellowship circuits or written themselves, which they bring to meetings in loose-leaf folders. The *Kriol Song Buk* (1994 - 4th ed) is a collection of 224 songs written by Aboriginal people as a result of several song-writing workshops during the 1980s at Ngukurr and other Aboriginal communities. The Kriol Baibul Translation Team gathers songs for this publication, which is published by the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

²⁴ Country-and-western music was a formative genre for a generation who are now in their 40's and 50's and who were exposed to such tunes in the Aboriginal camps at the mission and on stations. An older generation of 60 and 70 year olds who are more familiar with the Christian hymns of the mission era such as *Onward Christian Soldiers* sometimes complain that they don't know these new songs. A new generation of 20-30 year olds has started to favour 'rock 'n roll' tunes, particularly of the 1970's, and 'disco pop' for their New Testament derived lyrics.

JX, IW and others joining in where he faltered. AO tended to sing a bit off key and even at times to have changed tunes, much to the amusement of the rest who nevertheless called out 'kip goin' olgaman.' As they reached the end of *Baba Jisas*, sung in Kriol and Ritharngu, people exclaimed the drawn out 'yohh,' as they do at corroboree and other performances, to voice their appreciation of *olgaman* (old man, a term of respect) AO's efforts and even, unusually, applauded him.

AO was encouraged to sing a few more numbers before he begged off singing for a while saying, 'yu mob garra help tu and sing-sing.' The lively interchange, however, between participants encouraging and helping each other to sing seemed to set the tone and pace for the evening. MM exclaimed excitedly 'kip goin, kip goin' and her sister-in-law UO added 'ebribodi kaman iah la stage an' sing-sing, an' praise Im la top.' Three women responded (CA, YPW and her sister-in law PE) by going to the stage and equipping themselves with hand microphones plugged into the amplifier. GPW, my gagu (MM/ZDC) and 'father' of YPW, had joined the guitarists on stage along with a few younger men. CA's sister SL arrived with some grandchildren and sat near FPW (GPW's sister) and myself. Musicians tuned and strummed chords and keys as someone suggested the well-known song *Redibala*; another sang the first line indicating their agreement with the choice as it simultaneously cued the musicians to the tune required. UO said 'English batta,' meaning they should sing a verse first in English and then in other languages. After a little more strumming the tune emerged and the group sang the first chorus of *Ready*. Before it ended a voice called for it in Kriol, whereupon it was sung. At the end another voice called for it in Mara; GPW and FPW beside me took it up with a few others joining in. Then it was called for in Ngandi and CA's and SL's voices could be heard above the others. IW, RX and UO led it in Alawa, Ritharngu and Rembarrnga respectively; by which time almost every Aboriginal language known by participants that night had been represented.

The animation increased as singers and musicians alternated in urging on the pace at which choruses were sung. *Dedi God* was followed quickly by *Our God is Holy*; then by *Jesus Christ my Lord*, then came *Anoint Me* and more. GPW sang

Heavenly Country, a classic country-and-western song he had written years ago, joined by YPW, his 'daughter.' PG and her sister's MN, VA and AG fitted in a quick set of their choruses, *Wi Bin Kaman Langa Sebis*, *The Conversion of Saul*, and *Going Home* prompting FPW to comment to me 'that G mob garra best mob songs.' As the evening progressed, singers would hurry the musicians along by breaking into a new song as soon as the old was finished and forcing the musicians to scramble to catch up. The musicians would launch into a favourite number of someone who had just finished singing encouraging them to continue their set. This good-humoured interaction resembles a pattern of play commonly found at funeral *bunggul* or corroboree dancing where a stick is passed, supposedly randomly, from dancer to dancer. But performers play 'tricks' on each other by passing the stick to the same dancer over and over again, which the dancer can't refuse. At Fellowship also this play generates a lot of amusement and excitement to see how long and well a performer can carry on. Moreover the alternation of pace setting between musicians and singers and the alternation between well-known group verses, serial choruses in different languages and individual or small group song-sets stimulates a wider participation in singing.

There is, however, a purpose to singing beyond play and entertainment. Whether or not there is a bible reading or healing session, chorus singing occurs over a two to three hour period during each Fellowship meeting. The practice of taking turns to perform song-sets has therefore social import for the way in which it brings into being a Fellowship group on a nightly basis. In this regard chorus singing, as I discuss below, enables participants to realise *gudbinji* by establishing relatedness among people and with God. This regular shared activity moreover is the means through which participants confer social recognition on themselves and place.

Gudbinji: relatedness and distinction

The practice of groups taking turns to perform songs and dances for each other has been noted in the literature on Aboriginal Australia. Berndt and Berndt for example (1988:126-7), describe how performances of song and dance repertoires were offered in return for hospitality at Oenpelli during the wet season of 1949-50.

But they also comment on the fact that among Aborigines there was a great deal of group singing and display ‘on nearly all occasions when people [came] together, particularly during the evenings’ (ibid. 369). Berndt and Berndt (1987:206-7) also describe the ‘great vitality’ of traditional evening group performances at army settlements in the Northern Territory during the war where Aborigines had an obvious pride in ‘displaying song-and-dance combinations to others’ and enjoyed comparing and discussing the various styles and repertoires that different groups possessed. The Berndts, however, leave unexplored the social import of such performance, either in terms of the way in which Aborigines use them to extend relatedness and generate *gudbinji* (well-being).

A more recent literature does recognise the social import both of singing and performative ventures for Aboriginal people in establishing and sustaining relatedness at a place. Marett for example (2000:18, 2005:231), discusses the way in which *wangga* songs in the Daly region of the Northern Territory, like *purlapa* songs for the Warlpiri during the 1940s, are a significant element in contemporary Aboriginal life as they facilitate adaptation to new patterns of residency (see also Wild 1987; Dussart 2000:217). Myers (1991[1986]:164-5) discusses a similar occurrence among the Pintupi who moved from one location to another in the 1970s. In order to assert their autonomy in relation to their old place of residence they organised their own initiation ceremony and football team at the new location (ibid. 164). In doing so they were aggregating individuals into a ‘significant mob’ through shared activity and using it as a means to confer social recognition on themselves and their new place of residence (ibid. 164-5).²⁵ They were, in addition, making public life conform to a fundamental image of sociality, sustaining through meetings and ceremony the appearance that people were related (ibid. 163-4). This is why, Myers argues, Aborigines propose that such gatherings can ‘make everyone happy,’ because they present participants with the reality that inter-group relations involve the same reciprocity as occurs in family and camp relations (ibid. 112).

²⁵ See also Sansom (1980:259-67) on the aggregation of Aboriginal people from different linguistic traditions into ‘mobs’ through joint ventures at Wallaby Cross.

It is noteworthy that this literature highlights the way in which Aboriginal people use reciprocal singing in particular as a way to confer social recognition on and generate unity among people. Reciprocal displays of this sort also resemble the way in which chorus singing at Fellowship is used to establish relatedness within a group of performers and confer social recognition on them. Moreover, it is these aspects of shared activity which brings a Fellowship group into being and which Aboriginal Christians thematise as *gudbinji*.²⁶ Aborigines at Ngukurr frequently describe *gudbinji* as a good feeling or a feeling of happiness (see also Cowlshaw 1999:101-2), which emanates from the stomach (more properly the gut). Literally it means ‘good belly’ in Aboriginal English, a feeling of satisfaction ‘given metonymically as repletion or satiation’ (Sansom 2002:161). God moreover experiences this satiation, as the Kriol Bible informs us throughout Genesis. When He looked upon each of His creations ‘imbin gudbinji’ (*Holi Baibul* 1991, *Jinasis* 1[1-31], 3-5; see also Sansom 2002:166). *Gudbinji* is also a socially produced feeling, arising most often when interactions with others (including sentient country) are mutually satisfying. People use it to refer to the well-being they experience when organisations in the community are ‘running right,’ when they receive help or gifts, when Fellowship has left them feeling ‘light’ and ‘awake’ or when they have enjoyed a good day’s fishing. In contrast, *nogudbinji* describes the reverse where dissatisfaction is the predominant experience because no one helps or shares.

Fellowship participants emphasised during the course of my fieldwork that the purpose of gathering to sing choruses for each other and God every night was to realise an experience of *gudbinji*. They offered the view that singing ‘really pulls’ a person ‘along’ into a relationship with others and God as it keeps open an engagement where the flow of care and help is unimpeded. For example as my *abujji* (FM/SC) remarked to me one night, when a group from Ngukurr took a healing service to another community to ‘help’ the people there:

²⁶ Magowan (2003:309) remarks on the way in which the local concept of *gudbinji* has been used at Roper River to naturalise the Christian divinity, who is also said to have *gudbinji*.

Singing really fills you up, it makes you forget about your worries and your losses – it takes all the *nogud* tings out. Singing does that – it makes you really happy. (UO, Field-notes 2000, B6:205).

The act of nightly singing, participants say, not only makes them feel ‘light’ and ‘clear’ (free) by ‘taking out’ all the ‘heavy’ things that beset their lives, it makes Ngukurr itself (or wherever it is performed) ‘really fresh and light again.’ Moreover the act of travelling 200kms to another community to help them by singing for several hours is typical of the way in which shared Fellowship activity is interpreted as ‘help’ and ‘doing so much for’ God, others and place. It is also noteworthy that transformation is an expected dimension of chorus singing, where shared activity, it is assumed, will generate greater intimacy among people and reverse states of *nogudbinji*.

Chorus singing as well as sermon, prayer and study are also thought to instantiate connections between people and God, offering to each reassurance of an ongoing relationship between the two. The following example given by the minister at Fellowship makes clear this reciprocal relation:

Dedi God, wi iya nah bla yu, dumadji wi sabi yu, yu spirit and yu san go-bak langa yu. Yu gibit ebrijing bla wi, kantri, exampuls and weis yu libim iya. Yu gibit dat music, dat word wi share-share, ebrinite la Fellowship, ebri week la Bible study. So mani tings wi du fo yu, bla makim yu gudbinji an hapi. Ebrinite wi kam tu yu in faith and love langa yu presence. Ebintho yubin gibit melabat unhappiness, mitebi melabat weship yu take away ola sorrows, sadness langa heart. Dedi wi du ebrijing la yu dumaji yu creator la wi. Dedi irim wi prair in Jisas’ name, amen.

Father God, we are here now because we know you, your spirit and your son who has gone back to you. You give everything to us, our countries, examples and ways that you have left here. You give us our music and your word which we share (exchange) every night at

Fellowship, and every week at Bible study. We do so many things to make you satisfied and happy. Every night we come to you in faith and love in your presence. Even though you give us unhappiness, maybe if (when?) we worship you take away all the sorrows, sadness in our heart. Father we do everything for you because you are our creator. Father God, hear this prayer in Jesus' name, amen.²⁷

Though the minister draws attention to all the things that Christians do to make God *gudbinji*, chorus singing is nevertheless the favoured mode of instantiating connections between Him and people. This relates to the fact that Fellowship songs, it is thought by informants, are God given even as song-writer's 'hunt' to 'find' the 'right' words in Aboriginal and other languages to express their knowledge of 'gospel wei.' God helps song-writers, whether working alone or collaboratively, by directing people to the 'right' words that 'will touch a person's heart.' Not only are songs a 'good way to share messages' with others, as one writer explained to me, 'they are the Lord's voice touching us' both in the act of singing and writing.

Song writing and musicianship, by implication, are therefore highly valued skills among Fellowship participants as they facilitate people's desire to enact relatedness and realise *gudbinji*. Both are highly popular activities at Ngukurr, not only among Christians but also among the town's many rock 'n roll bands. The ability to circulate Christian 'messages' in the form of songs is particularly favoured because it allows people to display their knowledge in distinctive ways. Individuals and groups of kin can compile repertoires of material (whether original compositions or gathered from elsewhere and worked into another language), which through consistent performance become identified with them. Hence some individuals and groups, as FPW remarked above, 'garra best mob songs.'

There are two dimensions then to the way in which the Fellowship group, as a troupe of performers, is brought into being. It generates, in the first instance,

²⁷ Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. I follow the orthography developed by Sandefur (1984) for the Summer Instituted of Linguistics (SIL), Australian Aboriginal Branch.

distinction for some who clearly know what should be said and done in the context of Fellowship, and who demonstrate their expertise through regularly taking the lead to perform song-sets, sermons, prayers and healings. It situates, in addition, the less experienced within a supportive environment of capable others wherein mastery of Christian knowledge and correct action can be achieved. The interactive context of Fellowship therefore presents to people an image of sociality as relatedness and the reality that it involves the same reciprocity as occurs in camp and family life. This reality also entails a very real desire for distinction, to differentiate oneself from others and one's close kin from other groups. Hence I characterise Fellowship as a kin-based order of Christianity, as it provides participants with a public locale in which to affirm the reality that social life is exchange.

That Fellowship is a kin-based order of Christianity is moreover clearly evident in the spatial arrangements of each meeting. As I discuss below, it is the way in which kin-based associations constitute nodal points through which a group can be expanded into a larger troupe for performance or dissolved back into small groups of kin that enables Indigenous dynamics of sociality to be brought to bear on Fellowship's form. Specifically it is the principles of unity and differentiation infusing Aboriginal social life that pervade Fellowship meetings, even as they are given further salience in this performative context (see also chapter 2).

Reciprocity: unity and differentiation

Differentiation and unity are twin principles of both regional and local Fellowship meetings. Though meetings emphasise unity and mutuality, it is not the case that kin-based associations are submerged in the notion that Fellowship participants are a family of brothers and sisters through their relationship with *Dedi God* and *Baba Jisas*.²⁸ People maintain differentiations by virtue of the places they

²⁸ At Ngukurr Kriol kin terms are used to specify the relation between God, Jesus Christ and humans. Hence *Dedi* or *Dedi la top* is God the Father who resides above the human world in heaven. His son Jesus Christ is referred to as *Baba* (brother) *Jisas* in Kriol. Other Kriol phrases used to denote God and/or Jesus Christ are *bos balanga wi* (our boss) and *det haibala bos* (that high boss). Some of the Aboriginal language words used to denote God are *bunggawa* (Nunggubuyu and Ritharngu),

come from, the different languages they may speak and by the style and content of the ‘messages’ they perform. Though less marked at local gatherings at Ngukurr, especially if the Fellowship group is small, the spatial arrangement of groups of kin sitting together and taking it in turns to perform songs-sets is nevertheless a recognisable feature of each meeting’s organisation. This pattern of coming together at Fellowship and arrangement of people in small groups of kin is virtually identical to a description given by Berndt and Berndt (1988:369-70) concerning the tradition of group singing among Aborigines. They say:

In some ordinary camp singing there may be only a small extended family ... enjoying an evening’s entertainment. ... [W]hen more formal ceremonies have been arranged, the groups are larger and include dancers as well. When they hear the sound of sticks clapping, ... (tuning up), people come drifting in twos and threes to the space which has been cleared for dancing. There they sit down on the ground, arranging themselves in socially significant patterns; usually men and women sit a little apart, but choices within these groupings may be made on the basis of close kinship, or membership of the same subsection, moiety and so on.

This propensity for group differentiation is also a feature of regional Bible Camps (one week) and weekend Fellowship gatherings. Each Aboriginal community will occupy separate camps of related personnel around the site selected for the proceedings for the duration of their stay. Each night at Fellowship these groups will perform their repertoires of songs in turn, leading the rest of the participants in choruses. Other activities are circulated among participants as each night a different group takes responsibility to give a bible reading and exegesis of the text and to open and close the event with prayer. There is clearly a desire for groups to maintain their distinctiveness in performance even as a regional event generates a sense of

nupungawa (Andiliaywa), *balayi-yiwa* (Mangarrayi), *nu-garli* (Ngandi) and *wadajarri* (Rembaranga). It is significant that these are all terms, which in everyday usage, refer to human leaders rather than named spirit entities.

commonality among participants as Christians. Moreover there is a clear desire among groups at regional events that they give a good performance and enliven everyone present. One case can illustrate both of these concerns.

In the weeks prior to the Bible Camp hosted by Ngukurr in 1999 attendance at nightly Fellowship increased considerably and the group's efforts were directed to selecting and rehearsing their favourite and best songs. Individuals in the group frequently commented on their desire for Ngukurr as a group to give a good performance. There was also frequent comment that the Bible Camp should run its full course of a week in order for it to be a really successful one. When reports were heard that there was E-coli in the billabong at the campsite selected for the proceedings the major concern at Ngukurr was not that people might get sick, but that if they did it might cut short the event. During the camp itself there was always commentary on the performance of different groups, their set of songs and style of singing and their ability to enliven the congregation. At that particular camp the group from Minyerri gave outstanding performances every night. Not only was their set of songs upbeat and sung with gusto, they were accompanied by 'action' where rows of dancers performed bodily movements in conjunction with the singing. While groups who performed with less animation at that year's Bible Camp might have felt some degree of dissatisfaction, participants nonetheless voiced their relatedness as a group who all had a part in what God had created because He belonged to everyone.

There is similarly both the desire for distinction and commonality at Ngukurr's Fellowship meetings. Participants, when they arrive at the meeting, congregate in socially significant patterns of small clusters of close kin. Such groups will regularly sit and perform together at meetings and often collaborate in the production of 'messages' beyond the context of Fellowship. In doing so they contribute in a significant way to the formation of the Fellowship group as they simultaneously differentiate themselves from other groups of kin by virtue of the style and content of their repertoires. Specifically, during my fieldwork, spouses (about seven pairs) most often performed song-sets together at Fellowship and often jointly composed songs for their repertoires. It was also the case that two pairs of

sister's in law and one group of sisters consistently performed together.²⁹ In all of these cases people sustained close associations with each other as domestic groups where the sharing of hearths and resources was a daily feature of their relationships. Fellowship participants who were not in an obvious troupe of performers, or who had less of a repertoire than others, would always be 'helped' to perform either by a close relative, such as a daughter or son-in-law joining them on stage or, at larger gatherings, by 'coming in with' (incorporating) other kin.

The following case elucidates more clearly how specific individuals act as social reference points for a group, often sisters or spouses forming a core around which other relatives cohere. Though members of different families may maintain separate hearths and distinct identities, kin-based associations nevertheless enable them to expand into a larger collaborative unit for the purpose of performance. In effect overlapping networks of association, being a constant feature of Aboriginal forms of organisation, proliferate kin-locales beyond domestic groups providing individuals with opportunities to accumulate and demonstrate diverse skills and knowledge (see also chapter 2).

MN (née family G) and her husband WN are regular attendees at Fellowship and in their mid and late 40s respectively. MN has a longer history with Christianity than WN. She was baptised and confirmed in her teens and her maternal grandparents, Umbariri and his wife, and a paternal 'great grandfather,' Gabarla, worked for missionaries at Roper mission from as early as the 1920s. WN, in contrast, and his parents are more recently confirmed (i.e. late 1980s and 1990s) and do not have a history of association with the mission. Both MN and WN have some

²⁹ This is by no means a full listing of the people and groups I met through Fellowship at Ngukurr. Nor is affiliation through descent and marriage the only basis for association of smaller groups within Fellowship. Four older male musicians regularly performed as a unit for the larger group during my fieldwork and described for me one night their history of 'runnin around together,' that is their shared experiences with music, Gospel and work in the Northern Territory. Each of these men had developed, to a greater or lesser extent, their own repertoires of songs and could play the music for almost everybody else's repertoires at Ngukurr. They were never identified as a distinct 'gospel band' or 'mob' but they formed a core around which the larger group cohered.

prominence at Ngukurr as they are on the YMCGC, being leader and deputy respectively of an administrative clan, which is known by the name of an outstation in country associated with the N and L patriline.³⁰ In addition MN and WN are on the Church Council and in 2000 they received licences from the Anglican Church as layreaders. MN and WN reside in 'top camp,' most often at the home of MN's mother BG (daughter of Umbariri), who shares a 'long house' (that is two semi-detached houses joined on the short end) with WN's invalid parents. WN's and MN's eldest son and his wife and child occupy a house to one side of their camp, while each of their sisters and families occupy a number of houses on the other side.

MN is noted for the number of Fellowship songs she has gathered and composed over the years, most often in collaboration with her 3 younger sisters, PG, VA and AG, who are all more recently confirmed than herself. PG (previously married to WN's brother) has written more original compositions than her sisters and has given at least one to the Christian rock group *White Rock*. However, PG is not as regular in attending Fellowship as MN and her absences from the community on drinking binges has been a bar to her 'really going forward' as a Christian. The 3 sisters and their mother perform with WN and MN when they attend nightly Fellowship or larger special gatherings.

WN's older sister UO and her spouse AO have taken up Christianity more recently than WN, having been baptised and confirmed in May of 1999. They regularly attended Fellowship during my fieldwork and were in the process of working over Fellowship songs from English and Kriol into AO's language Ritharngu and UO's language Rembarrnga in order to build up a repertoire. MN and her sisters help them particularly by having musical sessions in their yards where they all contribute to 'finding' suitable tunes on the keyboard and 'hunting for' suitable bible passages and words to fit the tunes. UO and others often consulted the dictionaries available at the Katherine Language Centre in order to seek out suitable

³⁰ As a clan leader WN is a focal individual for members of his clan, who access CDEP and council resources through him. See chapter 2 for an explanation of town administration through CDEP 'clans.'

translations of words to convey their ‘messages’. UO and AO would take their turns at Fellowship to sing a small set of songs, but more often than not they would generally perform with MN and WN, particularly at big events or, as in the case above, be encouraged to sing by the use of serial choruses that AO and UO knew in their own languages.

JNG and his wife, FDL, also tended to perform most often with MN and WN at big Fellowship events, as they had not developed their own distinct set of songs. JNG and MN ‘come in with’ each other because their mothers are sisters, so they call each other *baba* (sibling). Moreover JNG and his wife also reside in ‘top camp’ where WN’s and MN’s relatives cluster. JNG and FDL, however, have been inconsistently involved with Christian activities and have not advanced as they hoped. They were baptised and confirmed in the 1980s after the death of one of their young daughters; they did not want to ‘blame blekbala wei’ for her death they said. But they had also found Christianity ‘too hard’ to sustain and had lapsed in their attendance for some time before rededicating themselves to Christianity in the late 1990s. They had hoped to receive licences as layreaders in 2000 but ‘missed out’ because they had not been to Fellowship enough they said. In fact I observed that they did attend Fellowship and bible study a good deal in 2000 but neither of them were particularly keen to perform from the stage or give prayers or bible interpretations at these meetings. In contrast, MN and to a lesser extent PG and WN did more often perform these activities. Toward the end of my fieldwork JNG and his wife were establishing a new niche for themselves at a local outstation, employing Gospel stories as a way to revive an Aboriginal language among youth at the school.

Even with the incorporation of WN, his sister and brother-in-law and JNG and his wife, MN and her sisters sustain an identity as ‘G mob’ at Fellowship performances and have a reputation for having a ‘biggest mob’ (a lot) of songs. Individually MN stands out as the person with the most consistent involvement and willingness to take the lead in Christian activities among her kin. She and WN together form a core around which their parents, siblings and to a lesser extent

another related couple cohere and to whom they give assistance in a variety of ways.³¹ The daily pattern of residence and kin-based associations they sustain are not submerged at Fellowship but are given additional emphasis as a network in which a person can count on the support of significant others, whether as a newcomer to an activity, such as UO or AO, or as a more experienced leader such as MN.

Through collaborating and performing together groups of kin such as the one described above contribute in a purposeful way to the formation of the larger Fellowship troupe. And though participants often retain distinctive patronymic identities and repertoires of songs, they nonetheless assume new identities according to the roles (of singer, song-writer, musician, bible-reader and so on) that they perform and the extent to which they perform them each night. Hence groups can easily be expanded into a larger troupe for performance through the joint venture of Fellowship, but these groups can easily be dissolved back into smaller groups of kin as the need arises.

Fellowship participants are then a contextually relative troupe of performers repeatedly drawn from overlapping networks of kin, which are distinguishable from patronymic families. I base this differentiation on the fact that patronymic families, as already discussed in chapter 2 and 5, maintain rival interests in the context of Ngukurr's administrative arrangements and are not a locus of socialisation. Rivalry of this sort is not a feature of Fellowship activity as it would impede the realisation of *gudbinji* and contradict efforts to make public life conform to the ideal that social life is reciprocal exchange (cf. Bourdieu 1994:184, 190; and Myers 1991[1986]).

³¹ MN in particular helps her sisters, who have all had problems in sustaining a separate hearth to her and in sustaining an engagement with any valued activity such as employment, art, music, sport or Fellowship, by investing her energies in securing resources for their mutual benefit. For example she purchased musical equipment so that they could all work together on Fellowships songs. She helped, with WN's assistance, VA and her spouse to secure a house at Ngukurr and AG and her spouse to secure a loan for a car. She was instrumental in acquiring funds to buy uniforms for their her kin's basketball team, the composition of which is discussed in chapter 2. They chose the team name from a site in country associated with the G patriline, and they are commonly referred to as 'G mob.'

There are in fact particular circumstances that do frequently dissolve the Fellowship troupe into smaller groups of close kin. This occurs when people feel their autonomy is threatened within the larger gathering or when the fundamental basis upon which interaction should occur is breached. In the following I describe some of the circumstances that do disrupt Fellowship meetings and how participants seek to resolve them.

Performance At Fellowship: A Negotiated Order

Regular participants at Fellowship during the course of my fieldwork did frequently discontinue attending for a period, often as a result of disagreements about right Christian practice. This was evident throughout my involvement in Fellowship in 1999 and 2000 and pertained to the matter of how a commitment to Christianity should be sustained and enacted. On the one hand some participants rendered right Christian practice as an exclusive commitment entailing the requirement that people ‘push away’ from some Aboriginal cultural practices, such as *Yabaduruwa* and *Gunapipi* ceremonies. On the other hand Christianity was also rendered as ‘going together’ with Aboriginal culture allowing practitioners to ‘build bridges’ between the two, such as perceiving God to be both creator and controller of Aboriginal mythological beings. Such debates among Aborigines mirror those found among a variety of mainstream Christian churches and mission organisations operating in the Northern Territory who argue about the extent to which non-Christian cultures can be a foundation for the Gospel (see McDonald 1997:96-7). These debates are also mirrored in other Aboriginal communities where Aborigines similarly disagree about the way in which they understand and render the relationship between Aboriginal culture and Christianity (see Magowan 1999, 2003; McIntosh 1997; Slotte 1997).

What cuts across such theological abstractions and differences of interpretations are the actual practices and social contexts in which people engage in and through which they construct their social worlds. Specifically, how people negotiate similarity and difference in order to engage co-operatively in joint ventures is of significance. Keen (1994) offers some useful insights into this issue. He argues that multiplicity of interpretation and practice was capable of being accommodated

in Yolngu life, even as people evaluated variability as the ‘same way’ or ‘song’ in certain contexts. In part this accommodation was achieved due to the fact that devices of obscurity and ambiguity were central to the control of religious knowledge and equally pertinent to the maintenance of autonomy in everyday interactions (ibid. 20-1). Yolngu people took measures to maintain or erase similarities and differences between ritual forms. It was by these means they could assert autonomy through guarding differences in certain contexts or minimising them when attempting to claim rights in or control over another group’s country, sacra or resources (ibid. 166). Heterogeneity then was grounded in the ambiguity of religious and other forms of discourse, in addition to being bound within performative contexts of co-operation and competition.

As Keen proposes, ‘it was up to people to attempt to enact their own interpretations of law’ within group-centred networks ‘of qualified agreement as to the constitution of ... right practice’ (ibid. 293-4). In doing so they ‘strove to maintain their autonomy within an order of law ... more or less agreed to with their neighbours’ (ibid. 294), through negotiated ritual forms. Shared forms of ceremony provided people with a common language and matrix for sociality beyond everyday contexts. However they were sufficiently flexible so that they could contain highly differentiated content across different group-centred networks as well as different ages and genders (ibid. 294). This structure of assertions of local autonomy, of different groups playing a specific part within co-operatively produced ritual forms, was Keen argues, also a characteristic of Christian religious practice among the Yolngu (ibid. 302; see also chapter 4 of my study). A further point of significance in Keen’s elaboration of the heterogeneity of perspectives made possible by shared, though ambiguous, languages and frameworks is that dispute about ritual forms and different interpretations was not uncommon among the Yolngu. However the mediating strategies were ‘silence,’ ‘delicate negotiation’ and ‘obliquity’ when

referring to ‘the significance of forms in the presence of those affiliated to incommensurable traditions’ (ibid. 164).³²

I draw two observations from the foregoing that are applicable to the way in which Fellowship operates as a co-operatively produced form in which significant sociality can be realised. The first point concerns the fact that there is a great deal of ambiguity among Fellowship members regarding which aspects of *kalja* ‘go together’ with Christianity and which ones should be ‘pushed away.’ It is not the case that an absolute rejection of ceremony follows from the assumption of a Christian identity or from the statement that a person wishes to ‘push away’ from culture. Rather, in the social contexts of camp and family life, it is always the case that being a good relative mediates people’s forms of action and association. Even when people immerse themselves in Christian activities they nevertheless will often continue to perform prescribed roles when initiation and mortuary rituals involve their kin. As RX said to me once, ‘wal mi Christian, but if my *junggayi* asks me to do my part in ceremony, well, I gotta go, I gotta do that.’

Moreover Fellowship members at Ngukurr were aware that a variety of interpretations about and styles of Christian practice exist in the world. They were sensitive to the differences between for example Anglican and Catholic traditions, particularly the emphasis given to the mediating role of the Virgin Mary in Roman Catholicism. Fellowship members often voiced their concern that people from non-Anglican evangelical Christian backgrounds in the community might feel ‘left out’ because they found the ‘Ngukurr style’ of practice too different to their own. Members did not change the format of Fellowship meetings as a response to these concerns; rather they would stress the similarities between forms of action that were ultimately, in their view, part of the ‘same way’ of enacting relatedness with God and manifesting His presence as a causal force in the world.

³² A similar point is made by Myers (1991[1986]:107, 163) who notes that personal will, among the Pintupi, is subdued and self-assertion avoided in public life in order to sustain relatedness with others.

My own involvement in Fellowship provides a useful example of how differences can be submerged through the foregrounding of similarity, which entails a paradoxical relationship between absoluteness and ambiguity. I was open with everyone in the community that my attendance at Fellowship was motivated by a research interest rather than as a seeker of Christian knowledge per se. I informed people that I had ‘pushed away’ from my own Catholic background, that I did not belong to a church or accept the fundamental creeds of that tradition though I subscribed in a general way to some of its moral code. My claim that I did not view myself as a ‘practising Christian’ was, however, dismissed as patent nonsense on a number of occasions. PG one day said quite heatedly to me ‘what yu mean yu nomo Christian – yu bin baptised, yu bin confirmed, yu go tu Fellowship ebri nite – yu Christian.’ The fact that I systematically showed up at Fellowship and sought knowledge of Aboriginal practice through participation overrode, as far as Aborigines were concerned, whatever difference in belief and motivation for action I had. Though identified absolutely as Christian, my actions could nonetheless encompass a great deal of ambiguity concerning meaning, belief and motivation evident in the way that people accepted that I had moved away from a Catholic tradition (but not a Christian one) and that I pursued Fellowship as research. Fellowship participants were, in effect, allowing me to have my own version of Christianity, which operated as a device that enabled social interaction to occur and unity to emerge.³³

The second point I observe, then, references the complex interplay between devices and strategies that enable both unity and autonomy to be maintained in joint ventures. People value and protect their autonomy and capacity to interpret what constitutes right Christian practice for themselves and do, as the example above from my own experience indicates, extend this capacity to others. When Fellowship

³³ I could not fail to notice during my fieldwork the multitude of times where Aboriginal people at Ngukurr established a basis for ongoing interaction with me through similarity. For example in another conversation with PG she described her pursuit of Christian knowledge as akin to my own thesis project. She said ‘I’m doing research too Rosie, trying to find the right connections, trying to see how Christianity fits into my life.’

members do not observe 'silence,' 'delicate negotiation' and 'obliquity' concerning difference (Keen 1994:164) they risk the withdrawal of others, who feel their autonomy threatened by the imposition of an alternative version of what is entailed in right practice from their own.

Differences of opinion and belief is, I conclude, less of a problem at Fellowship than behaviour that does not accommodate people's given capacity to interpret and express their version of right practice. Therefore I address in the following how behaviour such as 'judging too much' and 'taking out of turn' contravene the cultural construction of autonomy as a personal capacity for action that is increased over time through reciprocal interactions. I pay particular attention to the way in which the practice of taking turns to perform 'messages' at Fellowship evokes a novel constitution of leadership by providing all participants with opportunities to endow themselves with reputations as valued contributors to Christian life at Ngukurr.

Conflict and censure

Fellowship meetings at Ngukurr are open to all to attend. On any given night Aboriginal Christians welcome the attendance of newcomers to the group, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous. People are however expected to participate at Fellowship in accordance with the local configuration for its expression, no matter how loosely organised. Over the course of about one month at Fellowship one Aboriginal couple could not seem to appreciate that Ngukurr people had their own 'style' of conducting Fellowship meetings. And the way in which they attempted to insert themselves into the group and assert themselves at meetings, made explicit the central practices and principles of Fellowship at Ngukurr that are largely taken for granted.

The central practice at Ngukurr Fellowship meetings as I described above is chorus singing, with individuals and small groups of kin taking it in turns to lead the group and perform their own song-sets. Compiling song repertoires and taking turns to perform song-sets as well as bible readings and prayers allows individuals and

groups to exchange knowledge with each other and exchange roles as leaders and followers in Fellowship. The central importance, therefore, of being granted and willing to take up these kinds of exchange opportunities at Fellowship is the fundamental basis upon which interaction occurs, and is expected to occur. People who do not observe the practice of ‘giving room’ to each other or who ‘jump over each other’ by performing to such an extent that others do not get a turn are failing to respect the reciprocal nature of Fellowship exchanges. People will complain if they have not been given opportunities to perform or if they feel that others are ‘taking out of turn’ by dominating the proceedings. The following case elucidates how one couple’s attempt to lead at Fellowship incurred the censure of the group because they failed to observe its local order for performance.

The Aboriginal couple in question had recently returned to Ngukurr. One of the couple was born and had relatives at Ngukurr; the other was from the south. On their first night at Fellowship they went on stage to sing. In between songs they each gave a long testimony about their entry into Christianity and the transformation that had occurred in their lives because of a personal relationship with God. They described the ‘spiritual warfare’ that was being waged by Christians against evil down south – referring to the phenomenon of exorcising demons that have possessed a person. Giving testimonies and performing exorcisms are not features of Christian practice at Ngukurr, but this couple appeared to be oblivious to these differences. They went on to suggest that Ngukurr was in need of a spiritual revival because people here weren’t really ‘living for the Lord.’ They even chided the Ngukurr group that their performance at Fellowship was lethargic. At this point RX yelled out ‘yu bin saying wi gonna sing-sing bla God, wal dum nah.’ As the couple continued to sermonize about right and wrong practice people began to hum tunes, and mutter ‘too long nah’. Some even began to drift away from the gathering. Finally, the keyboard player, IW, broke the tension by launching into a well-known number and everyone joined in. Throughout the rest of the meeting the couple continually tried to insert additional messages between songs, which generally resulted in making other participants restless. Many of their requests for songs were accommodated that night but many they sang were unaccompanied either by the musicians or other singers. On

subsequent nights local members re-asserted their positions at Fellowship by singing their own songs and not really ‘hearing’ (i.e. politely ignoring) the couple’s request for their own numbers.

The couple above found themselves in difficulties at Ngukurr Fellowship meetings for two reasons. In the first instance they sought to evangelise among a group who already saw themselves as evangelists. By doing so the couple gave leadership and following a wholly asymmetric character thereby threatening the autonomy of other members. Their didactic style of leadership, evident in the harangue about Ngukurr’s lethargic performance and the explicitness of their statements about right Christian practice treated other participants as if they had no knowledge or capacity to interpret Christianity for themselves. Moreover by continuing to hold the stage to voice their own messages they were not allowing other participants the chance to display and express their knowledge and expertise. In effect the couple did not use tactful behaviour or ‘delicate negotiation,’ noted by Keen (1994:164; see also Dussart 2000:99-100), either to negotiate a position relative to other Fellowship members or to enact their interpretation of Christianity. The couple found their efforts to assert themselves in this way at Fellowship rebuffed. Conversations about them over the next few weeks were generally accompanied by the view that ‘people shouldn’t judge’ so much and that at Ngukurr you cannot ‘jump over each other.’ Both comments referred specifically to the couple’s moralising style of leading and habit of performing ‘out of turn’ at Fellowship. The couple were ‘given room’ to contribute at Fellowship but they were expected to observe the existing order for performance and expertise within the group. When they did acknowledge both of these things they began to fit in better.

This case points then to a crucial aspect of the value of taking turns to perform at Fellowship. ‘Giving room’ and not ‘jumping over each other’ underline the reciprocal character of Fellowship exchanges where taking turns keeps the structuring of leaders and followers in flux. Specifically, as the example above shows, people at Fellowship do not (or should not) take it upon themselves to tell others what to do or how or where to enact their interpretation of Christianity; neither

is anyone willing to be told what to do. Even the minister, who attends Fellowship regularly and who is locally acknowledged as the leader of the Church because he is a priest and canon, cannot command or explicitly direct participants at Fellowship. Though he has sought to get the Fellowship group to relocate to the church building during the rainy season, they have been unwilling to do so. I witnessed one of his attempts to do this, when, at the end of a Fellowship meeting one night, he announced to the group that if it rained on the following day the meeting would go ahead in the church.³⁴ He told the group that he had expressly bought a ‘power ticket’ for this purpose and he urged them to show up and not disappoint him.³⁵ On the next night, however, he was left sitting alone in the empty church for several hours – no one showed up. When I asked various Fellowship members why they had not attended, most offered the excuse that they were simply ‘too busy’ with family or other matters. The minister did not refer to the (non) event when Fellowship resumed at the park a few nights later; he took his place within the group singing his song-set and providing a ‘blessing’ (a prayer for healing and protection) when asked.

Consensus is maintained at Fellowship when people accommodate the existing order for performance and when people’s ‘messages’ are consistent with what participants acknowledge as ‘that Word langa God.’ A ‘good message’ one night came from John chapter 6:25 (*Jesus and the Bread of Life*) where the interpreter drew a comparison between Jesus’ instruction to people to ‘work for’ the ‘real bread from heaven’ that ‘lasts for eternal life’ and all the things in life that are not the living Word of God. ‘All kinda tings wi lookitbela too long – television, newspaper, work, money, sport, internet, blekbala weis’ are not the ‘livewan Word wi tok-tok’ at Fellowship, the interpreter said. These ‘dead tings’ only ‘brainwash yu’ to think they are real and take you away from the Lord. In contrast, an unsuccessful message came from the Anglican bishop of the Northern Territory who

³⁴ The minister’s attempt to relocate Fellowship to the church happens every wet season I was informed. So far participants have been unwilling to do this though their actions are not a result of a decision taken by the group. Individuals simply fail to show up if the location of Fellowship is not to their liking.

³⁵ Electricity services are pre-paid at Ngukurr via ‘power tickets’ purchased through the Council.

proposed to the Fellowship group: ‘you cannot let your feelings and your customs block you from a relationship with God — this is the message we must spread.’ Whereupon the minister responded immediately by praying to God over the bishop ‘to help this man to learn our [blackfella] ways.’ The bishop, though highly respected by the group, exceeded his authority and threatened the autonomy of participants by telling them what they should give up. His interpretation was therefore rejected as ‘only ’im own idea,’ but it might have been accepted if he had proposed that blackfella and *mununga* (white) things were not as real as God, as the previous interpretation suggested.

When individual expressions of authority are excessive at Fellowship (and in the community generally), others will view them as egotistical, illegitimate and a threat to their own autonomy. Exceeding the consensus of any group-centred or contextually relative network is evaluated as ‘judging too much’ or ‘bossing too much’ and is often dismissed as ‘own idea.’ Small groups of kin respond to such threats to autonomy at Fellowship by withdrawal, often having *sebis* (service) in their own camp for a while. Unhappy with the tensions at Fellowship once, JNG proposed to me that more Fellowship structures should be built so that Christians would have plenty of sites in which to perform their messages. The most usual response to conflict however was to make Fellowship meetings mobile. Fellowship participants would host meetings in different parts of the community, performing for a few nights in one yard before moving on to another. This practice of relocating Fellowship to people’s yards operated to refocus participants’ energies on ‘helping’ and ‘making happy’ kin affected by ‘trouble’ (often illness or disputes). Numbers attending Fellowship were always boosted by this practice of dispersal, allowing the performative dynamics of kinship to be brought to bear on social space when difference could not be contained within the logic of ‘same way.’

Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr have developed a form for association in Fellowship that does not allow relations between people to become polarised into a hierarchy of leaders and followers. Participants at Fellowship will rebuff those who ‘put ’imself in front too much’ or ‘go over’ others by performing excessively or

dictating to others what they should and should not do. They inhibit the attempts of others to assert and define themselves exclusively and unconditionally as leaders and by doing so they preclude the possibility of being defined categorically as followers. In effect participants will not allow others to transform the egalitarian reciprocity of Fellowship into a one-sided or asymmetrical exchange, and thereby negate their own contributions to the group and their own interpretations of Christianity. Though there are qualitative differences established among participants by virtue of the fact that some individuals regularly demonstrate their capacity to take the lead, no individual or elite group have the exclusive capacity to mediate God's gifts for others. It is God then who is the ultimate authority recognised by Ngukurr Christians, an authority that is not solely contained within the ecclesiastical structure of the Church. Neither do Fellowship participants make submission the principle upon which association should occur. Rather they situate themselves within the flow of God's animating *kindness* (grace), wherein all (including God) realise *gudbinji* through the nightly practice of reciprocally performing His 'message.'³⁶ Submission therefore is rendered as service to *Dedi la top* (God), who gives the greater gifts of life and well-being to humans and who in turn is made the recipient of participants' care. Hence an asymmetry is established between God and humans through His provision of a 'way' for people to 'follow,' at the same time that mutual intimacy is created through His 'looking after' those who 'work for' Him in turn.

There is then no institutional or centralised authority that organises the Fellowship group or to which individuals submit. Rather the gathering is sustained by continually renegotiating standing and unity through the practice of taking turns to display knowledge and expertise. *Gudbinji* emerges from these organised enactments of distinction and relatedness so long as people's 'messages' or the manner in which they are expressed does not exceed what is authorised among participants at these gatherings. What, therefore, is the content of autonomy at

³⁶ The act of listening to Fellowship songs also functions to situate a person in the flow of God's *kindness*. I observed on a number of occasions individuals listening to tape recordings of Fellowship songs for hours on end in response to some crisis that had occurred in their lives.

Fellowship, given that participants do quite easily exceed the consensus of the group as the cases above demonstrate? It is to this question that I address my final remarks.

The content of autonomy at Fellowship

As discussed in chapter 2 of this work, the cultural construction of autonomy by Aborigines at Ngukurr renders it as both a given in human life and as a capacity for nurturant action that is increased over time. This latter form of autonomy is a realisation of social standing within a group, based principally on the willingness of individuals to provision others or organise events in which others can build shared identity and relatedness. It is this dynamic moreover that brings a contextually relevant group composed of overlapping networks of kin into being, generating a variety of locales wherein status and relatedness are realised through reciprocal interaction. Fellowship then is one such locale, beyond the context of patronymic families and residential groups, in which autonomy is demonstrated through the accumulation and reciprocal performance of diverse skills and Christian knowledge.

Though autonomy is configured as a status in similar ways at Fellowship as it is in a variety of kin-locales at Ngukurr often involving sports or rock bands, such sites do not generate an elaborate system of differentiation and esteem. They differ therefore from the way in which a fully adult status is realised in an Aboriginal ritual order objectified through country. Such an order sustains a hierarchy of statuses in relation to multiple sites throughout a region, based on the differential between those with knowledge of places, myths and ceremonies and those without it (Myers 1991[1986]:225). Though revelatory ceremonies are not a graded hierarchy that youth move through in a definite order, they nonetheless provide a series of steps toward developing full adult responsibility particularly for young men (Keen 1994:193). Participation requires that youth surrender their autonomy to those with the right to impart revelatory knowledge, depersonalised as ‘the Law,’ gradually acquiring the competence to perform as equals and ‘look after’ others in turn (Myers 1991[1986]:220-1, 241). This cultural construction of authority as nurturance therefore accommodates hierarchy within an essentially egalitarian framework, successfully masking subordination by the act of ‘looking after’ (ibid.). These

Dreaming-derived authority relations are most apparent in ritual, where senior men in particular are identified with a hierarchically encompassing level of organisation (ibid. 246, 254). Authority however is not identified with a permanent group of individuals; rather it is a temporary jurisdiction that must be continually renegotiated by autonomous actors involved with each other (ibid. 256).

Though Fellowship similarly objectifies authority as standing outside human relations, depersonalising it as ‘that Word langa God,’ there is no restricted knowledge under the control of any individual or elite group. It does not therefore accommodate a male or human hierarchy within its egalitarian framework, nor does it generate a series of steps toward developing an autonomous status. The social practice of ‘looking after’ then is drained of its significance to some degree as it does not endow specific humans with the exclusive capacity to mediate God’s authority for others. Though still reproduced as a value at Fellowship, ‘looking after’ or ‘helping’ do not generate among individuals any major differentials in status or produce a ‘vertical control’ of knowledge or resources favouring senior male leadership (cf. chapter 4 and 5 of this study). In point of fact the emphasis on egalitarianism at Fellowship is such that all perceive themselves as potentially capable of contributing in the same way to the continual pooling and circulation of knowledge and skills within the group. And participants vigorously and often consciously defend their autonomy to engage in this locale as equals, dismissing as self-interested and non-nurturant individual interpretations (even the minister’s and bishop’s) that do not accord with their own. Hence Christian ‘messages’ at Fellowship are most successful when they reiterate a truth already subscribed to – such as the belief that God is the real animating force in life. But even this interpretation has limited validity, if it is taken to mean that the Dreaming is not true or that it is opposed to ‘gospel-wei.’ In other words Fellowship does not successfully sustain objectifications of an external authoritative source to which all submit when it impinges on the plurality of locally owned knowledge that is created, for example, through a mythically inscribed landscape.

The form of hierarchy entailed in rhizomic organisation in the contemporary situation at Ngukurr is then no longer successfully masked as the act of 'looking after,' linking varied domains of activity as it once did. Though nurturant action and relatedness are widespread values for Aborigines reproduced in a variety of kin-locals, the relatedness it realises is largely unconnected with the task of accumulating knowledge of territorially focused site-based rites that sustain a ritual hierarchy. Such rites, often referring to country that is largely unknown for a generation born at settlements and being dependent on extensive knowledge of song cycles as Peterson notes (2000:213), requires a long-term dedication and discipline that is now less commonly pursued than it used to be. The status therefore of a boss and those he 'looks after' is no longer dialectically defined at different levels of the system, which once represented child-care, generational succession and male hierarchy as essentially similar activities constitutive of social development and order (Myers 1980:312, 317; 1991[1986]:221). And there is concomitantly less clarity and consensus concerning the principles for bounding domains of activity to which an order of authority applies.

The following chapter pursues these themes of intra-Aboriginal struggles to realise authoritative forms for association and practice in relation to activity that is focused on the church at Ngukurr. Though St Matthew's Church is a bona fide Indigenous organisation, the Aboriginal minister's tendency to assume exclusive control of its services conflicts with the Fellowship form of leadership associated with an egalitarian autonomy. Moreover his tendency to assume exclusive ownership of 'dead-body business' (funerary rites) is at odds with the way in which groups of kin labour to objectify relations of interdependence among humans and between human and spirit worlds. Hence there is a marked tension in relations at Ngukurr, where the laity struggle to define themselves as co-custodians of Christianity and where the claims of kin in the event of death deflects attempts to subsume all activities within the hierarchy of the church.

Summary

This chapter has provided an account of nightly Fellowship meetings, elucidating how they operate as a locus for collective action and decision-making. Involvement in many of the ministries and maintenance projects of the church is mobilised most often at Fellowship meetings, thereby enabling participants to contribute widely to Christian life at Ngukurr. Participants moreover show a marked preference to engage in activities that allow them to articulate social relationships through reciprocal performance and nurturant action. Hence nightly Fellowship is organised in terms of repeatedly performing Christian ‘messages,’ especially in the form of song-sets and serial choruses, which enables participants to demonstrate their expertise and capacity to act for others. Thus relations among humans (and with God) are structured according to the principle that social action in the form of reciprocal ‘helping’ is the means through which all have opportunities to realise prominence and *gudbinji*.

Though participants utilise Fellowship meetings as a locale in which to negotiate and re-negotiate their roles and standing, I have drawn attention to the fact that it does not generate an elaborate system of differentiation and prestige. In other words, the spatialised site-based hierarchy of statues realised through Aboriginal ceremony is not sustained by the social act of ‘helping’ to make God’s nurturing *kindness* manifest in the world. Fellowship in effect affirms relatedness associated with an egalitarian autonomy, but does not constitute a hierarchically encompassing level of organisation with which particular individuals are identified. Hence rhizomic organisation is modified by the nightly practice of taking turns to perform at Fellowship, which keeps the structuring of leaders and followers in flux. As a corollary, authority is easily exceeded at Fellowship where all participants have the same capacity to autonomously interpret ‘that Word langa God.’

Withdrawal is a common response when ‘bossing’ or ‘judging too much’ threatens the autonomy of Fellowship participants. Another response is to refocus people’s energy on ‘helping’ and ‘making happy’ those affected by ‘trouble,’ grounding in camp contexts the same kin-based dynamics of sociality that are

regularly brought to bear on Fellowship's form. There are however other intra-Aboriginal contexts where tensions in social relations are not mediated by obliquity, tact and focusing people's energies on realising *gudbinji* through reciprocal performance. The church is one such context where social relations are often fraught, due to the way in which its organisational logic demands that sociality be rendered obedient to an authority beyond negotiation.

CHAPTER 7:

CHURCH, OBEDIENCE AND KIN-BASED ACTION

This chapter contrasts the foregoing account of nightly Fellowship with activity that is focused on the church at Ngukurr. Though Fellowship is a ministry of St Matthew's Church, I nonetheless argued in the previous chapter that meetings constitute a principal locus in which Christians act collectively to endow themselves with prominence and *gudbinji* through reciprocal performance and nurturant action. In this regard, no individual or elite group mediates God's animating *kindness* for others. All participants equally contribute to its manifestation.

A major part of this chapter considers the challenges posed by church organisation, where its hierarchy provides the Aboriginal minister with the opportunity to exclusively mediate for others the institutional authority of the Anglican regime. The minister takes up sole responsibility to determine what constitutes right practice at Sunday worship and mixed-congregation funerals, where Fellowship participants are given no role to play and only a minor one respectively. There are few opportunities offered to other Christians to display their knowledge and expertise. And no authorising constituency of people is mobilised to validate the minister's determinations, particularly the demand that sociality be rendered obedient to a single authority in time and place.

Hence the church at Ngukurr displays its effects unevenly, as submission to authority is not the social action through which autonomy is realised or through which associations among Aborigines are brought into being (cf. chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6). There is then a marked tension in social relations focused on church activities, evident in the first instance from the way in which the laity invokes traditional owner-manager associations to render themselves as co-custodians of Christianity. It is also evident from the way in which kin-based action at the time of funerals operate as a challenge to the minister's tendency to assume exclusive ownership of 'dead-body business.'

I first provide an account of the organisation of the Anglican Church of Australia and how it operates at Ngukurr.

The Organisation Of The Anglican Church¹

The Anglican Church of Australia has a decentralised authority structure, having no single leader or church with the power to make decisions or rules for its member congregations.² Political control within the Anglican Church of Australia is vested primarily in its 23 dioceses and secondarily in its 1,450 (approximately) parishes. Parishes are bound together in different geographic regions and make up a single diocese. A bishop leads each diocese, being responsible for doctrine, worship and ordaining and appointing ministers to the parishes within his diocese. An ordained priest leads each parish, having responsibility, together with the parish council (if one is elected), for local decision-making concerning budgets, building maintenance and ministry needs. Parishes generally pay an annual tax to their diocese to fund its Synod, which is made up of representatives from each parish drawn from the ranks of clergy and laity. At the national level, the Anglican Church is administered by a General Synod made up of representatives from all 23 dioceses, which is held every 3 years.

The Anglican Church of Australia is characterised by two distinct doctrinal positions. The evangelical tradition emphasises biblical interpretation and conversion, whereas the Anglo-catholic tradition emphasises the continuity of spiritual authority within the church via apostolic succession as represented by the

¹ Material on the Anglican Church of Australia comes from their website (www.anglican.org.au) and from Blombery (1996).

² The Anglican Church of Australia characterises its authority structure as dispersed. However it operates in essentially the same way as a centralised or decentralised hierarchy, having a fixed ranking of offices and groups – the most authoritative of which (bishops) coordinates and controls its imperatives of association (see also footnote 3 below). As noted in Chapter 1, Anglican bishops are considered to be equal in orders, even where they carry the title of Archbishop or Primate.

episcopacy.³ The Anglican Church is, nevertheless, united in recognising a three-fold order of ministry of bishops, priests and deacons together with a corporate Christian life centred on the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist (Holy Communion). A cognitive engagement with the Bible is also required, given that the Anglican Church regards it as the ultimate standard of faith inspired by God containing all things necessary for salvation.

The three orders of ministry are authorised to perform different functions. Bishops have the greater power to ordain priests, deacons and other bishops, to confirm candidates in the faith and to represent the link between the church and the apostles appointed by Jesus. Priests may also represent the link between Christ, as the founder of the Church, and humans. They are authorised to baptise, administer Holy Communion, pronounce absolution after confession and give blessings to the laity. Deacons are permitted to baptise in the absence of a priest, to preach and lead prayer services but may not administer Holy Communion. Deacons generally are priested after some period of service in ministry. The Anglican Church also licences leadership among the laity recognising such offices as layreaders, pastoral care workers and deaconesses who may undertake special ministries in a parish and may lead Morning and Evening prayers. Administrative offices such as churchwardens and secretaries are also appointed by local branches of the church and are drawn from the ranks of the laity. Regular services conducted at Anglican churches are

³ Apostolic succession provides the Anglican Church with its spiritual base of authority. It is perceived to constitute an unbroken link with Christ as founder of the Church via the transmission of spiritual authority from Christ to the apostles. Bishops, as governors of the Anglican Church, represent most fully this lineage of authority. Many Anglicans also regard priests to be representative of the link between humans and God, being ‘in the place of Christ’ among people. Evangelicals within the Anglican Church, such as CMS, are loyal to its forms of worship, government and authority. They generally de-emphasise the exalted position of bishops and priests, regarding them as trained leaders of the congregation rather than as exclusively representing the spiritual continuity between humans and God. In addition, evangelicals recognise the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist but give great emphasis to the sacrament of the Word as the principal means by which God transforms people. In this respect CMS emphasise less the experience of conversion into the faith, often referring to the enthusiastic (but often temporary) taking up of a Christian identity as ‘froth and bubble.’ Real membership in the faith for CMS occurs through guided biblical instruction.

Morning and Evening Prayers and Eucharist Services, which may be conducted on a daily, weekly, fortnightly or monthly basis. Occasional services include baptisms, confirmations, weddings, funerals and larger events such as Fellowship Conventions and Bible Camps.

From the foregoing it is clear that the Anglican regime, though not centrally governed by the General Synod, is a hierarchical organisation centralised at the level of the diocese. It is moreover a rationalised sacramental order, utilising verbal discourse in the form of preaching and prayer as the medium of truth. Rationalisation refers here to the capacity of institutional carriers to propagate and control religious knowledge and identity over large social expanses, which is aided by the formal systematisation and codification of rite, doctrine and authority (Hefner 1993:14-5, 18-9, 24). Successful institutional carriers such as the Anglican Church can coordinate membership in the faith, which is premised on obedience to the teachings of Christ. Moreover it guarantees organisational continuity through the transmission of authority in the form of holy orders and offices to which parish churches, agencies (such as CMS) and individual adherents are loyal. The ecclesiastic structure of the Anglican Church gives authority a very specific character where properly endowed leaders (that is bishops and priests primarily) have a divine mandate and/or an institutionally endorsed appointment to carry out an evangelical mission. How the minister at Ngukurr struggles to mediate and reproduce this order is discussed below.

The organisation of the Church at Ngukurr

St Matthew's Church at Ngukurr is committed to the doctrine and polity of the Anglican Church of Australia and adheres generally to its major forms of worship, government and authority. St Matthew's is located in the parish of Ngukurr and is one of the six Aboriginal parishes within the Anglican diocese of the Northern Territory.⁴ The Aboriginal minister, MT, has been the incumbent priest of Ngukurr parish since his ordination in 1973 and has greatest responsibility for performing both administrative and sacramental functions in his church. Ngukurr parish also had

⁴ There are 15 Anglican parishes in total in the Northern Territory of Australia.

a Church Council (approximately 18 members), one churchwarden, one people's warden, one secretary, six newly licensed layreaders and four previously licensed layreaders, although only two of the latter were active during the time of my fieldwork, and two retired Deaconesses. Aboriginal people from Ngukurr hold all of these positions. In addition there were two non-Indigenous ministry support workers from CMS who were coordinating the Kriol Bible Translation Program at Ngukurr and providing ministry support to the Aboriginal communities at Ngukurr, Minyerri and Numbulwar in southeast Arnhem Land. Regular church worship is performed weekly, generally alternating between Morning Prayer and Eucharist Service. Occasional services at the church include baptisms, confirmations and funerals.⁵ The minister presides over most services (apart from confirmations) with Fellowship participants having a specific role to play only at funerals.

The Church Council is elected annually and the majority of its members, during my fieldwork, were regular participants at Fellowship. Several more were consistently involved with the Kriol Bible Translation Program. I was unable to ascertain how often the Council met due to the fact that meetings were infrequent and those that I tried to attend were constantly deferred. I was informed that Church Council meetings deal with administrative matters concerning church buildings and members are given tasks to perform such as preparing and cleaning the church before and after services and keeping the church services registry up to date. Matters to do with ministry to the parish and Ngukurr community were, however, dealt with at Fellowship services as I described in the previous chapter. With regard to the church, Fellowship participants take a role at funerals by leading the singing at the minister's direction. Licensed layreaders are permitted to hold funerals in addition to leading Prayer Services at the church. In actuality, however, only one senior male layreader

⁵ Church weddings have not become the norm at Ngukurr with only a total of 37 marriages having been performed for Aborigines at the church (sources include Cole 1968; NTRS 870/P1 1944-82, 1957-71, 1960-71, 1967-69; NTRS 1102, Vol 1, 1936-54; NTRS 1002, Vol 2, 1955-73; St. Matthew's Church Marriage Register). There were 3 church marriages recorded between 1908-39; 32 church marriages between 1940-69; 1 in 1972; 1 in 1978 and none since then (37 total). It is commonplace at Ngukurr, for both men and women, to have a series of monogamous unions over one lifetime, although it is also common practice for many couples to form permanent monogamous unions.

did hold funeral services on a couple of occasions while I resided at Ngukurr and one of the non-Indigenous pastoral workers led Sunday prayers in the absence of the minister. Fellowship participants also assisted the minister during Eucharist Services, collecting the financial offering (plate) and helping him to administer the bread and wine to the congregation. The organisation of St Matthew's Church is represented in Diagram 3 below.

The minister, in contrast to the ad hoc involvement of Fellowship participants in Christian activities, is constituted as the authoritative head of the Church at Ngukurr by virtue of his holy order and appointment as the incumbent of Ngukurr parish. He has the right to say when candidates are ready for baptism, confirmation and licensing as layreaders and to call for a convention to be held. As the highest ranking trained leader of the Anglican Church within his parish he is expected to provide a focus for unity and to regularly preach the orthodox teachings of Christ as given in the bible and conduct services according to the *Book of Common Prayer*. The minister upholds his office by taking almost sole responsibility for preaching at Sunday worship and in being willing to give bible readings regularly at Fellowship. Sometimes he is asked to do so by participants and sometimes he feels the need to work against laxity among the laity when, for example, there has been a fall off in attendance at church services. He also takes almost sole responsibility to teach Christian doctrine beyond the faithful at funerals because it offers, he says, 'another chance' to people 'to hear my word langa God.'⁶

⁶ I was informed that when one of the male layreaders performed a funeral service at St Matthew's Church he did not use the event to evangelise beyond the faithful in a major way. Rather he emphasised in his sermon the comfort that Christianity brings in the event of death and allocated more time to the family to speak about the deceased.

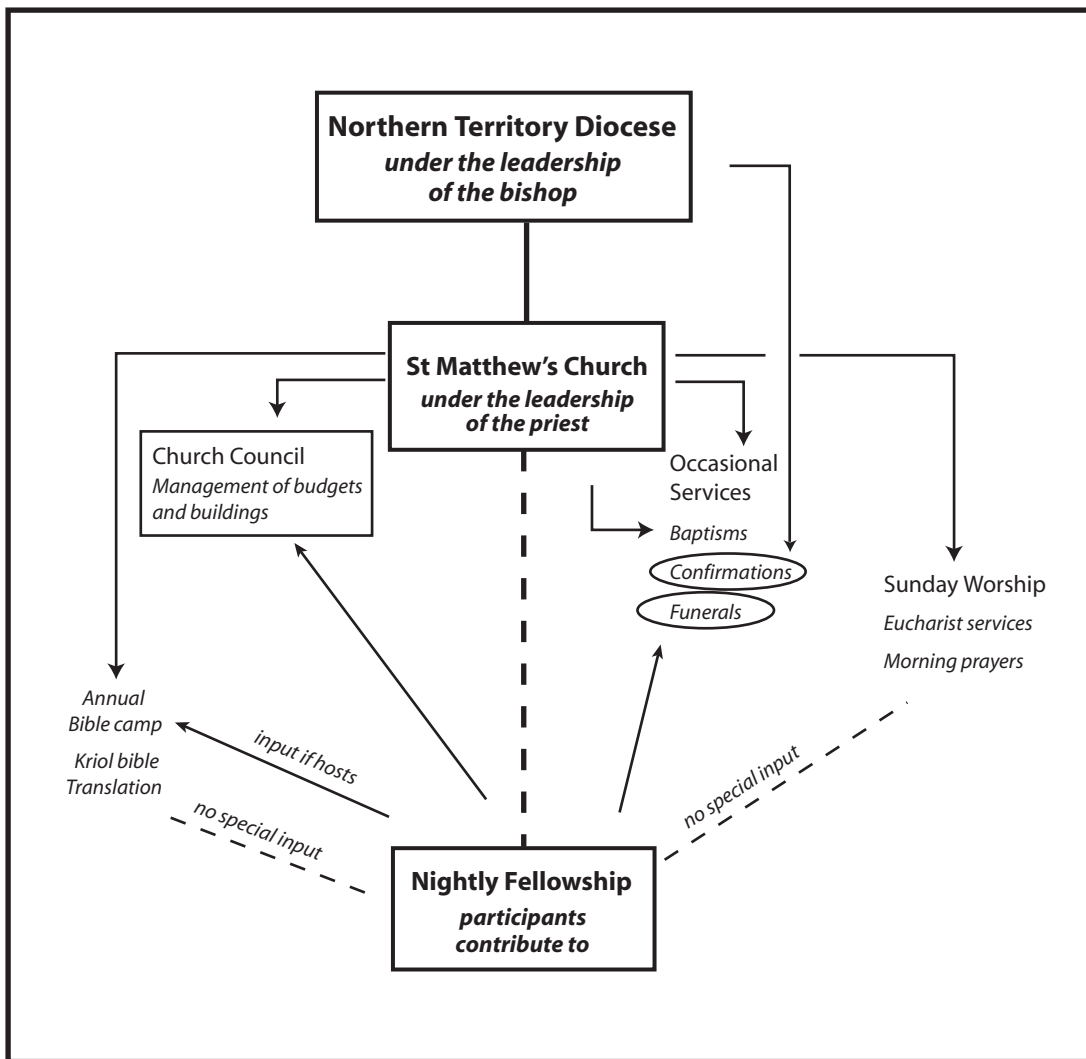


Diagram 3: The organisation of St Matthew's Church

In taking virtually exclusive responsibility to conduct church services and deliver sermons it is apparent that the minister perceives his position to be an authoritative and pivotal one within his parish. Moreover it will become evident from the content and delivery of his sermons, as discussed below, that he configures authority in terms of a ranked order of elite positions, which receive their legitimacy primarily through the ecclesiastical apparatus of the Anglican Church. In propounding how this hierarchy operates the minister's style of expression is didactic and premised on a rejection of the value of capacities grounded in reciprocity. Hence he emphasises the view that real order can only be achieved when sociality is rendered obedient to an authority beyond negotiation, rather than realised as relatedness. He also contravenes a widespread expectation that autonomy is achieved through the contributions of others.

Sunday service and universal community

Church worship at Ngukurr differs markedly from nightly Fellowship in two important respects. In the first place Sunday services, like Anglican services elsewhere, employ the systematised canons of the Anglican Church, which articulate and affirm the absolute truths of the Christian faith and the covenant entered into with God as Christians. In the second place specified social carriers, namely the minister in this instance, deliver services to a largely passive congregation in order to promote doctrinal orthodoxy within a standardised framework for its dissemination. These two mechanisms, of a set formulary for worship and guardianship of interpretation vested in specific members, link the transcendental imperatives of a Christian life to the church as an institution for the propagation and control of identity, community and knowledge across time and space (see Hefner 1993:18-9, 122). It is as Hefner (1993:19) argues these twin mechanisms, of doctrinal systematisation and socio-structural organisation, that are crucial to the successful replication of 'world religions' such as Christianity transregionally and transnationally.

Sunday worship at the church is the site where doctrinal systematicity and guardianship of the faith is most apparent in Christian life at Ngukurr. Morning

Prayer and Eucharist Service utilise Kriol versions of the approved liturgies for each, derived from the *Book of Common Prayer* (1662) and the revised *A Prayer Book for Australia* (1995). The liturgies used at the church generally include a recitation of the creed, scriptural reading(s), a sermon and formulary prayers of thanks, praise, intercession and closing. Services at Ngukurr take about two hours to complete due to length of the sermon and because each phase from opening to closing is punctuated with hymn singing.

The minister calls the congregation to Sunday morning worship by ringing the church bell in advance of the service. He is attired in vestments (usually a white cassock and stole) and takes a solitary position in front of the congregation who are arranged in rows of pews facing him. On the way to their seats people collect service books (Kriol), bibles (Kriol) and songbooks (English and Kriol) from a side table by the door, to read and sing from in unison at the minister's direction. There is no particular arrangement of members in terms of gender or kin as is apparent at Fellowship meetings. The minister leads proceedings from his position at the head of the congregation beginning the service with singing, accompanied by him on guitar as all join in. It is a marked feature of Sunday worship that the minister generally chooses which songs will be sung from both the Kriol and English songbooks, showing a preference for the latter.⁷ In addition Fellowship members do not play instruments at this time, nor use the repertoires of choruses usually sung at nightly Fellowship and Aboriginal language songs are not a feature of Sunday worship.

The utilisation of set texts for song and prayer gives a corporate form to worship at the church. The use of extended sermon and exegesis of scripture, however, consolidates doctrinal guardianship in the person of the minister who undertakes the burden of responsibility for articulating the fundamental tenets of Christian faith to the laity. His sermons always elaborate one core theme: that the specific task required for the creation of a transcendental community is obedience to

⁷ *Mission Praise* (1990), which the minister favours, contains 798 popular hymns in English. Many of these songs are more familiar to the older generation who grew up during the mission regime. The *Kriol Song Buk* (1994) contains 200 songs, a few of which were locally composed.

God, actualised through the institution of the Church. In his representations of this spiritual and social order the minister emphasises that submission to authority is the first and only discipline that establishes and maintains relations with God and among humans.

In elucidating the socio-structural dynamics of obedience to authority the minister distinguishes between types of human activity in terms of the potential they have for human reform in the present and redemption in the future. To get the laity to reflect on practice he frequently asks ‘what can really take us to the top?’ meaning an afterlife in heaven. ‘Nomo blekbala weis can take us la top,’ he says. ‘Blekbala weis and ceremony can’t take us la Dedi la top (God) – our mind goes deep in the dark when wi jingout (call out) this wei. Wi nomo free, wi really struggling.’ But he also represents *mununga* (white) ways to be equally lacking the requisite connection with a divinely sanctioned order and ineffective as a vehicle for redemption. As he says, ‘nomo mununga politics and mununga things can take yu la top.’ He describes *mununga* politics as being ‘like [Aboriginal] ceremony.’ ‘Even though God gave us all these things,’ he says, they are ‘only about earthly power.’ ‘They can give us good law like *Dhuwa* and *Yirritja* so we know how we are related, or give us leaders like the prime minister who works for peace here and in Timor.’⁸ But despite such benefits people are ‘really living in darkness when they don’t gibit self la top,’ when they don’t ‘saby (know) the new way that missionaries gave us,’ when they don’t ‘recognise God and Jesus Christ’ or ‘recognise his earthly representatives (bishops, priests and laity but also heads of State or monarchs such as Queen Elizabeth) and the authority of the Church in everything.’

The minister, in representing spiritual and social orders as differentiated spheres properly mediated and perfectly aligned through the institution of the Church, distinguishes between different types of leaders, positioning them within a hierarchy of authority that emanates in the first instance from God. This arrangement is represented in Diagram 4 below.

⁸ This reference was made during the time that Australia was involved in the Timorese situation in 1999-2000.

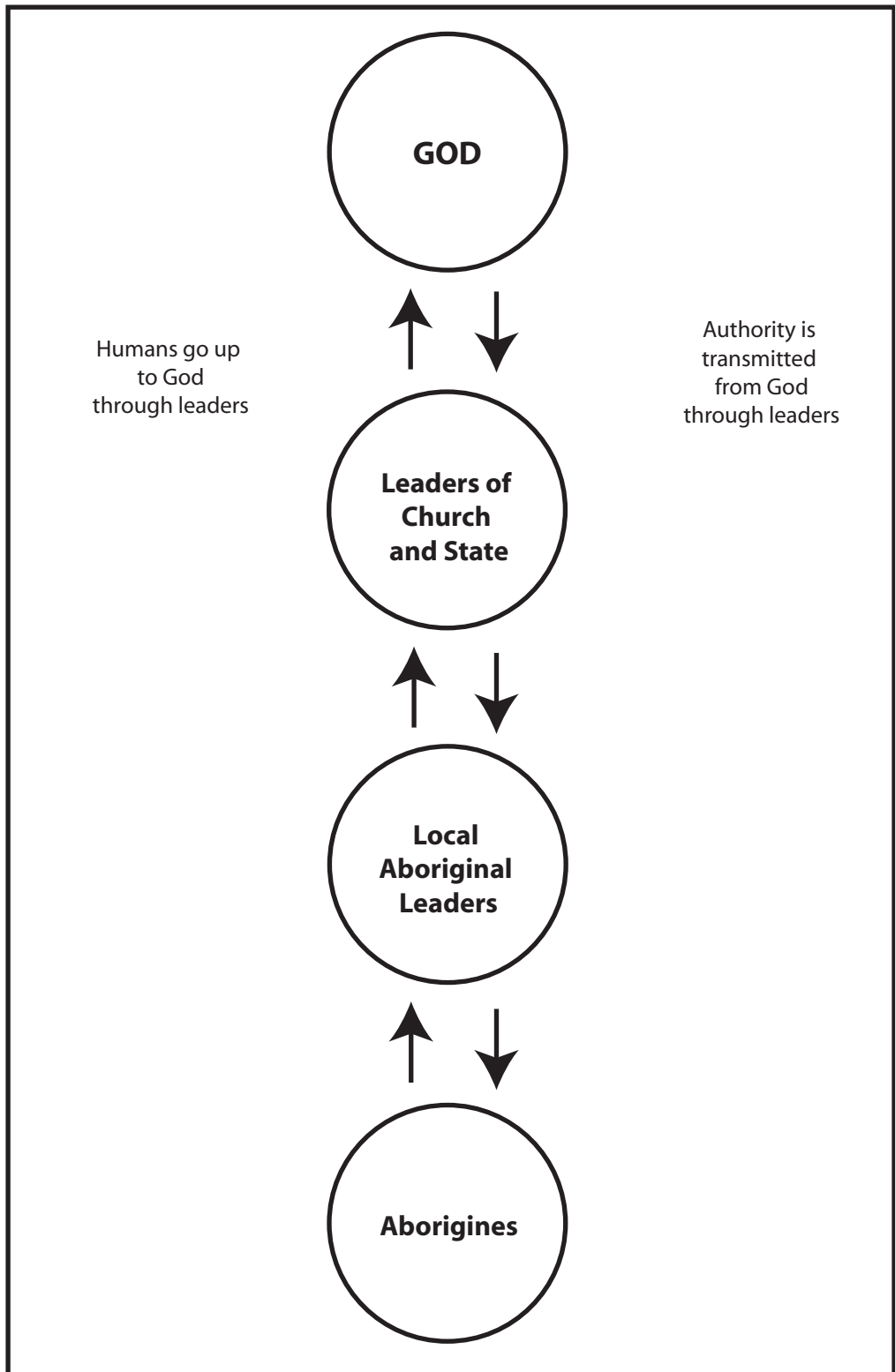


Diagram 4: The minister's representation of authority

As the minister describes it, ‘the apostles got their authority through Jesus Christ, and we Christians go through them to get ours.’ The laity does, in his view, represent God and Jesus Christ but their empowerment is limited. Specific individuals may not either have the requisite attributes of age and gender to lead others or be properly trained to do so. In conversation with me he remarked one day that ‘in blackfella way women do not have authority over men. Mitebi a woman could be minister here, but she wouldn’t have that power.’ He also informed me that properly trained Christian leaders were those who received licences from the Anglican Church; only then could they perform funerals and healings (I discuss this issue more fully below). The minister also views civil authority, particularly heads of State, to be representatives of God, and every Sunday service includes prayers for such leaders.

In proposing that order is constituted through a single authority in time and place the minister polarises relationships among people into a hierarchy of leaders and followers, the latter of whom are obliged unequivocally to support the former. Hence he linearises a dynamic Indigenous space of politics and sociality, divesting it of the instruments (i.e. reciprocal exchange and nurturant action) through which relatedness and leadership associated with an egalitarian autonomy are realised. This in turn gives an impersonal character to authority and sociality, making leaders representatives of an order to which all must submit. And by linking civil and spiritual domains of authority the minister identifies Ngukurr with a larger imagined and universal community that are Christian because, as he sees it, they all belong to God.

Aboriginal Christians, however, struggle with the minister’s monopolistic control of the church and the way in which he utilises it to affirm his pre-eminence in relation to others. In other words they struggle with the way in which his monopoly of events at the church denies them opportunities to demonstrate autonomy. This is illustrated most forcefully when the minister’s didactic expressions of authority, particularly at funerals, denies the relevance of kin claims on the deceased. How they respond to both of these issues is discussed below. In doing so I address the way in

which Aboriginal people generate sites for enacting sociality, making the act of ‘helping’ a fundamental principle for association. In this regard evangelism spreads most often through kin as a form of nurturant action, allowing individuals to demonstrate autonomy as a capacity to take responsibility for others. I start, however, with an account of one of the ways in which Aboriginal Christians view their relationship with God, applying to the business of Christian services an owner-manager model of human relations.

‘Owned business’ and nurturant action

The minister, in his role as parish priest, struggles for control of Ngukurr community and seeks to infuse it with evangelical fervour particularly through the church’s program of Christian activities. But his representations of authority and order have little validity in people’s lives in two significant ways. In the first place the laity do not always endorse the minister’s demand that people live in conformity with Christian truth as he specifies it, despite the fact that Aboriginal Christians and non-Christians alike both accept and respect his leadership of the church at Ngukurr.⁹ In the second place as I show, evangelism spreads through groups of kin as Christian knowledge becomes identified with specific individuals who use such knowledge to affirm relatedness and responsibility. I will deal with each point in turn.

In the first instance although the minister is often referred to as the boss, *junggayi* or *bunggawa* of the local church, he is not regarded as either an absolute authority or an exclusive source of interpretations about the world. Christian informants perceive him to be ‘very high on the *mununga* (white) side’ because he is both priest and canon of the Anglican Church. Hence people at Ngukurr regard him as a useful broker between them and this external order. He is, in their view, the

⁹ Many Christians and non-Christians at Ngukurr do not feel obliged to accept any of the minister’s views about Christianity, authority, death and so on. This is consistent with the way in which, as discussed in detail in chapter 6, difference (e.g. of meaning, belief, motivation) is accommodated through foregrounding similarity especially between forms of action oriented to enacting relatedness with others. See also footnote 26 below where I comment on the fact that the minister’s interpretation of sin is often rejected as ‘own idea’ rather than accepted as ‘that Word langa God.’

proper person to apply to for help in a variety of matters including pursuing courses at Nungalinga College and the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Many Aboriginal Christians, however, disagree with the minister's rendering of a perfectly aligned spiritual and socio-political order mediated through the church, proposing instead that they do not require white personnel to mediate their relationship with God. This view is represented in Diagram 5 below.

Diagram 5 was drawn for me one day by GPW, a senior Aboriginal man at Ngukurr who has maintained a long-term dedication to Fellowship activities and a close association with the minister. The diagram was used more than once to support the argument that it could not be incompatible with Christian faith to observe the obligations of Aboriginal culture, as God had made everything. Aboriginal Christians also propose that ceremony and Christianity are similar as each provides a system of discipline for youth and forums for joyous aggregation. Members of the laity at Ngukurr also struggle with the authoritative hierarchy of offices endorsed by the minister and the limited empowerment they have as followers. They suggest instead that a traditional construct of owner-manager land-ceremony relations could apply to the ecclesiastical structure of the Anglican Church (see also Anderson and Carroll 2005:14). On this view Ngukurr Aborigines propose that bishops are like *mingirringgi*, being the owners of Christian ceremony and having a passive identification with the ceremony they own.¹⁰ Priests are like *junggayi* having rights to

¹⁰ This passive identification has been described in Chapter 4 of this work, in the section 'Exchange, autonomy and the value of worker roles.' It references the way in which the managerial role in ceremony in southeast Arnhem Land is an authoritative one, because *junggayi* (manager) and *darlinyin* (custodian) are not endangered in the way that *mingirringgi* are by a site's totemic power. I do not imply that *mingirringgi* (owner) is a lesser role by virtue of this passivity, either in its application to the church or in the organisation of Aboriginal ceremonies. As one Aboriginal man pointed out to me 'if the *mingirringgi* don't ask for their ceremony to be put up there is no work for the *junggayi* and *darlinyin* to do.' By extension I took him to mean that *junggayi* and *darlinyin* would have no arena in which they could act responsibly and authoritatively if the *mingirringgi* does not offer this opportunity to them. I also took him to mean that all three categories of *junggayi*, *darlinyin* and *mingirringgi* are closely related in terms of leadership and authority. As Maddock argues (1972:36) the owner-manager relation in Arnhem Land is interdependent and cannot generate a social hierarchy because neither *Dhuwa* nor *Yirritja* moieties can autonomously perform their own ceremonies.

perform Christian services and to supervise the performance of others. Layreaders, then, are like *darlnyin*, who also have important performance rights in Christian services as they do in Aboriginal ceremony.

It is significant that the application of this model of owner-manager relations to Christianity prioritises roles (*junggayi* and *darlnyin*), which traditionally have the greatest rights to perform in Aboriginal ceremony.¹¹ By transposing church offices into traditional categories members of the laity seek to empower themselves as leaders invested with responsibility and authority, more closely related to that of *junggayi* or *darlnyin*, for the church. It must be noted however that the application of this model has no substantive reality in activities focused on the church. In other words no reciprocal interaction actually occurs between owners (bishops) and managers (priests) and custodians (laity) in the conduct of church services at Ngukurr, though no Aboriginal Christians I interacted with ever commented on this fact. None therefore seemed to recognise that reciprocity was not in actuality affirmed through the application of an owner-manager model to church matters. Nor was it ever discussed with me how the application of this model to the church structure could entail the kind of exchange of authority enacted in Aboriginal ceremony where reciprocal performances of different ceremonies allow moieties and semi-moieties to alternate in the roles of *junggayi*, *darlnyin* and *mingirringgi*.

¹¹ Owner-manager relations in southeast Arnhem Land operate in the way that Tamisari (2000:148) describes for northern Arnhem. People have the strongest rights to perform in the ceremony of their mother's group (*junggayi*), in their mother's mother's group (*darlnyin*) and in their father's group (*mingirringgi*), in that exact order.

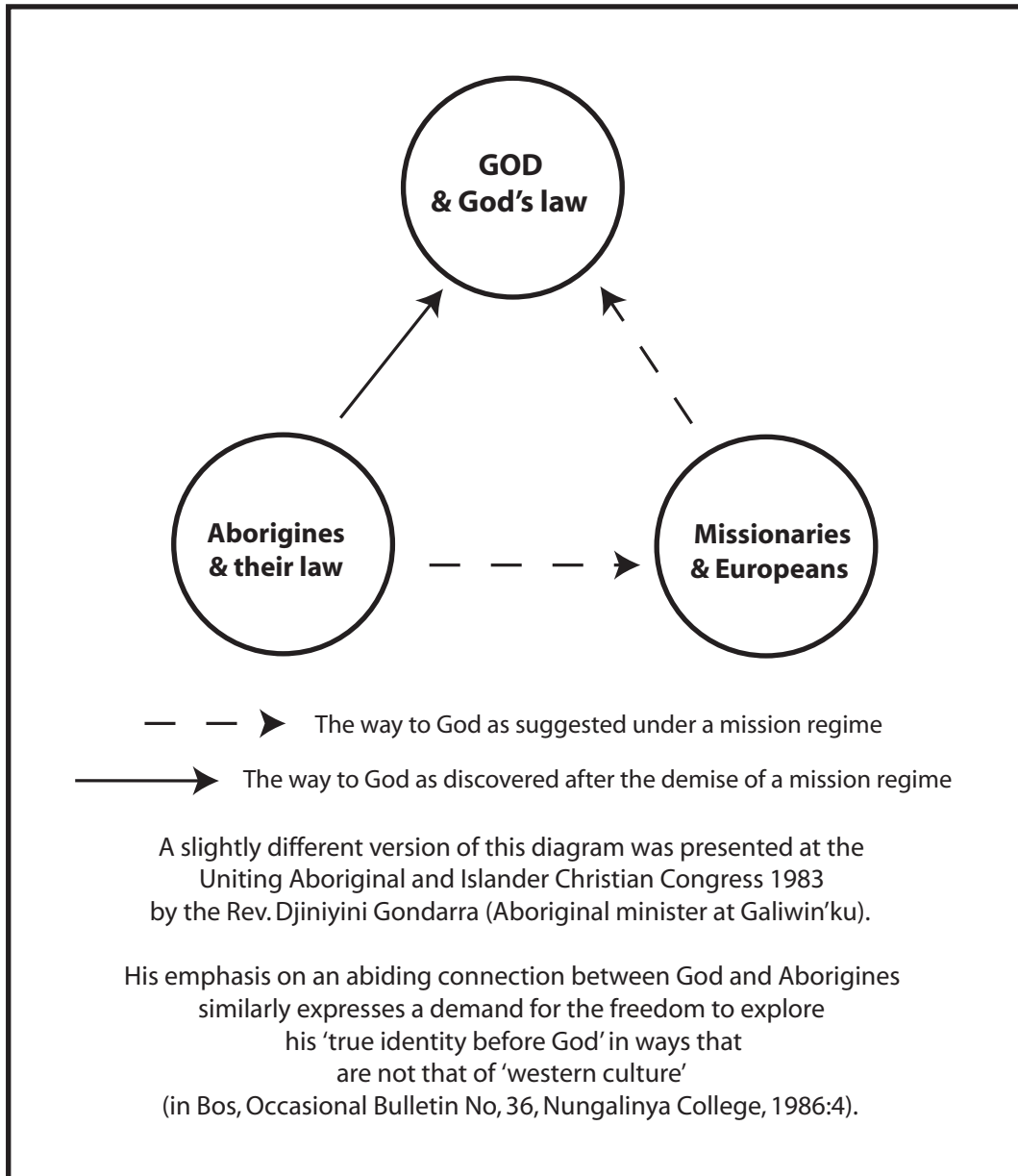


Diagram 5: An alternative perspective of the way to God

Yet the performance of healing services at Fellowship does provide an interesting example of the way in which interdependent roles are structured and affirmed through their enactment.¹² When a person requests a healing or blessing at Fellowship, often because of illness or prior to undertaking a journey, he or she takes up a passive relation to the source of their affliction or worry. This is reflected in the way that the person to be healed sits silently for the duration of the service, being partially encircled by all the other standing participants. While these members sing a set of songs to call in and focus the energies of the Holy Spirit on the person to be healed, one member makes a sustained extemporaneous invocation to God to make the afflicted happy and well. The service takes 15 to 20 minutes to perform and may be accompanied by the laying on of hands and anointing the person to be healed with oil.

The organisation of roles among people in healing-blessing bears a strong resemblance to the organisation of roles among *mingirringgi*, *junggayi* and *darlnyin* in ceremony. As recounted in chapter 4, *junggayi* (manager through mother) and *darlnyin* (custodian through mother's mother) mediate *mingirringgi* (owner through father) identification with country and perform work on his behalf in relation to the sites he owns. *Junggayi* in particular have a responsibility to preserve *mingirringgi* sites and are endowed with the capacity to petition them for bounty (Merlan 1982). People performing healing-blessing do not however undertake these roles based on

¹² The minister performed healing-blessing services most often during my time at Ngukurr. I observed that one senior male did act in this role as well and he was a licensed layreader of the Anglican Church. This was in keeping with the minister's view that only licensed layreaders should perform the healing prayer. However other Fellowship members claimed that any Christian could perform this act. The only difference between healing and blessing is the extemporary prayer spoken over the person, which will differ each time and address the specifics of the illness or journey (or special undertaking) to be confronted. In addition, Christian healing was not conducted outside of the context of Fellowship. On a number of occasions I observed that when a person was too ill to come to Fellowship a close relative or intimate acted as proxy for the afflicted; the healing was performed on the stand-in by the group. Prayers are said for the ill on many occasions, for example at the end of the Fellowship service or at the end of the Sunday service at church and people also pray at the bedside of the ill. A healing service differs from these other prayers in terms of the amplification of the invocation to God by the group and the intensification of the instance of connection with Him.

their actual affiliations to the afflicted, nor do they note this resemblance with ceremony. Nevertheless a qualitative difference among people is established through the roles they perform for each other during healing, with the person requesting the service being passively identified with a 'trouble' he or she owns. Other participants then actively amplify a request through song and prayer, asking God to direct his attention and power specifically to the afflicted. In effect those singing and praying on an individual's behalf enact for him or her God's *kindness* (grace), affirming in the process forms of interdependence and hierarchy premised on reciprocity and nurturance.

The attempt to apply an owner-manager model to church matters is based then on the way in which Ngukurr Christians interpret performance in a distinctively Aboriginal way. In doing so they bound human activities according to the principle of reciprocally 'owned business.' This in turn proliferate roles through which they can demonstrate their knowledge and capacity to take responsibility for others. Hence they constitute themselves as owners of 'slices of action' to use Sansom's terms (1982:131), endowing themselves with the requisite knowledge to perform and specify as a kin-locale a site in which roles and skills can be enacted. The differentials in autonomy created through the social act of 'helping' others are however minimal and never fixed, because donors will at various times also be the recipients of nurturant action.

These dynamics contrast with the minister's attempt to institutionalise the role of prayer-giver in healing-blessing as one that should be licensed by the Anglican Church. Though few members at the time of my fieldwork shared his view, it was nevertheless very apparent to me that Fellowship members were keen to become licensed layreaders. They hoped for a wider distribution of leadership roles among the laity in church matters and more opportunities to demonstrate autonomy. Since I left the field at least some of the six newly appointed layreaders in 2000 have been taking more of the services at the church (see Anderson and Carroll 2005).

They have also proposed that they would prefer a team ministry when the current minister retires, rather than one ordained man as leader of the church (ibid.).¹³

I turn now to my second point regarding the way in which evangelism spreads through groups of kin, being taken up as a way of affirming relatedness and responsibility through the social act of ‘helping.’ In this regard the wider community is often disposed to respond to appeals to get baptised and participate in Christian activities on the basis of kinship. For example a survey of the St Matthew’s records shows that evangelism spreads through families, with relatives being encouraged by kin to answer an appeal to receive a ‘blessing’ (baptism and/or confirmation).¹⁴ Diagram 6 below represents how this occurs at Ngukurr.

This partial representation of a few Christian families at Ngukurr shows how evangelism often spreads first through siblings ‘going forward’ at the same time or within a few years of each other. As shown below two of the three sisters from the DL family ‘went forward’ at the same time (in 1984), as did one of their spouses. An elder sister (HDL) supported FDL when she had prematurely lost a child, particularly by orienting her and JNG to Christianity. ADL got involved with Fellowship at the same time to show that she was ‘thinking of her sister too.’ HDL was oriented to Christianity by her spouse GPW, both being confirmed in the 1970s. GPW in turn was influenced by his sister FPW, who similarly influenced her brother’s child YPW to participate at Fellowship.

¹³ This view was reiterated by other Arnhem Land communities as surveyed in the report by Anderson and Carroll (2005). They consulted with members of the laity from eight Aboriginal communities, six of which were Anglican parishes in the Northern Territory. There was a clear response from these latter communities that participants wanted more meaningful leadership roles in their churches. They also commented that a bad leader was one who failed to offer leadership roles to others.

¹⁴ As discussed in the previous chapter regular appeals to the community to ‘come forward’ for baptism have been successful, especially during the 1990s. 64 baptisms and 49 confirmations have taken place during this decade. In contrast 66 baptisms and 56 confirmations were performed between 1970 and 1989.

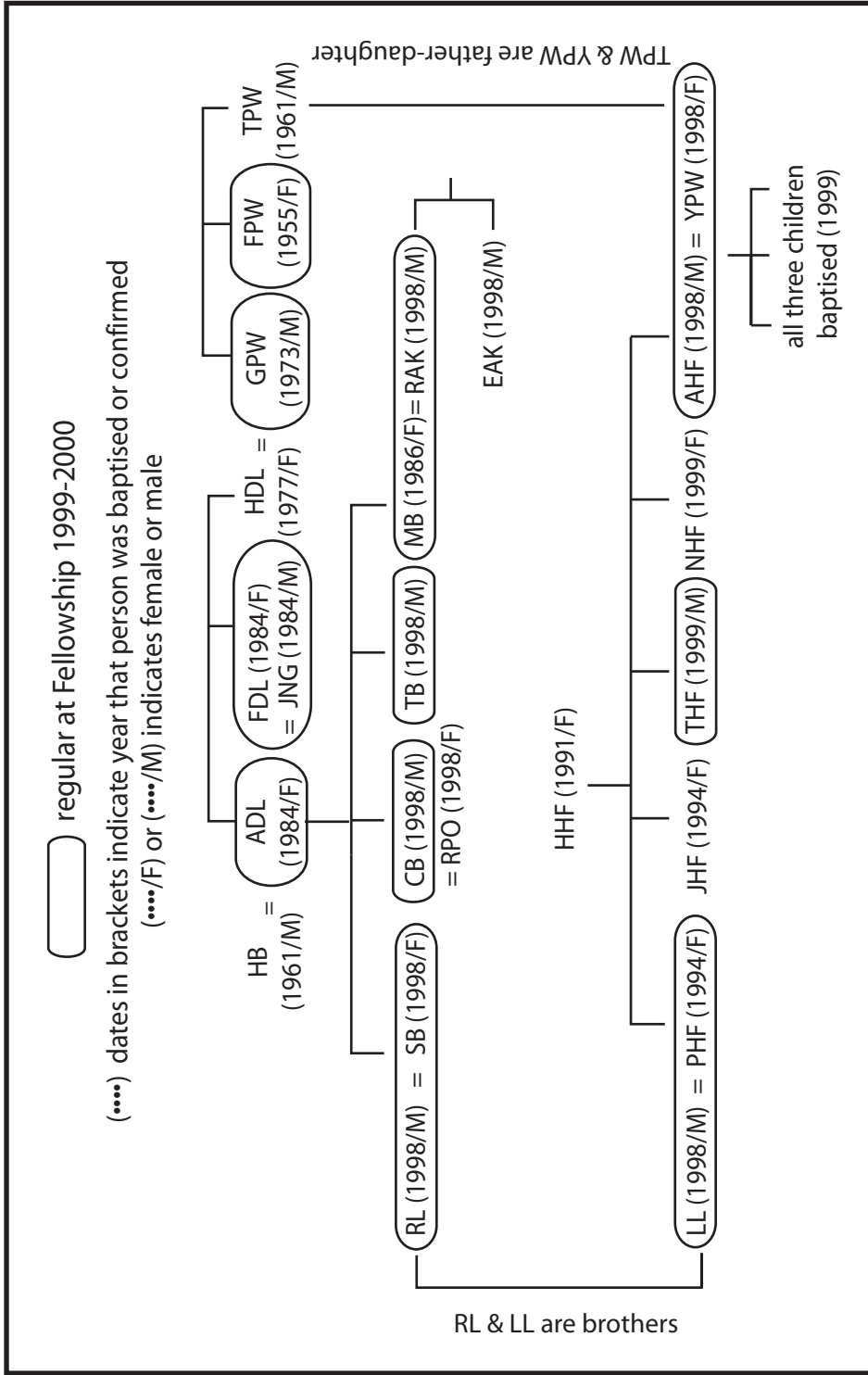


Diagram 6: Evangelism through kinship

Christianity is also transmitted from an older to younger generation at the same time that it spreads to other families through spouses. This is similar to the way in which other resources are often distributed through affinal connections so that several related households often form close residential groupings. It is noteworthy that here also ‘trouble’ and ‘helping’ are frequent motivations for action.

For example when ADL also lost a son prematurely her sister FDL and spouse wrote a Fellowship song for her. ADL also wrote a song about this crisis and her children, SB, CB, TB and MB, would ‘help’ her to sing it at Fellowship, her being ‘short wind, short wind’ due to asthma. The loss of ADL’s son who was in his mid 20s at the time of his death also prompted a couple of his brothers-in-law (RL and RAK) to get involved with Christianity in the late 1990s. It was not the case that the son was Christian; rather close relatives sought to support the living by affirming their relationships with members of the DL and B families. Unlike the G group described in the last chapter, members of the DL and B families had not developed extensive repertoires of Fellowship songs at the time of my fieldwork. But new troupes were beginning to emerge with FPW and her sister-in-law PHF consistently performing together with their spouses AHF and LL. Moreover other HF siblings were influenced to take up Christianity by their older brother and sister. It is also the case, however, that some individuals may only sustain a temporary Christian identity for the duration of an event or crisis. As shown in the diagram above, six individuals rarely or never attended Fellowship or the church during the course of my fieldwork and some no longer particularly identified as Christian.

Evangelism at Ngukurr tends to be transmitted through kin along multiple pathways including grandparents, parents, uncles, aunties, siblings and spouses. It radiates out from individuals to include relatives, specifying as kin-locales performance sites (e.g. involving joint singing and song-writing) wherein roles and skills can be enacted. Christian knowledge moreover becomes identified with specific individuals through repeated performance, attracting relatives to appropriate the paraphernalia of a site in order to participate as well (see Austin-Broos 2006:11). Evangelism through kinship, like the application of owner-manager relations to

church matters, is then premised on the social act of ‘helping’ rather than the principle of obedience to authority. In this regard it is an instrument through which differentials in autonomy are realised and sociality channelled in the direction of relatedness. Associated with nurturant action is the phenomenon of ‘reciprocally owned business’ or owning ‘slices of action’ (Sansom 1982:131), through which Aborigines including Aboriginal Christians bound and manage domains of human activity.

I pursue this theme further in the following section on funerals, juxtaposing different causalities of death for what they reveal about the labour required to restore relations among humans and between human and spirit worlds. In this regard the minister’s proposal that death is caused by disobedience is continually challenged by sorcery, which at Ngukurr encompasses both the benevolent and malevolent intentionality of humans and spirits.¹⁵ As I also show, the minister’s tendency to assume exclusive ownership of ‘dead-body business’ is circumvented by the action of kin who do not relinquish their claim on the deceased. Rather they assert their right to act in this event, affirming that ownership of death and the business of cleansing it belong to the social body of relevant relationships to the deceased. I first address some of the objectives entailed in mortuary rite and provide an account of current funerary practice at Ngukurr.

‘Dead-Body Business’

Morphy (1997) provides an analysis of Yolngu mortuary rituals, highlighting the fact that they provide, like other Aboriginal rituals, a context for political action and for social reproduction. They offer individuals and groups opportunities to represent their relationship to a dead person, which will set the stage for future action (ibid. 146). In this regard, clan gifts made to the deceased (ancestral words, dances and so on) enable him or her to be incorporated within the ancestral domain and

¹⁵ See also chapter 2, footnote 49, where I comment on the fact that spirit entities and sorcerers at Ngukurr are not regarded as being inherently malignant. Rather they are regarded as powerful, having the ability to harm or protect and to transgress or guard against it.

mark a desire for a continuation of positive relationships between groups (ibid. 145). Personal possessions of a dead person are also given as gifts to individuals who are tied by obligation or opportunism to the deceased. These gifts, made by those who organise the funeral, represent potentially active ties and may perpetuate the alliances and network of relationships wherein the deceased was embedded when alive (147). Death then brings into focus a network of connections centred on the individual, where matters of inheritance, succession and seniority in a clan or among sisters' sons must be re-negotiated and re-established (ibid. 135-6). Hence funerals are political affairs, as groups vie to ensure that their sacra (law) is given sufficient representation in public contexts (ibid. 129), and individuals vie for the opportunity to exercise control over a set of people who have an interest in the deceased (ibid. 130).

Though I do not provide an analysis of traditional mortuary rite below, I nonetheless draw attention to the political nature of Aboriginal funerals for two reasons. The first is that death is similarly a resource for the living at Ngukurr, which can be used to support subsequent political action and legitimise it. In this regard the church, through the action of the minister, equally utilises the opportunity provided by the event of death to (attempt to) exercise control over those who have an interest in the deceased. The second reason relates to the fact that political activity is in some respects analogous to sorcery at Ngukurr, as both acknowledge power relations, self-interestedness and their effects in the world. The two differ however as sorcery is always a covert activity to the extent that accusations about it only ever circulate as rumour and gossip. Political activity on the other hand, though often covert with regard to male ritual cults for example, is frequently public – being utilised to represent and affirm the current standing of individuals and families at Ngukurr.

As funerals entail both political and social objectives, they are long and large events at Ngukurr, which draw in many relatives of a deceased person from other Aboriginal towns. Currently church services are conducted alongside traditional

mortuary rites, the latter of which both precede and follow the burial.¹⁶ Each of these sets of rites proposes, through its performance, a quite different journey for the spirit of the deceased and quite different forms for association among humans. Because these rites have been kept distinct they are not publicly a negotiation between different social orders. Rather the simultaneous yet separate performance of them are described locally as ‘two-way’ practice – a common local gloss for distinctions made between Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultural elements that are nevertheless brought together at certain times.¹⁷ Church services, however, are intended to mark a separation between Aboriginal culture and Christianity, reflecting a decision made by the minister and senior men during the 1970s to keep these rites distinct.

When death occurs at Ngukurr several weeks may pass before the burial is held so that all the relevant, especially close, relations of the deceased can gather to mourn and resolve the social consequences of their loss. Traditional mortuary rites are carried out both prior to and after burial to free the living from the dangers associated with the spirit of the deceased.¹⁸ During these sessions the relative’s,

¹⁶ In some rare cases at Ngukurr only the former or the latter is observed. It is more usual for burial to be accompanied by both Christian and traditional mortuary rites. The simultaneous performance of these rites has become the most visible expression of routinised ‘two-way’ practice. Prior to the 1970s a small Christian service was conducted either at the grave or in the church and traditional rites were not held at the mission itself until the late 1960s (Sandefur, 1998:237-8). Before 1975 the community did not have a morgue, so could not hold a corpse for the length of time needed to gather relatives for the large services that are conducted today (ibid. 238).

¹⁷ ‘Two-way’ is a common Aboriginal gloss found in the Aboriginalist literature. See for example Maddock (1977), Trigger (1985) and Tonkinson (1988) on the socio-cultural opposition of Aboriginal ritual and bureaucratic powers, and see Kolig (1972), Austin-Broos (1996b) and Swain (1988) on the opposition and reconciliation of Christian and traditional ways of being. As Maddock (1977) and Austin-Broos (1996b) have noted in different places such talk is not a description of what life is actually like, rather it is a comment on changed circumstances and on ways to address these new conditions.

¹⁸ The order in which particular traditional mortuary rites are carried out varies at Ngukurr. There is a multiplicity of different styles for holding ceremonies because there is a confluence of different language groups residing there. But all mortuary ritual is dynamic and variable in form (Morphy 1997:126). Rites to cleanse and purify people and places can occur either before or after the burial.

residence and belongings of the deceased are ‘smoked’ — that is the smoke from burning ironwood leaves is passed about people’s bodies and things associated with the deceased to cleanse and separate them from the dead. There is a ban on naming the deceased so that all social ties with his or her identity are broken. In yet other rites food and some of the belongings of the deceased are given to appropriate kin, while other possessions of the deceased are destroyed. In addition *bunggul* (corroboree songs and dances including those of a deceased’s totemic affiliation) is performed to ‘wake up and sing’ the deceased’s spirit (*mugar*) back to country so that it does not stay around to pester the living any more. Mortuary *bunggul* is also performed to make both the living and the dead *gudbinji*. It does so by drawing attention to what human and spirit worlds have in common, which placates the spirit of the deceased through the reassurance that there is an ongoing relationship between the living and the dead (see Marett 2000:25-6, 2005:55, 65-6). On the day of the burial *bunggul* is also performed when removing the body from the morgue to the church grounds. At this time there is a marked enactment of the separation of traditional mortuary practice from Christianity at the boundary of the church grounds. A row of dancers stand in front of the coffin screening it from the church, while other performers simultaneously push it through the dancers divesting it of its totemic paraphernalia in the process.¹⁹ From there the unmarked coffin is carried by a different set of relatives across the grounds and into the church where the minister takes over proceedings.²⁰

Bunggul, however, is performed both before and after the interment to drive away the spirit of the deceased and reconcile it to its new status (see also Marett 2000:25).

¹⁹ The coffin is often decorated with a sheet of cloth displaying totemic and moiety designs associated with the deceased. A pole displaying moiety emblems is often carried in front of the coffin. These items are removed before the coffin enters the church grounds.

²⁰ After the church service *bunggul* performers receive the coffin back again. They replace the deceased’s totemic paraphernalia and perform more dances and songs as they carry the coffin to the edge of the graveyard with a cortege following. There the minister takes over again to give the final prayers before burial with mourners at the graveside. More camp *bunggul* will generally follow the burial either in the yard of a relative of the deceased or on a nearby piece of open ground, later the same day or some days later.

It is at this point that the minister uses church service as an opportunity to exercise control over his congregation and mediate for them a version of ownership that gives him a pre-eminent role to play at funerals. It is moreover at this time that a tension between what Christian and traditional rite propose about human sociality emerges. This tension is focused on the issue of order, which the minister associates with the univalent authority of God to bestow life. Hence he proposes, as representative of God and church, that discipline is the only labour required to present reform and future redemption. I address these aspects of church service in the following section.

Discipline, disobedience and death

The interior of the church is usually decorated with bunches of artificial flowers on the day of a funeral. They are liberally distributed throughout the church in vases, and attached at regular intervals along the walls and to each end of every wooden pew. The minister, clothed in vestments, encourages the funeral congregation to be seated before the coffin is brought into the church. Often the family of the deceased and relatives performing traditional mortuary rite will accompany the coffin from the morgue to the church, and some will remain outside for the duration of the service. Fellowship members, however, often joined by some of the elderly Christian women who don't attend nightly meetings, will have taken up positions behind the minister and be ready to play the opening set of songs as the coffin is carried in. The set used to open and close the service is the same as that used for healings at Fellowship and focuses attention on the nurturant *kindness* (grace) of God. As the last bars of the opening songs fade away the coffin is placed on a raised platform in the centre of the church and the congregation arrange themselves in groups of kin, with the relatives of the deceased at the front.

All funerals I attended at the church were 2 to 3 hour-long performances that combined hymn singing, bible reading, sermon and dedications from relatives and friends of the deceased. Only the minister gives the readings and provides the sermon, occasionally pausing to direct the Fellowship troupe to lead the congregation in song. The minister likes to begin the service with Psalm 23: *The Lord is my*

Shepherd and generally follows with several bible readings and a long sermon, which elaborate on the themes of Christ's resurrection, redemption from sin through obedience to God and its eventual transcendence in death.²¹

The majority of the minister's exegesis is devoted to providing the congregation with a divine causality for death. He therefore gives an account of why death occurs and what the proper response of people should be to the event. In the first instance he always denies that sorcery, disease and misadventure was the cause of a particular death. For example the death of a 40-year-old man, who passed away in his sleep one night, was interpreted in several ways – one view being that the man 'had too much fat around his heart,' which is a local gloss for heart trouble. At the funeral however, the minister claimed that he knew in advance that this man was going to die 'because of the sickness in his heart — which was sin.' Rumours of sorcery had also been circulating prior to the funeral and one account proposed that a 'clever' (a sorcerer capable of divining the machinations of other sorcerers) had found a needle and hair in the deceased's heart, though the 'clever' had not ascertained who had been responsible for the attack. The introduction of poison or foreign objects into vital organs (and blood) or the removal of blood and organ is commonly regarded as evidence of sorcery at Ngukurr.²² And at every funeral I attended the minister always focused on the anatomical area of the alleged sorcery attack in order to contest this causality. For example he pronounced on another occasion that God had given everyone a sign that death had a divine causality because a young man, who had been found dead by the river-bank one morning, had 'no marks,' either 'from crocodiles or anything, on his body.'

²¹ Some of the minister's regular readings were 1 Corinthians 15:1-12 about the resurrection of Christ; Thessalonians 1:2-10 about the life and faith of the Thessalonians; 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 about the conduct of the apostles of Christ. His final reading is generally from Revelation 20:6-10 and 21:5-8, which elaborates on the day of judgement and the second death in the lake of fire for those who have disobeyed God.

²² This is consistent with accounts found in Elkin (1994[1946]:158-60), Munn (1970:186) and Berndt (1982:125-6) among others.

The minister further explicates a divine causality for death by accounting for its genesis in terms of sin inherited from the time of God's creation of Adam and Eve. As he explains it 'God is greater than anything you can think of, He is the Dreaming for the world. He makes everything – mountains, animals, our life and we have to buildimup inside that soul and gibit back la God in the end.' 'God,' he says, 'is the boss of everything la world, from *amuri* (FF) right up to Adam.' However, 'Adam and Eve,' as he explains, 'bin make mistake' – they failed to obey God so now all of their descendants are separated from Him because of sin.

The minister also explains that at the moment of death God provides two alternative trajectories for the soul, having 'a plan for us' that we do not comprehend. On the one hand God chooses 'the perfect time' for death and when it comes 'we gotta be happy and gudbinji.' 'We can cry for death,' the minister says but we 'can't blame blackfella way, because only God owns life, not the *junggayi*, *mingirringgi* or Queen.' Moreover, when God chooses the time for death 'we go forward to Him' to a place of 'no pain, no murder, no suffering, no blaming [in] that country – only happiness, only jidan gudwei (satisfaction with current arrangements), only gudbinji (well-being).' On the other hand, as the minister describes it, death can also result in an eternal separation from God 'in the lake of fire' where all those who have not heeded His word are consigned at the final judgement (from Revelation 20:11-15).

The minister does not condemn the deceased at the funeral, rather he utilises the event to emphasise for the living what the consequences of their actions are for the present and future. Firstly, he always claims the deceased for Christ saying, for example, that the 'man in the box' was a good man, good to his family and community and a good Christian. In another instance he might say that the deceased never forgot the teachings of the missionaries and that the person was a good worker for the community. Secondly, the minister frequently asks rhetorically 'what is killing us?' adding a commentary about the fact that Ngukurr sustains, like other Aboriginal communities, a high premature death rate.²³ A joint funeral for a middle-

²³ According to Taylor, Bern and Senior (2000:80) Ngukurr has a death rate approximately 4.5 times higher than that of the general Australian population.

aged woman and a child who had died within days of each other prompted the minister to ask the congregation ‘why are we dying? Why do we [Aborigines] only go halfway?’²⁴ He then described the double tragedy as related to the conduct of the living: ‘First,’ he said, ‘we got that bad news that woman bin die, ok everybody sad – but then some bin play cards, go drinking, use ganja, use petrol – then bang, we get this other bad news that baby bin die.’ ‘WAKE UP YOU MOB,’ he declaimed, ‘that baby had no bad inside, clean one, no sin. God bin take im as warning that yu mob are going wrong way.’ Then he urged the congregation to ‘come to service [Fellowship] tonight and to church and try to get that life up to 100.’²⁵

From the foregoing it is apparent that the minister attempts to orient people to the univalent authority of God by transforming bio-medical conditions into bio-moral ones, which can be addressed by right Christian action. Although he envisages the soul as individual he gives sin a collective character, particularly through his rendering of death as an explicit warning to the living for disobedience against God.²⁶ He further divorces responsibility for the business of cleansing death from the social body of relations to the deceased by proclaiming God’s ownership over life. He thereby denies the relevance of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous forms of leadership (i.e. *junggayi*, *mingirringgi*, Queen) in the event of death and assumes, as representative of God and church, exclusive ownership of ‘dead-body business.’ By employing the notion of ownership as the means to infuse funeral congregations with

²⁴ The minister was commenting on the fact that premature death strikes Aboriginal people most often between the ages of 40 and mid or late-50s.

²⁵ All funerals presided over by the minister that I attended at the church accounted for every death as a judgement on the living for sin, manifest in terms of the visible social disorder at Ngukurr. The litany included alcohol consumption and other substance (petrol, marijuana) abuse, fornication, fighting, swearing, card-playing and excessive indulgence in music, sport, dancing and other entertainments.

²⁶ In the last chapter I noted how within Fellowship ‘judging too much’ signals a breach of Ngukurr modes for action and association because it indicates an excess of negatively evaluating other people’s behaviour. Many Christians and non-Christians at Ngukurr do rebuff the minister’s interpretation of sin as collective disobedience, resulting in premature death. They say it is only ‘im own idea’ and that he should not ‘blame us so much.’

Christian truths the minister polarises relationships between people and God and between people and institution. He does so by suggesting that the only labour required of the living is discipline, making nurturant action and the autonomy it realises an irrelevance. Hence he emphasises the divergence between the reality of current conditions of social disorder at Ngukurr and the ideal of a divinely constituted human order. He aims thereby to convince the congregation that ‘right way’ requires subordination to the transcendent authority of God and church.

Kin claims at the time of funerals both in the performance of traditional mortuary rite and during the church service, however, neither endorse the minister’s account of ownership nor his demand that sociality be made obedient to an authority beyond negotiation. Before addressing how kin insert themselves into church services to claim their ownership of the deceased, I first address the way in which most death is interpreted at Ngukurr.

Sorcery, endangerment and protection

In the Roper region of Arnhem Land there are Aboriginal myths in circulation that explain how death came into the world. A Nunggubuyu version concerns the trick played by moon on native cat to lure the latter into a billabong so that he drowns, thereby condemning humanity to mortality (Heath 1980:190-4). An Alawa man, Willie Gudabi (1998:23-4) provides a different account concerning the actions of the Rainbow serpent at Walgundu cave just south of Ngukurr. The serpent, he says, took revenge on ‘hundreds of people,’ bringing down lightening to burn everybody, because two young couples had killed and eaten her babies (ibid.).²⁷ Hence death, he concludes, was brought into the world because ‘a mistake bin made’ by humans (ibid.). Though such myths exist, detailing ingenuity or breach, they have little interpretive salience for Aboriginal people because they do not explain how or why a particular person has died (see also Maddock 1972:161). Sorcery, in fact, is

²⁷ It is noteworthy that Willie Gudabi’s explanation of death resembles the Genesis story concerning the ‘mistake’ made by Adam and Eve in eating the forbidden fruit, consigning humanity to mortality. Various stories given to me by Ngukurr Aborigines concerning Walgundu cave often carried this theme and were likely modelled on the Genesis story.

the most common interpretation for almost every death that occurs at Ngukurr because the majority are premature. Exceptions to this only apply either to the very young or the very old, because neither have a strong social identity at these times of life.

Lifestyle diseases and misadventure are common causes of death at Ngukurr as autopsy reports show. Rarely however are natural causalities for death such as heart disease or trauma sustained in a car accident accepted as true accounts of why a person has died. Neither are the minister's attempts to dispel rumours of sorcery successful because allegations generally continue to circulate for many years after a particular death has occurred, often erupting into violent disputes between different families. Though many people at Ngukurr simultaneously apply to western medicine, Christianity and traditional healing during times of illness the former epistemologies have less force in accounting for death. Rather, informants indicated that neglect, revenge, envy, ritual transgression or exposure to something secret-sacred were the most likely sources of endangerment to life.

Allegations of sorcery are fuelled by the actions of spirits of the deceased who appear to living relatives for a variety of reasons. In the first instance the spirit of a deceased person 'comes out' to a relative while he or she is sleeping and indicates to the sleeper how the deceased died. In the case of the man who died in his sleep (interpreted as sin by the minister and heart disease according to the autopsy), his spirit also 'came out' to his sister in a dream and showed her the hair and needle lodged in his heart. Her family were of the view that the dream provided corroborating evidence that sorcery had occurred. It is also the case that deaths that have occurred years previously are remembered as acts of sorcery. When I undertook a trip from Mataranka to Ngukurr with an Aboriginal man one day the 200km journey was, for him, punctuated by multiple signs of sorcery, evident by gouges cut into bitumen and ditch where cars had gone off the road killing all passengers. In all cases he said 'somebody' who wanted revenge on or was envious of one of the passengers 'bin do something' to make the cars go off the road and he knew because their spirits had appeared to relatives to tell them so. Moreover public allegations of

sorcery are always made in this oblique fashion that ‘somebody bin do something’ – indicating both the seriousness of making such a charge and the difficulty of ascertaining its source.

In the second instance spirits of deceased persons often ‘come out’ to living relatives to safeguard them from malevolence or provide them with bounty. They are often referred to as ‘angels’ at Ngukurr as their actions are benevolent. A middle-aged woman recounted for me how her deceased father and his cousin had intervened on many occasions in her life to show her why she or her children had gotten ill and to warn her of impending danger. The man who travelled from Mataranka to Ngukurr with me similarly had an experience where his deceased brother-in-law had intervened to prevent him from taking a journey that would have resulted in trouble had he gone.

Sorcerers can also temporarily possess the living and cause them to kill others. Exposing oneself to dangerous entities can also have disastrous results for oneself or for those around one (see also chapter 2). In several instances of violent death at Ngukurr Aborigines exonerated the person who had carried out the act (though not the courts) because they believed the killer was ‘not really himself’ at the time. In one case where a man killed his wife some of the acts he performed on her body were so bizarre that he was judged to be under the influence of some malevolent entity or sorcerer, which caused him to behave as he did. Inquests too are held to try to prove who might have enacted sorcery on another. In the case where the young man had died by the riverbank, the family insisted that one of the deceased’s companions from the night of his death jump over the coffin to prove his innocence. He did so and the allegations of sorcery against him terminated. Nevertheless the man in question still feared that the family of the deceased would take revenge on him for having neglected to look after the younger man who had died.

I have addressed in the foregoing how revenge, envy, neglect and transgression form core themes in Aboriginal interpretations about death at Ngukurr in order to highlight that neither divine nor natural causalities have come to dominate

as true accounts of why a particular person has died. Moreover, Ngukurr Aborigines experience themselves as inhabiting a world informed by spirits, many of which are deceased relatives who provide protection to the living and who are a constant reminder to them of an ongoing relationship between human and spirit realms. Human activities and the activities of spirit entities are then co-extensive, with practices such as sorcery and rite being directed to attacking, acquiring or subduing the potencies of other beings (cf. Kapferer 1997:6, 268). In proposing that neglect, revenge, envy and transgression are the most likely sources of endangerment to life, Aboriginal people recognise that malevolence and destructiveness are real factors in human and non-human intentionality. Hence sorcery is one of the ways in which they acknowledge power relations and their effects in the world, accepting it as a given means of attacking its oppressive manifestations – especially apparent in the rise of some to positions of prominence and control (see also chapter 2).²⁸ But Aborigines at Ngukurr also express this reality in terms of political struggle, rendering it as a particular form of labour required to sustain good relations. It is to this issue that I address my final remarks, describing the events of one funeral where the actions of a family made it clear that ownership and responsibility could not be encompassed within the authority of God and church.

²⁸ As noted in chapter 1, physical or sorcerous retribution is entailed in the expectation of reciprocity and considered to be a valid means of restoring equivalence among individuals and groups (see Myers 1991[1986]:115, 170). I also noted in chapter 2, footnote 42, the practice of ‘cursing’ at Ngukurr, which is most often directed at the centres of administration and service delivery especially the store, council offices and health clinic. The purpose is to bring business to a standstill and publicly demonstrate that the curser is not without knowledge and therefore power. It is a means to acquire what one wants by involving those who can dis-invoke the curse and who may then be prevailed upon to help settle whatever issue gave rise to the curse in the first place. In this regard cursing and other magical practices still relevant to people at Ngukurr (including *tjarada* – a type of love-song ritual used to attract a partner who otherwise would have no interest in the performer and *mundi* – a type of good luck charm used to influence the outcome of an event) are directed to making the desires of others conform to one’s own. Love magic in particular indicates an attempt to overcome another’s autonomy (see also Myers 1991[1986]:250).

Political struggle, alliance and leadership

The funeral I describe was for the man in his early 40s who died prematurely from heart disease. Having died in his sleep one night, allegations of sorcery rapidly followed and were made by his own and other families. He was not particularly eminent in ritual or secular matters but his senior brother is important in both activities at Ngukurr. And it was this man who pulled together and focused a group of close relatives, throughout all the mortuary rites, to honour their obligations to the deceased. Hence the senior brother utilised the church service to demonstrate his leadership of those closely connected to the deceased and made political struggle a core theme in his interpretation of this death to do so.

All funeral services at the church allow time for family and friends to make a dedication to the deceased. After the minister had interpreted this man's death to be a result of 'the sickness in his heart, which was sin,' the family took their turn. The group consisted of the deceased's spouse, five of his siblings, primarily sisters, their children and grandchildren and the deceased's senior brother. The family made an impressive turnout, all dressed in black and white clothing, as they followed behind the senior brother and *bunggul* performance from morgue to church. Now they stood facing the congregation and proceeded to sing a long set of fellowship songs, with the deceased's spouse and then each sibling taking a turn to lead. They drew on a large repertoire of choruses that had been written and gathered by family members over the years, although only the spouse and one sister-in-law were sometime participants at nightly Fellowship at the time. The senior brother had been a layreader in his youth but had, like his father, 'pulled away' from Christianity when confronted by the demand that commitment to it should be exclusive. Nevertheless he joined in with the choruses.

When the family came to the end of their set they remained standing behind the senior brother as he took the microphone to offer his personal dedication to the deceased. He gave a speech clearly indicating that he interpreted this death to constitute an attack against his family and their position within the community. He began by pointing out the importance of his family at Ngukurr and how his 'mob'

connected with other ‘mobs’ in the region. He recounted how his grandfather (Djangardba) had been the main leader of Roper in the early years of the mission regime and how his father and father’s brother carried this responsibility through the work each did as Welfare Officer and Director of the YCC respectively. He noted his own history of leadership beginning with the formation of the first council at Ngukurr in the early 1970s and the work he had done on behalf of the community. As he thanked ‘mobs’ within the congregation for coming and ‘sharing their grief’ he drew attention to the fact that there were a lot of visitors, especially white and service personnel. By doing so he underlined for the congregation how many connections his family had with a range of important people from a variety of occupations and enterprises both inside and outside of Ngukurr. Finally he declaimed ‘I might not be the main leader for this place any more but I will not let my brother’s death stop me from being a leader for my community and my people.’²⁹ Whereupon he gave the black power salute – raised his clenched fist in the air and lowered his head in silence.

What is significant about this funeral is that the minister was not the only person who could speak authoritatively about death, responsibility and ownership within the church. Nor was he the only person who had the rightful capacity and therefore autonomy to act in these proceedings. This association between rightful capacity and autonomy was demonstrated very effectively by the actions of the senior brother and his family. By declaring their ownership of the deceased they also declared their right to part of the action of the church service. They did so through taking turns to ‘share messages,’ employing the same modality of expression characteristic of Fellowship and of other traditional forms of articulating social relationships through reciprocal performance. And in doing so they affirmed that the social disorder created by death is restored by a different labour to that of discipline. Hence the objective of participating in all mortuary ritual is not to make sociality

²⁹ Here the senior brother was referring to the fact that he no longer has quite as much influence on the YMC GC as he once had in the 1980s when he was frequently Council President. This was delivered as a reproach to the wider congregation for not supporting his leadership, while being equally critical of the fact that whites dominate management roles at Ngukurr (see chapter 2).

obedient to authority, but orient it to recognising relatedness with the deceased and re-establishing ties among the living.

This funeral was not exactly typical of all others; neither was it an isolated case where the actions of the deceased's family and wider congregation, whether intentional or not, did not support the minister's vision of a disciplined society. Moreover the senior brother's actions challenged the minister's attempt to act autonomously in the event of death and exercise control over the congregation. He did so by focusing attention on the issue of leadership and rendering it as a form of work necessary to the maintenance of good relations between 'mobs.' In this regard the senior brother's claims to a history of leadership (from grandfather to father to himself) at Ngukurr were well-founded and common knowledge. They were also reinforced by the visible backing of his large family and others connected to the deceased throughout all the rites, both Christian and traditional, brought together at this event. Both gave further salience to the senior brother's grounding of the deceased within familiar forms of managing social relations through kinship and political alliance. And by fore-grounding a humanly constituted domain of leadership premised on a history of successfully 'working for' others, he could declare that this death was an attack (whatever its motivation or however achieved) on both his and his family's prominence at Ngukurr. More importantly, he utilised the opportunity provided by church service to demonstrate his capacity to act for this group, effectively mobilising them to affirm their pre-eminent role in this event.

What is noteworthy about the event of death at Ngukurr is the way in which it functions as a resource for the living, providing opportunities to achieve social and political objectives through exchange and the affirmation of continuing relationship. But death also reveals, particularly in the context of church service, the minister's attempt to linearise a dynamic Indigenous space of politics and sociality. He does so by representing death, especially premature death, to be a warning and punishment to the living for disobeying God. Hence his interpretation of it denies human intentionality, particularly that malevolence can be a real factor endangering life and well-being. And his demand that reform be achieved through a sociality made

obedient to authority contravenes the way in which people labour to restore relations of interdependence among humans and between human and spirit worlds after the event of death. In this regard the minister renders irrelevant forms of lateral association to the project of creating a disciplined society, particularly the way in which individual capacities are surpassed through re-establishing networks. He favours instead a form of organisation that tends to monopolistic control from which he tries to direct the collective capacity of the congregation.

But it is also significant that kin-based action at funerals, and sorcery, escape attempts to render them irrelevant to ‘dead-body business.’ Both suggest that human and spirit activities are co-extensive, being bound only in human terms by the principle of ‘owned business’ with which specific individuals are identified. Hence boundaries are brought into being through events such as death, with issues of responsibility and authority being identified with those people who have in this context (and not necessarily any other) the rightful capacity to play particular roles in relation to it. Moreover Aboriginal people at Ngukurr favour activities that provide them with opportunities to demonstrate their autonomy as a capacity to act for others, employing forms of ‘helping’ and ‘working for’ to mobilise an authorising constituency of participants in relation to specific events. Neither the church nor other centralised hierarchies at Ngukurr have successfully generated any stabilising focal authorities in the contemporary situation then. Though the logic of their socio-structural arrangements aims to facilitate the future of such organisations, they have instead facilitated monopolistic control. Despite this outcome, Ngukurr Aborigines continue to invest in fora where sociality can be managed and enacted as relatedness. They do so by participating in various sites of performance including mortuary rite and Fellowship, where they affirm the truth that social life is exchange and which they thematise as *gudbinji*.

Summary

This chapter has provided an account of church activities, beginning with the organisation of the Anglican Church of Australia and St Matthew’s Church at Ngukurr. I have sought to show how the hierarchy of the Anglican Church is

mediated at Ngukurr, primarily through the representations of the minister at church services. It is through the office of parish priest that the Aboriginal minister takes on the burden of responsibility for an evangelical mission, utilising Sunday and funeral services as fora in which to infuse his parishioners with Christian truths. Pivotal to his interpretation of Christianity is that obedience to authority is the fundamental principle upon which association should occur and through which social order can be achieved. In his struggle to control his congregation the minister gives leadership a highly didactic and authoritarian content, which is premised on his interpretation of ownership as absolute and singular.

Aboriginal Christians and non-Christians, however, struggle with the minister's didactic expressions of authority particularly at funerals and the way in which he utilises the church as a site in which to exercise control over others. They rebuff the principle of subordination to hierarchy that he propounds and the way in which it denies them autonomy. Hence the laity applies an owner-manager model of relations to church matters, seeking to constitute themselves as custodians of the knowledge required to perform valued roles. Evangelism among kin, in addition, operates to deflect hierarchical control, being utilised as the means to demonstrate relatedness and responsibility through the social act of 'helping.' And both 'trouble' and 'helping' frequently motivate people to act, often mobilising kin (sometimes temporarily) to appropriate the tools of Christianity to jointly address an event or crisis.

The chapter pursued these dynamics further through the event of death, highlighting the political nature of mortuary rite – including church service – where different trajectories for sociality and autonomy become apparent. This divergence emerges when the minister proposes that a Christian sociality is constituted through discipline, being the only labour required to present reform and future redemption. But kin-based action at funerals suggests instead that labour takes the form of participating in the business of recognising reciprocity and reassuring both the living and the dead of continuing positive relations. Hence the interdependence and co-extensiveness of human and spirit realms has continuing relevance at Ngukurr, with

sorcery, political action and rite being responses to this reality. In this regard such action is bound for Aboriginal people only by the principle of 'owned business' with which specific individuals are identified. It is they who have the requisite capacity to demonstrate autonomy by taking responsibility for others in particular contexts and places. It is they moreover who effectively mobilise an authorising constituency of participants. The Anglican order then, like other centralised hierarchies, displays its effects unevenly at Ngukurr, as its socio-structural arrangements have not brought into being an effective authority to which all assent. Rather Aboriginal people at Ngukurr, both Christian and non-Christian alike, continue to labour to objectify and affirm forms of interdependence and hierarchy premised on reciprocity and nurturance.

CONCLUSION

In this study I have traced a particular instance in the evolution of Indigenous organisation at Ngukurr, as it developed from mission to town. This has been framed in terms of a contrast between centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation, as characteristic modes associated with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians respectively. It has also been framed in terms of a contrast between orders of value indicative of centralised hierarchies and laterally extended forms of organisation. Central throughout this account has been the way in which evolving social orders have provided different foci for the realisation of authority and autonomy at Ngukurr.

Chapters 3 and 4 provided evidence that in the course of the founding of the mission and the introduction of assimilation initiatives, autonomy was presented to Aborigines as a form of self-sufficiency realised through agriculture and wage labouring. Missionaries and government agents therefore viewed the relationship between self-sufficiency and economic viability as a transparent and exclusive one. They were not disposed in effect to recognise forms of sociality or organisation that did not operate to locate the autonomous subject within a hierarchy of relations premised on the capacity of individuals for economic independence.

I have also provided evidence that Aboriginal people operated on a model of reciprocal service during these various periods. They maintained a kin-land based sociality in the course of travelling between mission, cattle-stations and country, by provisioning themselves in traditional ways. Missionaries' efforts were thus deflected by a propensity to realise an Indigenous sociality through spatiality, sustained throughout a region in the course of reciprocal visiting and the integrated activities of foraging and ritual life. Missionaries' efforts were also deflected by the way in which Aboriginal people interpreted labouring and evangelism as service exchange through which place and relationships at the mission were realised. Hence to a significant degree Aborigines sought to render these new forms of activity in

familiar terms and incorporate the mission within their own diverse modes of exchange.

Though government-directed assimilation initiatives gave a more particular focus to the relationship between self-sufficiency and socio-economic viability, the Aboriginal response was not in terms of waged activity. Rather Aborigines responded by interpreting the mission as a site of performance, and evangelism as the activity that supported it. Work, for them, continued to be defined as a form of service exchange performed for a boss who reciprocated with resources, whether in the form of goods, money or Christian knowledge. ‘Gospel ceremony’ was incorporated into Indigenous modes of organisation and exchange when Aborigines took up the task of evangelising to their own kin-groups and when Aboriginal men began to regularly stage Christian services beyond the context of the church. Thus evangelism in kin-groups and ‘gospel ceremony’ became a significant means of generating status and accessing resources that could not be attained solely through cult activities.

Kin-group evangelism and Aboriginal-run Christian services fostered valued prominence in the mission’s social order while generating a relational form of authority. These activities honoured, from an Aboriginal point of view, their obligations to missionaries and enabled Indigenous people to constitute themselves as the new co-custodians of Christianity. Gospel ceremony also affirmed the capacity of specific clusters of related patrilineal groups to be the organisers of these events, while establishing and maintaining the co-operative unity of wider sets of cognatic relations who participated in them. Indigenous dynamics pertaining to co-operation and control in the performance of gospel services engendered a boss-worker form of association. This enabled Aborigines to allocate an equivalent value to their own roles at the mission (as ‘leaders on the working side’), while it also sustained, in familiar form, autonomy as a progressive status realised through nurturance (‘looking after’ and ‘helping’). Thus in significant part Aboriginal evangelism deflected the putative hierarchy of the mission through affirming an evolving Indigenous system of differentiation and prestige.

Self-determination initiatives, particularly a bureaucratic focus on the 'community' as entity, radically altered the conditions that had encouraged familiar realisations of autonomy and authority among Aboriginal people. The attempt to generate an institutional domain of autonomy, through establishing organisational platforms for the purposes of directing collective action, did not jell with the attempt to orient individuals to realise autonomy as self-sufficiency. This contradiction was clearly illustrated in the events that led to the Ngukurr strike, when Aborigines tried to endorse their own and European forms of work and ownership by establishing small enterprises on traditional country. But as a result of the strike's failure to affirm dependency as a shared condition, Aborigines sought instead to localise control over resources as a means to protect and demonstrate autonomy.

The way in which institutional conflicts engendered through resource struggles distil a particular dynamic about autonomy was demonstrated through the case of the Yugul Cattle Company (YCC). Its founding and demise illustrated how resource organisations at Ngukurr served to heighten rivalries between families rather than promote common interests and co-operative action among them. As a result, organisational platforms are redesigned as resource niches, the control of which serves to enhance the status of bosses and the patronymic families they bring into being through a boss's re-distributive capacities. In effect a new pattern of status and leadership emerged, premised more on control than co-operation. The oscillation between co-operation and control, which invigorates competitive status relations in the performance of ceremonies (or Aboriginal-run gospel services), is not then a feature of contemporary resource struggles. Rather, a 'winner-takes-all' politics tends to ensue, in the rise and fall of family groups. This in turn has given the categories of 'boss' and 'worker' new functional values, which no longer entail equivalence and reciprocity. They are instead socially disjunctive positions, the latter of which is generally rejected by those (often senior men) seeking to demonstrate an autonomous status in relation to place.

Though the differentiation of resource niches as kin-locales affirms Aboriginal control, such action engenders problems in the following ways. It inhibits

the realisation of an institutional domain of autonomy as people invest in building extended families and networks of support, rather than developing organisational platforms for the purposes of directing collective action. It also conflicts with the development of autonomy as a progressive status realised through ‘helping’ and ‘looking after.’ A boss provisioning kin with commodities does not necessarily transform their ‘given autonomy’ into an equal competence to ‘look after’ others in turn. Concomitantly, expressions of authority associated with the control of a resource niche are often deemed to be illegitimate. Bosses within families often find themselves provisioning kin who do not respond with deference and service. And the status of bosses realises little authority between groups, as families continually contest resource control by others in order to protect their own autonomous interests.

These dynamics of factionalism at Ngukurr, which have been playing out since the 1970s in relation to resource organisations, give autonomy a highly ambiguous value as other values and practices cannot be brought into meaningful relation. Autonomy then is no longer successfully integrated within relatedness at a community-wide level. Rather its social forms are varied and context dependent, creating tensions in social relations that often manifest as conflict between or withdrawal from kin, or a turning away from administrative organisations including the church. I have proposed moreover that these tensions arise from the way in which centralised hierarchies including the church transform (unevenly) the social field at Ngukurr. They do so by rendering anomalous, ineffective or irrelevant forms of interdependence and authority premised on reciprocity and nurturance. In other words their organising logic, which always inflects to hierarchy, fosters monopolistic control among Aboriginal people. This occurs because roles within administrative institutions become a major resource from which to exercise control over the distribution of resources or others.

Chapters 2, 6 and 7 illustrated different aspects of the ways in which centralised and laterally extended forms of organisation engage each other, often pulling in opposing directions. Chapter 2 discussed the effects on community life of white attempts at centralised management through a ‘clan system’ in the context of a

different and dynamic Indigenous order of patronymic families and residential groups. It was shown that at Ngukurr there is no central axis of bounded group formation upon which other units can build. In other words a multiplicity of patronymic families, residential and contextually relevant groups are reproduced through lateral forms of association. A crucial dynamic that brings patronymic families into being is the capacity of male bosses to engage in competitive status relations with each other. They are then most evident in the context of resource politics at Ngukurr, with male identities being also the point of fission within these groups. Hence they show a tendency over time to divide, as lines within them seek to differentiate themselves from each other.

Residential groups are, like patronymic families, a stable form of organisation with fluctuating membership, but they have little bearing on the administrative and political life of the community. They are composed of small groups of kin that can be drawn from overlapping families and involved in various networks. They tend to cohere around individuals with the capacity to organise events and demonstrate an adult status by offering opportunities to others to build autonomy. They are, along with contextually relevant groups such as 'Fellowship mob,' basketball teams and rock bands, a locus of socialisation where action is focused on domestic and public spaces. And these are the dominant contexts where Aboriginal sociality is rendered as and autonomy (somewhat) integrated within relatedness.

A characteristic dynamic associated with residential and contextually relevant groups pertains to the way in which Aboriginal people proliferate sites of performance as kin-locales through the activities and identities of focal individuals. These people may not realise the status of bosses with allocative power, but they establish valued roles through displays of varied kinds of knowledge and expertise. Knowledge and expertise moreover becomes identified with individuals through repeated performance, often attracting others to appropriate the paraphernalia of a site in order to participate as well. It is these dynamics that foster the reproduction of social relations of interdependence and authority, together with the official truth that social life is reciprocal exchange. It is also these dynamics that are rendered

anomalous, ineffective or irrelevant in the context of community and administrative organisations, which are committed to fostering an institutional domain of autonomy and authority.

The 'administrative clan system' was designed to effectively manage electoral representation, service delivery, the labour sector and community facilities in an equitable and democratic way at Ngukurr. Neither 'CDEP clans' nor the '7 tribe' construct it replaced have generated an institutional domain of autonomy or provided a stable focal authority for the community. Both have been modelled on what Aboriginal people have identified as important social categories, including tribe or language group, patriclan and owner-manager relations. But it seems to have always been an administrative assumption that tribe and clan are bounded groups, which can therefore operate as constituencies within Ngukurr. This, as I have demonstrated through the failure of the 'clan carer scheme' and the success with which senior men have dominated Council since the 1970s as leaders of 'tribes' and 'clans,' is not the case. These 'units' do not reflect Aboriginal dynamics of lateral association wherein kin networks continually transcend an administrative demand that groups be fixed and finite in relation to one centre. Moreover the administrative attempt to mobilise collective action through designated representatives of such units often flounders, as the dynamism of small and labile groups continually circumvents the linear pull of centralised hierarchies.

The administrative assumption that Aboriginal groups are bounded may also alter or render anomalous the salience of the Aboriginal social categories they employ. Most notable is the way in which owner-manager relations have been imputed to exist between CDEP clans at Ngukurr. These categories imply traditional relations of interdependence and reciprocity. Yet the administrative system provides no basis for an exchange of authority between the leaders of CDEP clans and no site for its enactment, such as occurs in performances of different ceremonies.

The convergence of governance and economic functions in CDEP clans at Ngukurr is moreover a serious problem. It does not reflect the orientations and practices of the population it is designed to manage, as is evident from the way in

which Aboriginal people invest a good deal of energy in proliferating sites of performance. More importantly, the attempt to subsume all secular community facilities within the organising logic of centralised administration narrows participatory opportunities in decision-making and constitutions of leadership for present and future generations. This is exacerbated by the fact that resource niches cannot be proliferated ad infinitum in relation to one centre, as the commodities of a market economy are dependent on government agencies external to Ngukurr.

Although there is a structural equivalent between resource niches and sites of performance the two show a marked divergence in their dynamics. Both resource niches and sites of performance emerge from the way in which Aboriginal people differentiate social space in terms of relatedness. The former however inflect more to hierarchy through control, limiting reciprocity to its occurrence within patronymic families. These groups moreover reveal dynamics of fission over time, although several families might form a temporary coalition when they perceive their interests to be threatened. Sites of performance on the other hand articulate features of an Indigenous sociality premised on nurturance and reciprocity, extending relatedness through repeated participation in them.

These divergences between resource niches and sites of performance were further addressed through a juxtaposition of action focused on public space and the church in chapters 6 and 7 of this study. Though the resources of a post-colonial secular and Christian domain are not comparable, characteristic dynamics pertaining to the deflection of centralised hierarchy and niche control are nevertheless repeated at Fellowship meetings and Church services. Both therefore reflect similar struggles to sustain values and practices in meaningful form in intra-Aboriginal contexts. But tensions in social relations often ensue as a result of attempts to generate a stable focal authority for a group or mediate the centralised hierarchy of the Anglican regime.

I specifically addressed the way in which Fellowship meetings evoke a novel constitution of leadership and mobilise an authorising constituency of participants through repeated co-operation with others in an order of reciprocal performance.

Fellowship meetings, being organised in terms of taking turns to deliver Christian ‘messages’ – especially in the form of song-sets and serial choruses, enables participants to demonstrate their expertise and capacity to act for others. Thus relations among humans (and with God) are structured according to the principle that social action in the form of reciprocal ‘helping’ is the means through which all have opportunities to realise prominence and *gudbinji* (well-being).

Although participants utilise Fellowship meetings as a locale in which to negotiate and re-negotiate their roles and standing, it does not generate major differentials of prestige among participants. It does not therefore constitute a hierarchically encompassing level of organisation with which particular individuals are identified. Rather participation affirms relatedness associated with an egalitarian autonomy, as the nightly practice of taking turns to perform keeps the structuring of leaders and followers in flux. As a corollary, authority is easily exceeded at Fellowship where all participants have the same capacity to autonomously interpret ‘that Word langa God.’ The practice of ‘looking after’ then is drained of its significance to some degree and no longer successfully masks subordination. This occurs because it is no longer dialectically defined at different levels of an Indigenous system, which once represented child-care, generational succession and male hierarchy as essentially similar activities. Hence contemporary forms of rhizomic organisation – evident in sites of performance such as Fellowship – hardly inflect to hierarchy at all. This is due to the way in which participants often consciously and vigorously defend their autonomy to engage in such locales as equals.

In contrast to the foregoing, I specifically addressed the way in which a pre-eminent role in church organisation operates as a resource from which the Aboriginal minister attempts to exercise control over others. I have framed this contrast in terms of the effect that the centralised and hierarchical organising logic of the Anglican regime has at Ngukurr, which the minister as parish priest is obliged to mediate for others. Thus he takes exclusive responsibility to determine for others what constitutes right Christian practice at most events at the church. In doing so, both the

laity and participants at mixed-congregation funerals have limited opportunities to take up meaningful roles or contribute to proceedings. It is moreover clear from the actions of the laity and participants at funerals that they reject authoritarianism, because it denies them autonomy.

This was borne out by the way that the laity has sought to constitute themselves as co-custodians of the knowledge required to perform valued roles, through the application of an owner-manager model of relations to church matters. It was also borne out by the way in which kin-based action at funerals challenge the minister's attempt to assume exclusive ownership of 'dead body business.' In this regard, kin and the leaders who mobilise them demonstrate their relatedness to a deceased person by participating in church funerals and taking turns to 'share messages.' In doing so they effectively declare their rightful capacity and autonomy to act in this event. In pursuing these dynamics I thereby showed how action is bound for Aborigines only by the principle of 'owned business' with which specific individuals are identified. It is they who have the requisite capacity to demonstrate autonomy by taking responsibility for others in particular contexts and places. And it is they who effectively mobilise an authorising constituency of participants, by utilising resources – including roles in organisations or the event of death – as opportunities to achieve social and political objectives.

I offer at this point some final observations concerning the implications for community governance that this study raises. Indigenous policy at Federal and State levels of government in Australia has altered, particularly over the last five years. Self-determination is no longer avowedly the policy framework. The conceptual tools and mechanisms currently reflected in policy and program language include 'practical reconciliation,' 'mutual obligation,' 'shared responsibility,' 'capacity development' and 'mainstreaming.' These concepts and mechanisms however do not represent a substantial policy shift. Rather they indicate a refinement of the ways in which self-determination initiatives and autonomy as self-sufficiency are being presented to Aboriginal people.

A key concern addressed by the conference on *Building Effective Indigenous Governance* in 2003 and by the *Indigenous Community Governance Project (ICGP)* established in 2005 is that of ‘institutional incapacity’ (Smith 2003; Hunt and Smith 2006). This refers to the historical legacy of governing for dependence, rather than development, that impacts many Northern Territory Indigenous communities, leaving them with under-developed and ineffective governing structures (Smith 2003:3, 10).

Both Smith (2003:9) and Hunt and Smith (2006:33), drawing from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, assert that it is only when effective Indigenous governance is in place that sustainable economic development will occur. Both also propose that problems of legitimacy can be resolved, at least in part, by Aboriginal people exercising some choice over the design of their governance arrangements (Smith 2003:7; Hunt and Smith 2006:18-20). In this regard they might choose new methods and values operating in the world of finance and business; or they might incorporate within governance structures or keep separate from them shared values associated with continuing modes of Indigenous authority. What is required is that Indigenous people identify the core cultural standards and authority structures that are currently valued and viable (Smith 2003:8; Hunt and Smith 2006: 30, 77).

In my view these proposals fail to address an important issue that my study raises. They do not take sufficient account of the way in which resource organisations play at least a quasi-governing function in many Indigenous communities, with the CDEP scheme having a pivotal role (see Altman 2006:6-7). As I have shown, dynamics of factionalism associated with resource organisations, and their redesign as resource niches, has been playing out at Ngukurr for over 30 years. In this respect Ngukurr Aborigines have made a choice regarding the way in which their immediate interests are best served. It does not seem likely to me that the current population or a younger generation will be influenced to make a different choice solely through a focus on improving the institutional capacities of their governance arrangements. Important as shared values are to issues of legitimacy and

governance, my study has revealed the highly ambiguous values now attending varied realisations of autonomy and expressions of authority in the contemporary situation at Ngukurr.

I would propose instead that a market mode of production also exerts an influence on the processes by which governing structures emerge among a population. And this is largely absent from Indigenous communities such as Ngukurr. Hence, as stated by Peterson (2005:10-12), social relations are more focused on circulation and reciprocity is a central structuring factor in economic and other activities. As I have shown, Aboriginal people at Ngukurr strive to proliferate valued roles in a diverse array of activities and through which they also strive to demonstrate an autonomy that comes through relatedness. These aspirations and processes do not articulate well with current governance and administrative arrangements at Ngukurr. They are moreover rendered irrelevant through a focus on the lack of institutional capacities in Indigenous communities. If policy continues this legacy of seeing only lack, then what reforms and futures are really possible for governance and economic development in Aboriginal communities such as Ngukurr?

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