The Cultural Dynamics of Adaptation in Remote Aboriginal Communities: Policy, Values and the State's Unmet Expectations

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Abstract: Using examples drawn from the Mardu, a Western Desert people, we seek to illustrate the incommensurability of remote Aboriginal and mainstream Australian cultures, including their opposed constructions of politics. Although there is ample evidence of Aboriginal people like the Mardu having adapted to their changed circumstances, deep differences persist. Kin-based authority and regulation of behaviour have been weakened and are often ineffective, but no viable civil society has emerged; this gap between Mardu and Western values and customs results in cultural clashes and the elusiveness of mutual accommodation. We emphasize elements of difference and difficulty that stem largely from the contrast in how these two kinds of societies deal with the tension between autonomy and relatedness.

Keywords: Australian Aborigines, values, policy, leadership, social change

Résumé : À partir d'exemples tirés des Mardus, une population du Désert de l'Ouest australien, nous cherchons à illustrer l'impossibilité de comparer la culture grand public australienne et celles des populations aborigènes isolées, y compris leurs perceptions opposées de la politique. Bien que nombre d'exemples existent de populations aborigènes qui, à l'instar des Mardus se sont adaptées à l'évolution de leur contexte, de profondes différences persistent. L'autorité et la régulation des comportements par les liens de parenté ont été affaiblies et sont souvent inefficaces, mais aucune société civile viable n'a émergé; cet écart entre les valeurs et coutumes occidentales et celles des Mardus engendre des affrontements culturels et fragilise les accommodements mutuels. Nous mettons en lumière des éléments de différence et de difficulté qui découlent en bonne partie du contraste entre les manières dont ces deux types de société gèrent les tensions entre l'autonomie et les obligations mutuelles.

Mots-clés : Aborigènes australiens, valeurs, politiques, leadership, changement social

Introduction

The centrality of values to the structure of cultures has long been accepted by social scientists, and many have pointed out, following Weber, that conflict between sets of values, whether within or between cultures, is intrinsic to cultural dynamics. Values are thus pivotal in situations of cultural change, which, as Robbins argues, can occur only when "key values" change, "either because new values are introduced or because the hierarchical relations between traditional values have been transformed" (2007:301). In addition to invoking Weber, Robbins relies to some extent on Dumont's notion of values as "determinations of the relative importance of elements of a culture" (Robbins 2007:296). Putting aside Dumont's idea that among value hierarchies in each culture there is one paramount value, we characterize the current condition of the Aboriginal people among whom we have conducted research as one of tension-laden change and conflict, actual or potential, generated by deep incompatibilities between the two value systems involved.[1] At one level there is a tug-of-war between a "Western" and capitalist value system and their traditional hunter-gatherer values. At another, the Mardu and others often experience an emotional or geographical tugging between the ancestral lands to which they are attached and on which they feel a degree of autonomy and control, and the urban environments in which many of them are spending increasing amounts of time—and to which some non-Aboriginal observers believe they must relocate if they are to transcend the poverty and marginality that typify their current condition.

Despite the obvious incompatibility of these value sets, their importance tends to be overlooked. The Mardu, along with other indigenous minorities experiencing continuous pressure to adopt change, are expected to abandon long-held values when, at this stage of their adaptation, they have not chosen to embrace the ones preferred by "mainstream" Australian society. It may be that the

process of transformation can be accomplished, but this seems impossible as long as they continue to lack the desire to adopt introduced values in preference to their traditional, familiar set. The undoubtedly crucial role of motivation in any consideration of acceptance and rejection of novel cultural elements points to the primacy of the cognitive realm, which is the locus of a recent important paper by Victoria Burbank (2006). The question she addresses is why many Aboriginal people, especially in remote regions, are reluctant to participate in Western institutions. Burbank notes that anthropologists working in indigenous Australia have chosen to address cultural constructs at the level of individual or collective belief and practice rather than at that of mind and cognition. This tendency results in a failure to grasp culture as "a motivational force that either facilitates or obstructs productive engagement with forms of living in this world" (Burbank 2006:3).

Applying this approach to Numbulwar, a remote Arnhem Land community in which she has conducted research over several decades, Burbank explores some of the ways in which family relationships can be linked to people's willingness or refusal to take part in Western structures they encounter in everyday life. She posits that a model internalized very early in life, a "self with others" schema, provides a template for the Aboriginal child's encounters with Western institutions (2006:5). Her informants explain motivation to action in terms of "liking to" or "feeling like," and of not doing things, such as attending school on a given day, because they do not "like it" (or "feel like it"); such explanations are typically accepted by their parents, or others, as reasonable. Though greatly indulged by adults, these children are obviously not autonomous beings and in many things cannot be allowed free choice. However, as Burbank notes, these restrictive domains in Aboriginal society provide few models for action within non-familial Western structures. Also, most of these models are acquired from late childhood on, and in Burbank's view this is a significant factor in children's experience of school and, later, of work. As a key Western institution, work in particular is much more about impersonal imperatives, such as "doing a job, being on time, getting things done" than the immediacy of how people are feeling or coping or conducting their lives (2006:7). Burbank points out that the cultural models that motivate socialization in Numbulwar (and, more generally, remote Aboriginal communities like those of the Mardu) do not suppose "an adult who 'works' in either the Western sense or the Western setting" (2006:5). Her major point is that there is an emotional incompatibility between the cultural self and Western structuring of others, such that Abo-

riginal people *neither see nor feel* the point of being and working within such alien arrangements (2006:7). Burbank's analysis forms an important conceptual backdrop to some of the material and interpretations we present below.

All major national socio-economic indicators reveal a severely disadvantaged Aboriginal population vis-à-vis most other Australians, and remote communities are alike in the extent of their extreme dependency on the state and the many serious social problems they face.[2] In the last few years, the focus of the wider society has dwelled increasingly on community "dysfunction" and the need for Aborigines to exercise "individual responsibility" if their situation is to improve. This shift in government and community attitudes towards indigenous people cannot be separated from the dominant neoliberal ideology: responsible citizens provide for their own needs, rather than placing a burden on taxpayers through public provision of services and support. From this perspective, "difference" in many of its manifestations equates with dysfunction and—unless it entails positive economic outputs, as is the case, for example, with much Aboriginal art production—will not be supported. However, the extension of this demand to Aboriginal people ignores the history, complexity and inherent inequality of their relationships with the Australian state.

Against this background, and drawing on knowledge gained from our long association with one Western Desert people, we canvass several issues illustrative of the seemingly intractable gulf between policy goals and actual community conditions and outcomes. Like most other Aborigines, the Mardu still lack significant access to power, knowledge, money and even good health (Tonkinson and Howard 1990; Tonkinson 2007a). In the face of a plethora of regulations, policies, pressures and expectations from government and other external sources, they nonetheless seem determined to maintain their distinctiveness and successful strategies aimed at mutual accommodation have so far proved elusive. Although kin-based authority and regulation of behaviour have been weakened and are often ineffective, they have not been replaced by a viable civil society. The contrast between kin-based and civil society exemplifies the gap between Mardu and whitefella values and customs that underlies current dilemmas, and we hope that the examples we cite have some value for cross-cultural comparisons.

Much of the impetus to change has been imposed by the dominant society and huge disparities in numbers and power separate it from both of Australia's indigenous minorities. Without doubt, the heavy burden of adaptation has been borne by people such as the Mardu in the

era since "first contact."[3] The great increase in indigenous people's control of their communities and their destinies that was expected to follow from new federal government self-management policies in the 1970s has proved illusory. Instead, in our study area as in most remote Aboriginal communities, dependence on outside advisers, experts and functionaries has increased, creating a situation in which the Mardu are to some extent complicit (cf. Tonkinson 1977, 1978, 1981, 1982, 1988).

We now outline some elements of Mardu outlook that are pertinent to our concerns here (cf. Tonkinson 2007b).

Mardu Worldview and the Whitefella Domain

All our research since the 1960s and 1970s confirms the persistence of a Mardu worldview that is, in important respects, distinctly different from the Western orientation of the dominant society. As late as the 1960s, there were Mardu still experiencing "first contacts" with whites, so little wonder that the cultural imprint of the past remains strong, particularly among older people. Proud of their Law and their cultural uniqueness as Western Desert people, the Mardu show little interest in transcending the differences that both mark them as distinct and serve as a convenient label for what to them are puzzling or otherwise unappealing facets of white custom and culture. Noting a particular contrast, they will often say, "whitefellas do that," generally in a non-judgmental way, intended as an observation rather than an impetus to action or change.

Despite enormous challenges to their powers of adaptation ever since they became sedentary, Mardu values of sharing, compassion and deep, abiding emotional attachment to kin, home and country remain firmly at the core of their worldview. Such cultural conservatism and group-centredness is patently at odds with many prominent values in Australian society (for example, those relating to property, time management, progress, aspiration, improvement, wealth accumulation and future-orientation). Mardu place very high value on their kinship relationships and their autonomy, but their understanding of the latter concept differs from commonly held assumptions of the dominant majority. For the Mardu, autonomy is about making decisions and choices as one sees fit, being accountable to no one, albeit within the bounds of "the Law," which entails obligations and responsibilities based on kinship and relatedness. In their scheme of things, dependence on others is perfectly compatible with personal autonomy, and relatedness is an essential component of the autonomous self. This differs sharply from Western notions of autonomy whereby the individual is independent and self-reliant, but amenable to a "high degree of uncoerced cooperation."[4] Mardu interpretation of autonomy in relation to outsiders appears to entail freedom from paternalistic and authoritarian strictures and avoidance of the economic strivings that whites consider essential to Aboriginal advancement. "Mucking in" and "lending a hand" or "seeing the need" are not characteristic of Mardu interaction with whites. The roots of this passivity probably lie in traditional Mardu forms of dependency reinforced by early contact experiences with strongly paternalistic whites playing the role of "boss," thus prompting reactions that Elkin once controversially described as "intelligent parasitism" (see McGregor 1996). Whatever their origins, passivity and dependency characterize the relationship of the Mardu to the Australian state and its agents. There are tasks and obligations that Mardu are happy to leave to others, as our discussion of local employment indicates.

Work

Besides the basic fact of limited opportunity, Mardu cultural values, such as high mobility, kinship and ritual obligations, make for a general incompatibility with the market economy and conventional jobs; these are major factors contributing to their low level of participation in paid labour. Things were not always this way, however. Until Aboriginal employment opportunities in the pastoral industry evaporated in the wake of equal wage legislation in the 1970s (cf. Bunbury 2002), able-bodied men— and some women, who were employed as domestics)— were in demand in that arena. There they could practice their considerable skills as horsemen, trackers, shepherds, fence-builders and so on, which brought them much satisfaction and pride in their work, and also a positive recognition by whites of their worth. Pastoral employment was also compatible with the ritual obligations on which Mardu set great store (see Tonkinson 1974). Work on stations was prized by Mardu, both men and women, and many look back on those days with nostalgia. Today, helicopter mustering is the norm, and very few jobs are available for Mardu in the surrounding region.

One striking feature of desert people is their extraordinarily high levels of tolerance for discomfort, frustration, inconvenience and hardship. Efforts by governments to goad such peoples into action through "carrot and stick" schemes, aimed at enticing Aborigines into conformity, are unlikely to galvanize them (Tonkinson 2007b). Thus, "work for the dole (unemployment payment)" programs have fared poorly in Mardu communities. Some people enjoy their work and a few remain in jobs for extended periods, but even the most dedicated worker might stop

for weeks or months, or altogether, in response to death of close kin, or a perceived slight from a boss or co-worker (see Tonkinson 2008). Stopping people's payments for failing to show up for work, with the intent of forcing them back into employment, ignores both their high tolerance for privation and the powerful redistributive effects of sharing and gambling. The Mardu economy is not about production; rather, it revolves around issues of circulation, redistribution and consumption and on attempts to gain allocative power over invariably scarce resources.[5] A majority of Mardu adults are unemployed but social welfare payments, such as pensions and child allowances, plus the constant circulation of cash, driven by kinship obligations and gambling with cards, ensure that most community members have access to food, though there are often lean periods as the time for the next payment looms.

The rise in non-Aboriginal employment on Mardu settlements is in part linked to a Mardu disinclination to work locally. With notable exceptions, those few who have the qualifications or experience to do these jobs do not always consider the "top-up" to their "work for the dole" wage sufficient to make it worthwhile. Also, working in their own community can entail lots of relatedness but little autonomy, so they are likely to be subjected to resentment and to criticism from community members, especially when they resist pressures to give certain kin preferential treatment such as free goods or services. Exposure to the risk of shame and anger, many say, is "not worth it." At the same time, low levels of education minimize people's chances of competing for jobs in towns, even if they desired to seek them. In any case, there is no widely shared Mardu moral evaluation of work that links it to feelings of self-respect or exalted status (Tonkinson 2007b).[6]

A strong Mardu cultural emphasis on mobility (and on discharging the mandatory obligations and responsibilities intrinsic to kin relationships) works against structures of continuity in employment: it is virtually impossible to sustain attendance at, and commitment to, training programs or the job itself in uninterrupted fashion. Travel is undertaken over huge distances within the cultural bloc that is the Western Desert, and sometimes beyond, to visit kin, attend funerals or sports carnivals, participate in "Law Business," engage in shopping expeditions and, notably, on the part of those who are drinkers, to obtain alcohol. For the vast majority of Mardu, the social obligations involved in these activities are much more important than staying in a job or, indeed, ensuring children's attendance at school. This situation is not necessarily one of continuity from desert traditions. For example, deaths

were traditionally followed quickly by interment, with major mourning rituals held a year or two afterwards, whereas today the advent of cool-rooms and access to transport, plus the high frequency of deaths in Mardu communities, have resulted in funeral attendance as virtually an ongoing event (see Glaskin et al. 2008; Tonkinson 2008).

Education

Education probably best exemplifies the stark contrast in perspectives and the distance separating tradition from modernity (cf. Sutton 2001:132). In traditional Aboriginal societies, "education" comprised observation, imitation and learning through repetition, and there was no formal, institutionalized learning environment akin to the school. Today, remote area schools in Western Australia have never been better equipped or (in many cases) staffed, yet, among Mardu, attendance levels and scholastic performance have probably never been worse.[7] Truancy has been rife in Mardu schools in recent years, and tends to be countenanced, if not instigated, by parents: the same people who make immense efforts and travel great distances to attend a funeral, might call a child out of the classroom for a trivial reason (to help carry bags of groceries home from the store, for example), or stay away from their home community, school and work for weeks on end without a qualm.

Children are permitted considerable independence and presumed to have valid reasons for the decisions they make, so are not normally chastised for absenting themselves from school. Besides, few Mardu see a connection between education and "success" as they measure it, given their circumscribed horizons, and the persistence of priorities based on Mardu values. Thus, success at school could mean being sent elsewhere for further education, but homesickness is such a powerful emotion in Mardu society that, usually, the few who go soon return, and everyone considers the cause legitimate. Whether they stay or leave, however, Mardu children's low level of scholastic attainment imposes limitations for their future management of communities on their own lands or successful engagement in the wider economy (cf. Schwab 2005).

Recently, there have been calls by Aboriginal people in some remote areas, including Mardu, for the re-institution of the dormitory system or boarding school. In addition to any improvements in children's care, nutrition and scholastic performance, it would certainly reduce nurturance burdens currently borne by many older people who are fostering small children. As one older Mardu woman put it, "it would be like the old [Mission] days, but not so strict; without the beating"; she argued that par-

ents would be more prepared to leave their children behind to attend school while they were travelling if the children were in dormitories, supervised and chaperoned.

Land Rights, Mardu Religion and Leadership

Among the themes of the CASCA session in which these papers were presented that resonate with the Mardu situation are: the often arduous and lengthy process of achieving land rights as legislated by the nation-state, and the suggestion that whether or not indigenous groups have won political recognition, land rights or native title, they face similar kinds of social problems because the "negotiated coexistence" they aspire to entails cultural imperatives as well as politico-economic concerns. Once Mardu discovered, some 30 years ago, that exploration for minerals had taken place in their traditional homelands without their knowledge or permission, and were then informed that these lands belonged to an entity known as "the Crown," they began agitating for land rights. Spurred on by deep concern about the risk of desecration of their myriad sacred sites, some groups moved in the 1980s to establish communities back in the homelands.[8] It took a decade from the inception of national native title legislation for the Mardu to gain such title over the bulk of their desert homelands in 2002.[9]

Native Title legislation mandates the establishment of a Prescribed Body Corporate to mediate between title holders and other parties. Besides the inequalities in power between title holders and, for example, state authorities and multinational mining companies, there are daunting challenges involved in ensuring that the representative body functions in the best interests of *all* Mardu title-holders rather than just the politically savvy and active few. Here the gulf between traditional and contemporary leadership patterns among the Mardu is large, and an increasing disjunction between them highlights the ways in which exogenously derived changes may clash with indigenous values and imperatives. For example, imposed structures have resulted in emergent economic inequalities in remote settlements that tend to favour those, predominantly men, who hold leadership positions through a kind of community inertia. Some of these individuals appear to act less often as disinterested community leaders than in the interests of themselves and their close kin. While welcoming better access to resources that extend their ability to forage for cash and other necessities, they usually abjure administrative and other duties, and often cannot or will not impose their authority when things go amiss in their communities. This reluctance to act may relate to a disjunction between the achieved status

of some younger leaders (now middle-aged), who have built lives and careers partly around some of the apparatuses of self-determination, and their failure to be advanced to a concomitantly senior level in the ritual arena. Senior Lawmen assess men's rights to lead in terms mainly of their ritual status and are, amongst themselves, quite harsh and dismissive of these young leaders' rise to prominence in recent decades; yet they are publicly reticent in their criticism of the latter's actions as "secular" leaders.

Male and female ritual hierarchies, which function in marked contrast to the kin-dominated egalitarianism of mundane life, have become increasingly separated from, and decreasingly significant for, contemporary leadership in the arena of intercultural or "whitefella" politics. They remain integral elements of "Law business" but their influence has noticeably weakened since the 1960s. Many mature Mardu are also troubled about matters such as the attenuated flow of religious knowledge from elders to younger adults. It used to take about 15 years for a youth's journey from first initiation to marriage, a process now severely truncated, as is the volume of religious knowledge and traditions being transmitted. Though the time allotted to religious affairs has shrunk since the 1960s, the annual "big meetings" held to initiate youths, perform rituals, settle disputes and exchange information remain major events, attracting large numbers and nourishing regional solidarities. Nevertheless, one of the greatest challenges facing the Mardu is the tension between their wish for continuity in the workings of their Law, still the linchpin of their cultural integrity, and their need to respond to demands for leaders and brokers who can operate effectively in the external environment with which they are obliged to engage.

In the midst of a massive resources boom and the promise of substantial income flowing to the representative native title body, the confrontation of two kinds of leadership and issues of fairness in distribution will take centre stage in Mardu affairs. One cannot help but conclude that the spoils could go predominantly to those *kuntaparni* ("shameless ones") with the chutzpah to act beyond the restraints of Mardu values, especially their strongly egalitarian ethos.

Property

A recurrent theme in recent debates, particularly in the wake of the Northern Territory intervention, is private home ownership in remote Aboriginal communities. The former federal conservative government was a strong critic of communal title and an enthusiastic proponent of individually-held 99 year leases over privately owned houses. The current Labor government is continuing to

pursue this goal in some Northern Territory locales and it is conceivable that similar arrangements will be extended to indigenous communities in other parts of the country. Yet people like the Mardu would rate private ownership very low on their list of priorities in life. True, Mardu have become enthusiastic consumers of many goods and services valued by most other Australians, such as motor vehicles, clothing, food, electronic appliances and gadgets, toys and so on, but they show minimal concern about individual ownership and the preservation and maintenance even of seemingly much desired items. Mundane property per se seems neither to arouse feelings of pride in ownership nor prompt envious comment; things circulate at a high rate via the demand sharing intrinsic to kin relationships and felt obligation. It certainly does not rate with the primacy of social relationships and strongly held values about sharing (which children are taught from infancy to regard as a natural rather than a cultural act, cf. Hamilton 1981). Adults will stand by ignoring small children who wreak havoc on items in and around houses or vehicles, and are disinclined to interfere because to do so would prompt a temper tantrum, in Mardu eyes an audible instance of neglect or abuse.

Although a newly acquired motor vehicle is a highly prized item for which the purchasers would have pooled funds, or used windfall cash from a successful card game, or may have saved over some months, it is cherished as a means to the supreme end of mobility rather than as an object in itself. It will be driven through the bush, endure food spills, dirt, severe overloading and inadequate attention to servicing needs until its short but very active life ends.

Houses present particular cultural problems since Mardu still routinely move out of houses when a death occurs. Usually the houses are re-occupied, usually after an interval of months, by people not closely related to the deceased. In only two cases that we are aware of have members of the same family moved back into the house associated with their deceased relative. Both in communities and in urban areas, housing authorities have accommodated Mardu cultural sensitivities. Insistence on long-term commitment to a family-owned house could have disturbing consequences for Mardu. Also, given the combination of high mobility levels and strongly felt impulse to go to the aid of kin, people may spend long periods of time in communities other than their own.

Concluding Comments

In the brief examples outlined above, we have attempted to illustrate Burbank's point about people's disinclination to engage productively (in non-Aboriginal terms) with institutions of the wider society. The "self with other" schema is fundamentally incompatible with Western notions of the detached individual capable of impersonal engagement free of considerations of kinship and a range of "interested others." Culture-based considerations are certainly a major element in the perpetuation of Mardu distinctiveness and a continual state of low-level resistance to exogenously imposed constraints aimed ultimately at making Mardu more like whitefellas. Mardu are at their strongest and most secure when on country, interacting with a range of kin and engaging in activities like hunting or gathering, where their considerable skills are being productively used and things are more like what they once had been. The antithesis of this situation is being in town, which can be a dangerous and debilitating situation: their distinctiveness exposes them, and their social marginality is perpetuated by both their own positive Aboriginal identity and entrenched racist attitudes among many of the non-Aboriginal people among whom they reside. Many Mardu remain in, but not of, towns, captured again, but this time by alcohol or by the need for medical treatment such as renal dialysis.[10]

Even those Mardu who live in Perth and in smaller towns closer to their homelands, continue to adhere to values such as kin-relatedness, sharing, mobility and so on, that put them at odds with the requirements of individualistic, capitalist striving focused on progress, time, and accumulation. If people like the Mardu are either lured or compelled away from the homelands they have struggled long and hard to win back via successful claims to native title, most will be reluctant émigrés. The previous federal government, intent on "mainstreaming," made loud noises against remote communities as "cultural museums" and havens for the unemployed and perverse, and uttered threats of closure or withdrawal of funding (cf. Vanstone 2005).

There are, however, some good reasons, other than those we just mentioned, for allowing remote communities to persist. For example, there is a growing body of Australian Bureau of Statistics data suggesting that, in relative terms, indigenous people in metropolitan, outer metropolitan and regional Australia are worse off than in remote and very remote regions. Altman (2005) identifies significant negatives, citing regional and urban indigenous unemployment rates 3–4 times those of non-indigenous for example. In 2006, in a speech to federal parliament, then Labor politician, Dr. Carmen Lawrence, reported two significant findings from recent Western Australian research: first, that "the level of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties amongst children is actually lowest in the most remote communi-

ties"; and second, that "alcohol consumption is much lower amongst the young people who live in those outermost communities than it is among those in metropolitan areas or areas surrounding agricultural and mining regions."[11] Arguably, there will be a gradual retreat from both the homelands and from some of their cherished traditions that are incompatible with prevailing Australian values. However, the history of their colonization, as well as cross-cultural examples, show that coercion is ineffectual. In a condition of conflicting values, a Weberian dynamic is at work and the Mardu must first raise the necessary motivation to choose to adopt values that will result in cultural changes that will entail unpredictable results. Ultimately, though, the outcome is not entirely in Mardu hands; the Australian people will decide whether or not they are prepared to underwrite the retention of cultural difference currently exhibited by remotely-located Aboriginal people. The current federal government, meantime, has committed itself to the process of "closing" the 17-year life expectancy gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and to reducing other large discrepancies in socio-economic status between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

To conclude by widening the referent of this article, it seems that many of the generalizations we make about cultural incompatibilities are in various measures applicable to pedestrian hunter-gatherers globally.[12] Research in this field in recent decades has focused on attempts by these peoples, now sedentarized and encountering problems of adaptation and adjustment, to accommodate themselves to Westernizing pressures. Discussions of social transformation have tended to revolve around social relations and ideology, specifically the "foraging ethos" or "foraging mode of thought," which is at the forefront of anthropological theoretical thinking in hunter-gatherer studies (see for example, Ingold et al. 1988; Widlok and Tadesse 2005). The economy founded on hunting and gathering has been supplanted by a range of economic activities, including wage labour, marginal herding or cultivating, craft manufacture, mendicancy and welfare payments, which are being pursued, with varying degrees of success. Such activities, and the social and mental frameworks within which these new productive patterns are embedded, account importantly for the persistence of such groups in the post-hunting-gathering era.

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Notes

1 The people who identify themselves as Mardu (now commonly spelt *Martu*) live in a number of towns and Aboriginal settlements in the Pilbara region of Western Australia but in the 1960s most were based at Jigalong Mission. Situated 1,200 kilometres northeast of Perth near the western edge of the Gibson Desert, Jigalong began as a camel-breeding station on the Rabbit Proof Fence, and later doubled as a ration depot for increasing numbers of Mardu drifting in from the desert in small groups and then eventually settling there. Although they now live with a great deal less control and surveillance than in the mission era (1946-69), the die of dependence was cast once immigrants from the desert settled down on its margins in a process regarded in retrospect by many Mardu as one of subtle seduction; as one man aptly put it, "we were captured by flour and sugar" (Tonkinson 2002:162; see also Tonkinson 1974).

2 For anyone seeking an overview of social scientific assessments of the current sociopolitical situation in remote Aboriginal Australia, an important recent reference is the volume of papers edited by Austin-Broos and Macdonald (2005), the proceedings of a workshop sponsored by the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia that was held at the University of Sydney late in 2004.

3 This term has different meanings in different regions of Australia. In the case of the Mardu, first contact with white people occurred between the 1930s and 1960s. Nationally, in the 1950s and 1960s, policies of containment and virtual neglect gave way to those of "assimilation," at least for part of the indigenous population, and were ultimately superseded with the advent, in the 1970s, of self-management policies.

4 We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this phrase and for impelling us to make explicit this important distinction. See acknowledgment in note 12.

5 See for example, Austin-Broos and Macdonald 2005; Martin 2005:4-5; Peterson 2005:3.

6 Change may be occurring in this attitude as some young Mardu, most of them males, are gaining employment in local mines. They and their families express pride in these jobs, akin to the way cattle station workers were viewed by previous generations.

7 To gain some idea of the complexities of the "problem" of indigenous education, especially in remote parts of Australia, see the articles by Schwab (2005) and Lea (2005).

8 With respect to notions of "social healing," there is no doubt that the Mardu concerned also saw other benefits, including distancing themselves from sources of alcohol, increased autonomy, greater access to and control over financial and material support, and the great satisfaction of "being on country" and teaching their children its totemic geography.

9   Absent was a significant tract on the western edge that had been designated as a National Park and was thus ineligible for claim under Native Title. Negotiations with the relevant government body over issues of joint management, employment of Mardu as rangers and so on, are ongoing.

10 There is also the risk of arrest, and not just for drunk and disorderly conduct. Much of the Mardu's current involvement with the justice system concerns motor vehicle offences: unpaid bills and fines, lack of licences, ignored summonses and breached community work orders. These offences are testament to a value system that rates obligations to kin as immeasurably more important than accountability to bureaucracies Mardu see as having little or no moral claim over them.

11 House of Representatives, Indigenous Communities Speech, 30 May 2006.

12 We are indebted to an external reviewer of the penultimate draft of this paper for pointing out these parallels as evidence of the wider ethnographic significance of our paper and for some of the detail here reproduced.

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