

East Kimberley Impact Assessment Project

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIVE ORGANISATIONS:
INTERMEDIATE CULTURAL PROCESSES IN THE KIMBERLEY
REGION, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Patrick Sullivan*

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Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies
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The aims of the project are as follows:

1. To compile a comprehensive profile of the contemporary social environment of the East Kimberley region utilising both existing information sources and limited fieldwork.
2. Develop and utilise appropriate methodological approaches to social impact assessment within a multi-disciplinary framework.
3. Assess the social impact of major public and private developments of the East Kimberley region's resources (physical, mineral and environmental) on resident Aboriginal communities. Attempt to identify problems/issues which, while possibly dormant at present, are likely to have implications that will affect communities at some stage in the future.
4. Establish a framework to allow the dissemination of research results to Aboriginal communities so as to enable them to develop their own strategies for dealing with social impact issues.
5. To identify in consultation with Governments and regional interests issues and problems which may be susceptible to further research.

Views expressed in the Project's publications are the views of the authors, and are not necessarily shared by the sponsoring organisations.

Address correspondence to:

The Executive Officer
East Kimberley Project
CRES, ANU
GPO Box 4
Canberra City, ACT 2601

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*Department of Prehistory and Anthropology
Australian National University.

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ABSTRACT

This paper will form part of a thesis on intercultural relations in the Kimberley region, Western Australia. It analyses Aboriginal representative organisations, including community councils, single service agencies, resource agencies and political organisations. These organisations are analysed as cultural manifestations rather than simple formal institutions. Community organisations are described as inherently ambiguous, situated at the intersection of cultural systems and occupying positions within two incommensurate structures at the time. Recognition of cultural ambiguity is, Sullivan agrees, a prerequisite for adequate communication between European and Aboriginal organisations. It must be retained as a buffer zone against the dominance of European culture, so that Aboriginal organisations can both remain Aboriginal and function in European terms. Aboriginal self-determination and self-management cannot proceed by the imposition of European structures and demanding appropriate European behaviour. It must be a slow self-generating process producing a contemporary Aboriginal cultural enclave inter-connected with the white Australian socio-cultural system. Mediatory institutions and individuals are an unavoidable requirement at the points of inter-connection and their role should be facilitated rather than rejected.

Introduction

This paper is a preliminary analysis intended ultimately to form part of a thesis on intercultural relations in the Kimberley region, WA.¹ Because it was intended originally to be read in the context of other chapters it requires an explanation of its content. The paper analyses Aboriginal representative organisations. It begins with the simple community council then more complex single service agencies, such as the Aboriginal Medical Services, multiple service organisations - the resource agencies - and finally political organisations, in particular the Kimberley Land Council. My intention is not so much to describe and quantify these community organisations and their operations, as to analyse their dynamics as intercultural phenomena and to assess the effect their position as cultural mediators has on their practical operations. The analysis is situated within a theory of intercultural relations that sees community organisations as inherently ambiguous, situated at the intersection of cultural systems, and occupying positions within two incommensurate structures at the same time.

The fieldwork which I draw upon in this paper was carried out from March 1983 to August 1985. For most of this period I was employed by Ngonjuwah, a resource agency in Halls Creek, as a resource coordinator. This position required servicing the outlying communities of the Halls Creek region with supplies, handling welfare and social security matters, dealing with other organisations and government departments, and providing a town resource base. It also involved frequent travel across the Kimberley region and involvement in the cultural and political activities of a number of different communities. The experience changed the course of my original plan of study and provided a privileged involvement with the whole range of contemporary Aboriginal life. For this I owe a debt of gratitude to the Councillors, workers, and members of Ngonjuwah.

Originally my scheme of research was to investigate the impact of economic development on the indigenes of a new mineral province. From the southern region of West Australia it seemed that the Kimberley was undergoing rapid transformation in a manner similar to the Pilbara in the 'sixties, and it appeared to be a matter of urgency to investigate the process in order to mitigate the same harmful social effects. However, on arrival in the Kimberley as a postgraduate student in the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology, ANU,² my initial experience with the Kimberley Land Council, and later with Ngonjuwah, produced three realisations that altered my perception of what needed to be investigated. Firstly, the Kimberley as a region

¹Consequently it has benefited from the comments of my supervisors Dr. Nicolas Peterson (Department Prehistory and Anthropology) and Dr. Jon Altman (Research School of Pacific Studies) at the Australian National University. In particular the editorial skill and helpful substantive comments of my thesis Advisor, Dr. Debbie Rose (Humanities Research Centre/Institute of Aboriginal Studies), has greatly improved the quality of the work. I am very grateful for this assistance and encouragement. A number of people have supplemented my own information and experience in ways it has not always been possible to credit. Among them I must thank Rod Dixon of the Aboriginal Task Force, Darwin, for information on the Kimberley Land Council and the NAC and for his helpful comments on a draft of this paper.

²This fieldwork was funded by a grant from the Faculty of Arts, Australian National University, and a scholarship from the Commonwealth Department of Education. A return field trip was also funded by the Faculty of Arts. The East Kimberley Project assisted with the provision of a vehicle. I am grateful for the support of the Human Sciences Programme (ANU), the Department of Prehistory and Anthropology (ANU), and Dr. Nancy Williams of the East Kimberley Project for their assistance in gaining this fieldwork support.

was very different in character to the Pilbara that I had known in 1975-6, a character that made it almost a foreign country in the state of WA. Moreover, it was a country that most citizens of that state were ignorant about. The distinctiveness of Kimberley culture is disguised by studies that reduce its people and their activities to economic phenomena or political causes. Here, in the cowboy towns, tropical resorts, and newly created administrative centres the struggle between Aborigines and Europeans continued on all levels with the history of a relatively recent colonisation determining much of its form. It seemed to me the diverse and ubiquitous presence of impoverished Aborigines, carrying out their own activities in the spaces left by European cultural processes, was a mystery to the white West Australian polity. Yet it was one on which they felt they could securely make pronouncements. This paper, then, forms part of a wider study of the whole range of intercultural relations in the Kimberley, both informal and institutionalised.

A second reason for abandoning the narrowly conceived project of the social impact of economic development was that the threat of isolated mining operations seemed less significant than the problem posed by European expansion in general. Although mineral exploration has the potential to be very destructive of sites of cultural significance, the increasing political organisation of Aboriginal groups in the past decade and their partly successful political struggles have greatly increased their ability to contain the harmful effects of both exploration and mining. The increasing intrusion of government administration of Aborigines, and the expansion of European population following increased services, tourism, and economic development, are the factors that most significantly constrain Aboriginal ability to control their own lives on their own land. The problem is not simply political and economic, but also one of cultural domination.

This is the third concern that informs my thesis. It became apparent to me that at every level of interaction, from informal contacts between black and white to commercial relations and relations between Aboriginal organisations and government departments, what was occurring was communication, intersection, and exchange between distinct cultural systems. Nevertheless, the question of culture never received prominence in negotiations between Aborigines and Europeans, it was an assumed yet unexamined subject, reduced to certain superficial behaviours and beliefs. This ignorance continually frustrates the effective meeting of the parties. Europeans do not conceive of culture as an all-encompassing, self-referring, and determining structure in which its members are enmeshed. Yet only this approach is capable of dealing with Aboriginal groups as they are, and not simply as deviant Europeans. It leads also to an understanding of all the interaction between Europeans and Aborigines, particularly the community groups that are the subject of this paper, as fundamentally ambiguous, consisting of two different orders of meaning, situated within different structuring systems, and therefore an intermediate channel between cultures.

Throughout this paper this point is stressed and illustrated in order to produce a description of Aboriginal community organisations that reveals them as *Aboriginal* and therefore as transforming the European

administrative forms that they appear in. This recognition is fundamental to end the present over-administration of Aborigines and encourage a more balanced dialogue between them and Europeans.

There are a number of Aboriginal representative organisations enjoying varying degrees of autonomy and success in meeting both European and Aboriginal demands. At one end of the scale are local community councils - incorporated associations nominally representing the views of a community group. Similar councils are usually formed to oversee the operations of non-government ventures related to Aboriginal welfare such as Aboriginal Medical Services, language and cultural centres, research projects and economic ventures. The community council form has developed in these cases from the simple expression of a residential group to the representation of a number of groups by their delegates, still on the assumption that the council represents the regional Aboriginal community. Finally there are political organisations. All are in some degree subject to government control, if only in the granting or withholding of funds. Some are quasi-governmental groups, bodies specifically established by government agencies to advise on Aboriginal issues, such as the Aboriginal Lands Trust, the State Advisory Council and its regional Advisory Committees. There is a good deal of cross-membership of these organisations and therefore a continuum in Aboriginal representation from the fully-government controlled to the fully autonomous. This paper is concerned with the Aboriginal end of the continuum.

There are several reasons for the consolidation of Aboriginal representatives and representative organisations in the past fifteen years. Aboriginal political aspirations have never previously been capable of expression in terms that whites could appreciate as political demands. Only in recent years have social, political, and economic changes permitted the flowering of an alliance between white sympathisers, educated mixed-descent Aborigines, and the 'blackfellas' of the bush³ increasingly liberated from the restraints of mission and station. With the increase in political franchise and commensurate economic changes since 1967, and the subsequent dispersal from missions and stations, Aboriginal groups became extremely diverse in location and economic, legal, social, and cultural characteristics. At the same time both their own welfare problems and the problem they posed for white society increased. The difficulty of centralised administration because of the dispersal of Aborigines coincided with a developing European political ideology of self-determination for indigenous people. This resulted in a willingness to divest responsibility for social welfare to community organisations. Also, the political ideology of Australian government demands the conferral of civil autonomy. The rejection of previous policies of institutionalisation accorded with the ideology of equality, but

³The problem of identifying different Aboriginal strata in the Kimberley requires more extended analysis than is possible here. If local usage were to be followed I would be able to discuss two related Aboriginal cultures using the terms 'blackfella' and 'half-caste'. However, these terms acquire different connotations outside the Kimberley. In any case they confuse the analysis of cultural phenomena with terms indicative of race. I have decided to follow a less common local terminology which refers to 'town people' to describe those who participate in the mainly mixed-descent culture of the towns and 'bush people' those, mainly full descent, who are usually more intimately involved in traditional culture oriented towards the surrounding countryside. I have nevertheless not been able to follow this consistently.

the need remained to control and administer Aborigines as thoroughly as previously. Community representative organisations meet the need for a manifestation of autonomy while still presenting the means for administrative control. It may be for this reason that the fiction of self-management has been so consistently maintained while structural and cultural constraints that render it highly problematic have not been a subject for discussion (VonSturmer, 1982, Tonkinson, 1978).

Aboriginal Representation as Intercultural Mediation

Community organisations seem to have an uncomplicated formal existence viewed from the perspective of European culture, as it is European culture that produces both the concept of incorporation and the system within which it operate as a temporary grouping expressing a limited interest. On examination the extension of this European cultural artefact to the colonial administration of an alien culture is highly inappropriate. I wish to describe some of the dimensions of this problem, conceived as an intercultural problem, before describing the organisations themselves in more detail. The problems raised here are sources of tension and conflict in the formal relations between Aborigines and Europeans. Aboriginal organisations are expected to perform three principal functions, and confusion frequently arises from failing to discriminate them. They are expected to represent Aboriginal views - to be advocates. They are expected to consult with others over planned interventions in the lives of Aboriginal groups - to be centres for formal liaison. Blurring the distinction between representation and consultation, manipulating the conflicting requirements of liaison and advocacy, is a principal source of tension in relations between Aboriginal organisations and formal European institutions. Thirdly, representative organisations are expected in certain limited circumstances to be decision-making bodies also. At least in the day to day running of organisations they are deemed to be in formal control of, and it is also implied that as a corporate entity they will be responsible for carrying out, certain practical programmes. It is not always generally agreed what these should be.

These requirements are generated within, and responsive to, demands formulated in European cultural terms. As Aboriginal organisations processed for the demands of European culture, they are in a structurally marginal position outside the mainstream of political power and administrative decision-making. The community organisations are at the same time required to meet the demands of Aboriginal culture. The contradictions that these conflicting demands engender are never examined. Structural weakness, then, is twofold. On the one hand Aboriginal representative organisations are without effective status in European administrative institutions. They are not linked to any hierarchy of power either in the ability to make decisions or to control resources. Nor do they directly reflect indigenous systems of authority or organisation. Aboriginal systems are inadequate for European purposes precisely because they are culturally Aboriginal. They are devoid of all the assumptions that structure European administration, for instance concepts such as those Weber identifies - office, contract, and the institution of public and private domains. These are the

foundations of bureaucratic administration, a European cultural system, a system of rational processing of the abstract expressions of real people and things. It is such an integral part of the European socio-cultural system it assumes a spurious universality.

This identifies a principal feature of Aboriginal organisations - their functions are intermediate between cultures. Only peripherally linked to European systems, their attachment to Aboriginal traditional authority is equally tenuous. Indeed, it is inescapably so. Aboriginal authority is diffuse and tied to concrete places, occasions, and functions. Other cultural processes also require reinterpretation. Acceptable expressions of leadership, processes of decision-making, relations between men and women and youth and elders, all require negotiation among members and between them and whites. Aborigines are constrained by the inescapable requirement to employ cultural mediators. Yet the administration of Aborigines, carried out through the medium of Aboriginal groups, employs the rhetoric of direct and uncomplicated representation. In the work of community organisations, their tasks of representation, consultation, decision-making, and community projects, this denial of intermediate processes compounds their difficulties.

The community council

Community councils are relatively recent phenomena designed to meet the needs of the policy of 'self-determination' introduced since the early 'seventies. Councils are assumed to occupy a point of convergence between European and Aboriginal cultural forms. The practice of a council of elders, imbued with the authority of consensus, meeting voluntarily to discuss communal business is both part of the European cultural baggage and assumed to conform to Aboriginal traditional practice. This assumption is highly dubious (Maddock, 1984:223-230). The workings of community councils in practice indicate considerably greater complexity. In fact community councils are a new hybrid phenomenon produced by the constraints of European rational administrative practice. Individuals do not function easily as elements of the bureaucratic process unless they are embodiments of functions or offices. Corporate groups are more readily processed. Incorporation ensures that the group has some stability and continuity independent of its fluctuating composition, location, and activities. The institution of a community association, with a membership presided over by an elected council, itself convened by an elected Chairman, processes loosely structured fluctuating human activity into a European cultural artefact capable of entering as a meaningful unit preexisting systems of meaning. Such systems include the European legal, administrative and political apparatuses. The assumption that the community council reflects both Aboriginal and European traditional practice of an idyllic pre-industrial type sanctions the process.

In practice, community councils are never formed without the intervention of Europeans and rarely meet without their presence. The single legal form covers a number of different types of organisation. The simplest and most effective consists of all the adults of a group with rights over, and a desire to reside on, a particular

tract of land. In this case the community council form can be bent most easily to Aboriginal practice. Typically names of members of a council are elicited by white assistants at a meeting of the whole group. Usually the names of all adult males will first be given as appropriate council members, then it is usually necessary to suggest the presence of women on the council. Following this the names of most adult women are given. The youths constitute the membership. The position of Chairman in such a case is usually made initially on the basis of foremost traditional right to the block of land the group aspires to. This is a fairly formal recognition and usually has to compete with more practical considerations which may result in the most forthright and effective person being named, sometimes in the adoption of a person known for integrity and wisdom. Frequently compromise forms are reached where functions are shared. While this represents community attempts to bend the council form to their own requirements it does not find sanction in the official process. The influence of whites is considerable in eliciting names of council members, sometimes taking sides in internal conflicts, interpreting fundamentally incommensurate Aboriginal suggestions for the way the council should be constituted, and finally in being in control of what is written.

Some examples illustrate this simple council form: In one case a group of related people reside at an outstation close to the boundary of two traditional estates. There are three married couples, one single old man, a single middle-aged woman, and an old woman. A single young man resides there permanently when not absent on stockwork. There are visitors from time to time, mainly young people from the nearby reserve, and the community frequently has responsibility for grandchildren left in the care of couples. In this case the community council is also the membership and all the adults are councillors. The Chairman is the single old man on whose patrilineal estate the community resides. Although he is deaf and his speech is largely incomprehensible to Europeans this is unimportant as his presence at meetings is largely symbolic and decisions are easily arrived at in consultation with the entire community. It is at this small-scale level that the community council appears to work best. This is partly because the actual process of community management can be based on personal interaction in the context of longstanding association with each other and recognised traditional rights. The outcome is presented in terms of council decisions. Secondly, the council appears to work because the intervention of Europeans in such a small community is minimal. Problems such as land tenure and access to mining royalties are expressed personally to white helpers, who then put them into terms of community council or traditional right according to which is appropriate. In this case the community council is a fiction. Representation, consultation, and decision-making take place with a group of individuals responding to the non-European dynamics of that group.

Williams and Kirkby (1984) have described these dynamics in decision-making over tourist access to the Bungle-Bungle Range near Turkey Creek. Their analysis focuses on small-group processes in which an acknowledged manager of consultation emerges responsible for co-ordinating discussion and determining when consensus (defined as the absence of overt opposition) has been reached. This results in the construction of a

'standing account' of the process which is in the custody of certain leaders and always available for review and alteration. They acknowledge, however, that all individuals retain the right to dissent, even to reserve their dissent and that "the time involved in the decision-making process is variable, and includes the possibilities of no outcome being achieved, indeterminate outcome, or the suspension of the process for varying periods of time." Even at the level of small-group decision-making, then, the result is much harder to pin down than the recording of a council decision would indicate. This is hardly a problem when the decision required has already been formulated by the approaching party such as a government department, or where the discussion centres, as is usually the case, on granting something to the group. However, decisions likely to adversely affect the group or land of interest to it, and likely to require decisions about the distribution of money or goods, are much harder to arrive at and always involve a wider range of people, themselves usually constituting other small groups. Sutton (Sutton, 1985) has grappled with this problem in the Northern Territory where the law requires consultation with small groups of traditional owners, their consent to mining ventures, and some decision on the distribution of royalties. He finds that attention to small-group decision-making rather than the delegation of power to larger regional bodies increases the influence of one or two dominant individuals, whether part of the group or not. This is simply because small groups frequently feel harassed into making decisions and "...only a handful of people actually have a personal position on major issues of the type for which ... consultation provisions were created. Most people either suppress their own opinions or - in my view most often the case - cannot come to real opinions until the key opinion-formers speak It should be admitted more often that being prepared to make a decision is as much a prerequisite for consent as any explicit rules about unanimity." (Sutton, 1985:383-384). He suggests it is fairer to recognise this and place decision-making power with larger bodies in which skilled politicians can operate under certain constraints of office and review by those with ceremonial authority (Sutton, 1985:384).⁴

The problem of discovering the community council becomes more obvious in a second example from the southern Kimberley where the community is too large for direct communication with all the members. It has about fifty people. Sharing of ritual responsibilities, language, and lifelong association nevertheless render the group a self-identifying cohesive entity. In effect the council in this case comes to comprise most of those who attend meetings called for community business. By coming together and sitting in a group, usually with the women on one side, the participants express their right and duty to hear and speak on community matters. Following from this concrete expression of right, white workers are able to process a community council. In this second case the council was ultimately larger than the entire community of the first case, yet still of a size where direct consultation with individuals could be disguised as a council meeting. The position of Chairman was the only one recognised, bestowing certain duties. None of the other positions had any effect on the

⁴This view is implicitly accepted in the recommendations of Williams and Kirkby, which insist on the mediation of Warmun Community Council, although their entire discussion has focussed on the autonomous process of the smaller Bungle-Bungle interest group.

constitution of meetings or the actual process of community decision making.

Only where Aboriginal understanding of the operation of community councils comes into direct confrontation with European understandings is the dual reality they occupy brought out. This is clear in the third example in which an old man talks to the Commissioner of the Aboriginal Land Inquiry with the intervention of an anthropologically-trained white advisor.⁵ He was the most vocal older person of the community where he was resident and usually spoke out at meetings. The Chairman, on the other hand, was a quiet man, always expressing a lack of desire to be Chairman, but kept in the position by the desire of the group who very much respected his judgement. JH, whose testimony is given here, has aspirations to a stretch of country on Flora Valley station. In 1983 he was elected to the Executive Committee of the Kimberley Land Council and appointed co-Chairman, a symbolic position. In this transcript he has just concluded telling the Commissioner of his attachment to a certain tract of country and his traditional right to it through his father. He goes on to describe how he came to be living in a town settlement and asserts he has authority over this community also.

JH: I went up to there. I was working government meeting, Council.

Commissioner: (Writing) I was working for the Council.

JH: Yeah.

Advisor: What Council that one ?

JH: I was second to Wilbiling.

Advisor: Wilbilla.

JH: Yeah.

Advisor: That one.

Commissioner: You got me. (i.e. does not understand).

Advisor: When he got.... Charlie Wilbilla was the man in charge of that mob of people at the time that they got, er, Red Hill community, Lundja Community.

Commissioner: (Writing) After that I was working for the Red Hill Community.

JH: Yeah.

Advisor: Lundja Council. If there was a Council in those days. I think the Council was set up sometime after.

JH: And I'm still working today.

Commissioner: And I'm still there today.

Advisor: Still working for them today.

⁵This was myself. Throughout this paper I attempt to present myself in the same terms as other individuals as a representative example of types of participants in intercultural processes, not to disguise my involvement but to render it the same as others. I have tried to preserve the confidentiality of informant's and communities' identities. I am not producing information about them but rather presenting them as examples of general experiences. Those familiar with the communities and individuals involved may be able to identify them, but it is hoped this familiarity will allow the placing of information in context and prevent drawing from it inappropriate conclusions.

JH: Charlie Wilbilla pension up. He give it to me now.

Commissioner: Now then, hang on. Charlie..?

JH: Wilbilla

Advisor: Wilbilla

Commissioner: Now that's a hard word for me.

Advisor: That's his name.

[Digression over pronunciation of name. Commissioner writes.]

Commissioner: Alright. Now Charlie Wilbilla.... What are you telling me about Charlie Wilbilla?

JH: He pensioner.

Commissioner: He's a pensioner ?

JH: Mm.

Commissioner: Yes and what has Charlie Wilbilla done ? What's he given you ?

JH: He given me his job, him job.

Commissioner: What is he the Chairman ?

JH: Yeah.

Advisor: Who is the Chairman of Red Hill community now?

JH: Me.

Advisor: What about [MS] ?

JH: Yeah. Well, I don't know, thatsa second. What they call'im second. Well, ah, I was secutive member.

Commissioner: Alright. His job to me as an Executive Member.

JH: Secutive member.

Advisor: Secutive member of what ?

JH: In signed(?) through the, er, Johnny Watson.

Advisor: Johnny Watson secutive member.

JH: Yeah.

Advisor: Kimberley Land Council.

Commissioner: Through Johnny Watson ?

JH: Yes.

Advisor: Do you want me to help out a little bit on this ? Um. The Chairman of, er, Lundja Community at the moment is [MS]. Lundja Aboriginal Corporation. Um. [JH] is Executive Member and Co-Chairman of the Kimberley Land Council.

JH: No never bin in a....

Commissioner: Well, I'll just write that down I think, er, equals an Executive...could you just tell me again...in the local community ?

Advisor: He's, ah, well as far as I know he's on the Council of the Lundja, er, Aboriginal Corporation.

Commissioner: How do you spell that ?

[Digression over spelling of name.]

Advisor: [To JH] But you say Charlie Wilbilla gave you that job ? For looking after that community ?

JH: Yeah. For the looking after the job, looking after the fence and everything work.

Commissioner: [To advisor] On Lundja Council you gave me your - what you understand the position to be and I've put it in brackets. He's also an Executive Director of Lundja ?

Advisor: Well he's saying that Charlie Wilbilla gave him the job to take over Lundja. And I'm saying that in fact the Chairman of Lundja technically is [MS], he's here at the moment. But that's not the information that [JH]'s given you. [Pause] And when he talks about Executive Member he's talking about another organisation altogether.

Commissioner: [...] I can understand sufficiently[...] All I've written down is what he's said.

Advisor: Right.

Commissioner: Charlie Wilbilla is a pensioner and he's given his job to me as an Executive Member through Johnny Watson. I've put in brackets 'there's a Lundja Council it has a Chairman other than this witness. Through Johnny Watson probably means KLC'.⁶ JH: Johnny Watson put me Executive Member cultures with a Red Hill. I'm in now.

Commissioner: Is there a Red Hill representative for the KLC ?

JH: Yes.

Advisor: No.

Commissioner: O.K. Well I'll leave it there. It's not terribly important to me.

It is easy to say that JH has no clear idea of which organisations he is a member and what his position is in them. It is easy to see him engaged in making an exaggerated claim to the Land Commissioner. Both these assumptions would be wrong. While the white advisor is trying to reconcile the testimony with what is already recorded elsewhere as the constitutional reality of the two organisations, and the Land Commissioner is trapped by his need to regard native testimony as direct, honest, and uncomplicated, JH is ignorant of the European forms in which his statement is interpreted and is correctly advancing his claim in his own Aboriginal terms.

Normally the irrelevance, superficiality, and confusion that strictly European legal forms engender when incorporated into the Aboriginal cultural repertoire is not so clear. JH would simply be told he was wrong, or ignored as confused, an embarrassment. This was not possible within the procedures of the Inquiry. Stripping aside the formal categories the witness is supposed to occupy it is clear that in functional terms JH claims leadership by right bestowed by a previous leader, by his involvement in wider affairs and the authority of another acknowledged leader, by residence and long term involvement, and finally simply in the act of claiming it and presenting himself in such forums as the Aboriginal Land Inquiry. (MS, though present, did not give evidence). It is not that these attributes add up to qualifications for leadership, they effectively *are* leadership.

⁶A more accurate record of JH's testimony would be: "I am the Chairman of Lundja because the founder is too old and asked me to take over. I am on the Executive Committee of the Kimberley Land Council and that also gives me authority over Lundja."

It consists of nothing else. Squeezing it into institutional offices is a European exercise which disguises a fluid, transmutable, and intersecting series of activities. When JH finally gained an excision and moved there it could be said that his years of de facto representation had paid off. It is curious, however, that the only person to move with him from Lundja community was MS, now taking the position of Chairman of this new community, still expressing his lack of desire for the position and his intention to take up the invitation to reside at another excision on his own traditional (mother's) country. From association with both men it appears to me they are both valued for precisely opposite qualities. JH is a vocal forthright man of passion, MS is recognised for giving wise counsel.

Europeans require not only to have a recognisable structure capable of assimilation into their own constitutional forms, but to have these structures occupied by certain types of individuals capable of producing the required effects. The mistake is to take this partial phenomenon at the intersection of relations between Europeans and Aborigines for the whole process of Aboriginal authority, rights, and community dynamics. This example shows, firstly, what a complex interplay of Aboriginal practice lies behind the simple, crude, and superficial community council form. To accept, as most European agencies do, that the community council is the embodiment of 'the Aboriginal community' is a simplification of the depth of social and cultural processes. To the extent that the council is integrated into Aboriginal culture it is assimilated as a new phenomena and adapted to more long-standing Aboriginal practice. It neither abrogates nor dominates other forms of agreement among community members. This poses problems for the effectiveness of representation, consultation, and decision-making in the group. Representation is a task frequently delegated to one person able to speak forcibly and with a willingness to travel, while consultation and decision-making involve a much wider group. None of these activities necessarily attach to traditionally-sanctioned authority. One factor that limits the reach of a representative's authority is the community members' ultimate right to disavow anything said on their behalf. There are always a number of reasons any person can be unrepresentative of a group despite the formal position of Chairman, council member, delegate, proxy or whatever. Some of the frequently cited disqualifiers can be listed:

- 1) He/she cannot speak for the opposite gender.
- 2) He is not a law man (i.e. active in ritual).
- 3) He cannot read/ write/ speak English well. (Attributes 2 & 3 are usually mutually exclusive.)
- 4) His right to the tract of country he speaks for is questionable. It may be a maternal right, only an association by birthplace, or it may be thoroughly in accord with traditional practice yet without possession of commensurate knowledge.
- 5) His relationship to others in the group is too remote to qualify as their own representative.
- 6) He is not qualified to speak on the subject under discussion, this is someone else's prerogative.

It can be seen there are a number of inter-locking systems of right which are capable of manipulation in group politics. Yet ultimately the right of the individual or family group to dissent is paramount. This is a

reflection both of traditional practice and that the council form, while enjoying some institutional status in relations with European society, has no ability to enforce recognition on community members.

Clearly these problems of representation penetrate the process of consultation. Despite the weaknesses listed above, Aboriginal communities do frequently arrive at firmly-stated positions on certain issues and adhere to them. They can become all the more firm when supported by the community's white workers and mixed-descent representatives. This poses no problem for the administration when decisions are fundamentally in accord with their own processes. When they are not, the complexity of Aboriginal systems of authority and the ultimate lack of any overall institutionalised power allows for a considerable degree of manipulation of the result of consultation with a community. Here the question of identifying the will of the people revolves around negotiating the correct understanding of who 'the people' are as well as the correct interpretation of their will. Not only are struggles between opposing European interests frequently played out through the medium of the Aboriginal people, but Aborigines themselves manipulate the opportunities granted by conflict. There is a culturally complex operation, however, because of their need to remain responsive to Aboriginal interpretations while effecting material gains from Europeans without any firm basis from which to make demands. They are required to offer something useful to European interests while at the same time retaining the Aboriginal position that entitles the making of any offer. Not surprisingly, then, the activity of 'dominant men' (Gerritsen, 1982) is frequently a source of confusion and frustration to their advisors as much as to the opposition in any dispute.

The ease with which Aboriginal groups can be approached for compliance in any matter of importance to Europeans, and the difficulty of adequate consultation, sometimes compounded by the willingness of some Aborigines to negotiate against the interests of others, reached a severe conclusion in the establishment of the Argyle Diamond Mine near Turkey Creek. During the dispute the attentions of both the company and the community workers centred on one man, the head of a family group. He eventually signed an exclusive agreement against the interest of others, and was condemned by Aboriginal politicians as a 'Judas' who had 'utterly betrayed' the cause (Dixon, 1985). Yet, Dixon, who was involved in the attempt to preserve Aboriginal rights during the dispute, suggests the assumption on the part of community workers that there is a single 'Aboriginal interest' is erroneous, and so therefore is the charge of individual betrayal of that interest. Reappraising the assumptions of political workers of the time, he states: "Aborigines from Turkey Creek, Kununurra and other settlements in the region ...were engaged in a series of pragmatic exchanges designed to benefit maximally from ... a new and powerful 'patron' in the mining company while, at the same time, seeking to maintain the services and support of community workers and agencies generally opposed to the *modus operandi* of the mining company" (Dixon, 1985). They nevertheless try to do this without abrogating Aboriginal cultural requirements (Dixon, 1987).

The frustration of whites dealing with the flexibility of Aboriginal representation where there are conflicting interests is illustrated in the following example. In this instance a white advisor was sitting on the steps of his caravan next to the resource agency office, talking to some members of a bush community about sending supplies to the site of an initiation ceremony. All the influential males of the community were present, and one or two others. It was a delicate discussion as it was important to establish who should carry the supplies and in which vehicle. This entailed imparting some of the information concerning the protocol of approach to this ceremony and was introduced with some reticence, hushed voices, and circumlocutions. Into the middle of this gathering strode a strange white man, later identified as the managing director of a mining company. In his shadow stood a young geologist, his liaison person. The miner held out a hand to the most amenable looking Aborigine and elicited a grinning display of excessive good will. The others looked away. He then asked a series of direct questions - what is your name? Who is your boss? Where is he? The advisor was initially ignored. As the interrogation was taking place on community property, and on the steps of his home, he eventually demanded to know the miner's business. Sensing trouble the group of Aborigines got up and drifted away. The miner explained he wanted to consult the community about a drilling program already under way in the vicinity. The advisor was able to point out a series of mistakes made in the first few minutes of this consultation. The man he had approached was a town drinker, not a member of the community assembled. The miner had recorded his name, the name of the community, and its Chairman incorrectly. Apart from the name, the leadership had recently changed. The present Chairman had been sitting silent in front of him. In any case these Aborigines had no connection with the site of the miner's operations, and were from a different language group. An impasse was reached from which future discussions never recovered. The miner had been advised by the WA Museum to consult with local Aborigines, the advisor insisted that mediation was necessary and the miner should fund an investigation into who should be consulted; the miner felt obstructions were being placed between him and open consultation with the Aborigines.

As these examples show, the limit of the simple council form is easily reached, even where it is appropriate to the nature and size of the community. Other forms of community council are not so simple in operation. They frequently represent residential communities such as missions where a number of different language groups are brought together. Some councils represent local areas. In small groupings the council effectively is the community. In contrast, representation of various sections of a large community on a community council, far from guaranteeing all interests are met, invariably means that there is no possibility of the council becoming the embodiment of the community, and therefore no effective community action is possible. The involvement of town people both as local Aborigines, as relatively better-educated and effective employees, and as individuals with political aims, introduces further diversity.

The community council form, then, is the point at which Europeans find it simplest to attach themselves to the more complex processes of the group in order to perform their particular charter of intervention. Yet it is

an unwieldy instrument for social change in Aboriginal communities, and indeed is employed mainly as a formal element of European administration. It may be capable of producing limited effects among its members, but the preceding passages have demonstrated that complex procedures for the material maintenance of a community are unlikely to be well performed by the community council in its simplest form. In recognition of this a number of other community organisations, again organised around the institution of a council, have been established. Resource agencies perform the widest variety of functions for Aboriginal communities. These will be analysed in the next turn. Firstly, I wish to describe an intermediate form of service agency which dedicates itself to the performance of intervention in a single field, for instance health, law, housing, cultural maintenance. A representative example of these will be considered here, structural problems arising within the organisations and from their interaction with European processes will be brought out, and these will serve to foreshadow the problems of representation by resource agencies and political organisations in the analysis that follows.

Single service agencies

Since the late 'seventies a number of services have been instituted specifically for Aborigines and ostensibly controlled by them. Principal among these are the Aboriginal Medical Services in Broome and Kununurra. The Aboriginal Legal Service is another national organisation. Less autonomous at the regional level than the AMSs, it employs solicitors in Derby and Kununurra and Field Officers in Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek. In recent years cultural organisations have been formed such as the Kamali Land Committee, the Kimberley Law and Culture Centre, and the Kimberley Language Resource Centre. I will concentrate on the Aboriginal Medical Service as an example of general processes identifiable in a number of organisations, and merely touch upon the problems of the other agencies towards the end of this section. While the demand for these services is most significant in the remote rural regions, the original impetus for the Aboriginal Medical Service was urban, becoming a national movement. Under the previous government of Western Australia such services were opposed in principle as 'discriminatory'. The Liberal government policy was to deliver services to all classes of citizens in fundamentally the same manner, viewing Aborigines as simply one among several economically disadvantaged groups. Both sides of this argument pose problems that require examination. The rhetoric of equality favoured by the conservative parties in West Australia comfortably disguises its own form of discrimination. It neglects to recognise real difference. To offer services founded in the needs and abilities of European culture to members of a fundamentally different culture, with different needs, abilities, and understanding of the world (including a different assessment of the historical relationship between the cultures) produces further disadvantage. 'Discrimination' has acquired pejorative overtones from the moral disgust of the civil rights era which contemporary conservatives are quick to exploit; yet it is essential to discriminate between Aborigines and Europeans where they are, in fact, very different.

There is no doubt that Aborigines, particularly those of the Kimberley, suffer health, legal, social and material problems that are distinct from those of other Australians. They are distinct not only in that they are more severe, but in that they are produced and complicated by Aboriginal culture and colonial history. It is on this basis that proposals for services geared both towards the unique problems of Aborigines, and controlled by Aborigines in a way appropriate to their culture, offer an apparently well-founded solution. In this section I wish to identify the difficult and deep process of Aboriginal adaptation of traditional culture to new demands such as health, and distinguish between this and the superficial process of mere Aboriginalisation of service organisations. Far from inducing the necessary cultural adaptation, an Aboriginal intelligentsia may be produced to operate fundamentally Europeanised institutions that are little more than dependent neo-colonial instruments of Aboriginal administration. Neither of these two extremes are ever completely realised. In the tension between them I hope to be able to indicate both the positive as well as the negative possibilities of single service agencies. On the positive side, even if they fall short of the cultural revolution they are a substitute for, they are nevertheless significant organs of political expression.

The new intelligentsia offered opportunities in these organisations are necessarily more responsive to Aboriginal needs, as it is from the fulfilment of these that they draw their legitimacy. Nevertheless, there is a tendency to remove Aborigines from the ordinary run of funding and delivery of services commensurate with those of the white population. They remain over-administered and constrained in their opportunities. In effect they are ghetto-ised and yet become the target for white criticisms of special services. The organisation's complicity in this process goes unrewarded. It becomes the bearer of responsibility yet remains devoid of authority, an outpost of Aboriginal administration. The danger that such services can degenerate into second-class facilities inadequately fulfilling the proper responsibilities of government with none of the institutional support of government departments is one that needs to be canvassed as the same problem confronts resource agencies. Initially I wish to investigate the way Aboriginal Medical Services, as examples of single service agencies, are produced to deal with problems European agencies are unable to adequately address.

Cultural medicine: the Aboriginal medical services

In November 1983 the Medical Officer of the Halls Creek region wrote to the Chairman of Ngonjuwah Council complaining of one community's apparent lack of cooperation in a recently concluded trachoma treatment blitz. One of the communities in question was a remote reserve. Lacking housing, its members had camped for two years under tent flies next to communal ablution facilities. Following all the initial groundwork of the health authorities and the provision of medicine to selected community members for dispensing, the entire community undertook one of its periodic migrations some 1000kms to the east for ceremonies. Even had they regularly administered the medicine in the face of this dislocation they would have immediately been recontaminated by their distant kin. This was not known to the medical officer. After

detailing the considerable effort of his staff in mounting the program his letter continues:

...it is therefore very disappointing to find that certain communities and families did not give the treatment provided. Failure to carry out the treatment was particularly evident in the X [community] and Y [community]. This failure occurred despite weekly visits by the staff to review compliance and emphasize the importance of the program, and visits by the Medical Officer on a number of occasions explaining the nature of trachoma and illustrating this with visual aides. It also goes without saying that the expense of medicines alone is quite high and that it is hard to justify continuing the provision of medicine if there seems to be no likelihood of compliance. I would like you to discuss this serious Public Health problem with the council, and propose means whereby the problems we have encountered might be overcome. It is my opinion that [this division of the Public Health Department] has done as much as is humanly possible to ensure the success of the program, and that any supplementary initiatives must come from the people or their representatives.

Three years later, in September 1986, a communication in similar tone was sent by a subsequent Medical Officer addressed directly to the community Chairman:

Dear Sir,

The results of the tests taken by Dr.Z. in August, show the alarming incidence of 18 Parasite diseases in 24 children examined at Y [community]. There is medicine that will cure these diseases but they will come back unless the people in the community of Y do something to prevent it.

These germs are swallowed through the mouth or enter the body through the skin and are present in the ground around your houses. The ground is contaminated by faeces, poo or shit from humans and dogs. Any child who does not use the toilet but defaecates, shits or poos on the ground will spread these diseases. Kimbies contain babies' shit or poo and these should be burnt immediately or placed in a bin with a tightly fitting lid. If the Kimbies blow about the ground or dogs play with them dragging them around, the germs will be spread in the ground and left on the dogs skin. This means anybody who touches the dogs will be left with germs on their hands. If people use the toilet and then wash their hands the germs will not be spread. If mothers do not allow Kimbies to blow around and after they have changed the baby wash their hands the germs will not be spread.

WASH YOUR HANDS AFTER USING THE TOILET

WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE YOU PREPARE FOOD

WASH YOUR HANDS BEFORE YOU EAT OR DRINK

WASH YOUR HANDS AFTER CHANGING BABIES KIMBIE

It is your responsibility to stop the spread of these diseases. It is only the people who live in Y [community] can stop the spread and prevent the children being sick. Doctors or nurses cannot do it for you. You can only do it for yourselves.

The purpose of this section is to analyse single service agencies, not to comment on the state of health and living conditions revealed in these letters. Nor is it immediately relevant to examine the peculiar protocol of formally addressed written communication. The medical officer was aware that the community in question had barely three literate members, all young girls of no authority. It is clear that much of the purpose of the letters derives from the internal processes of the structure within which the medical officer is employed. They are directed much more towards other European readers, and to that peculiarly European cultural artefact, the filing system of permanent records, than to the ostensible addressee. (Perhaps this multiple audience explains the repetition of three synonyms for 'faeces' only one of which is known to Aborigines). While these personnel undoubtedly have an interest in community health, they record for European readers their intention not to take responsibility for its poor state. What is particularly germane to the consideration of community control of health services is that medical officers stand outside the community, firmly identified with white administrative

processes, and adopting an exhortative, exasperated, and commanding posture towards the community. The second significant feature is the final appeal to the community's responsibility for its own health.

It must be clear that the measures necessary to control parasites require fundamental changes in behaviour that amount to an agreement to a radical break with accepted community practice. Aboriginal practice requires frequent handling of food, close proximity to dogs, frequent intercourse with others not under a health program, and outdoor living where control of hygiene is impracticable. In the long term it is possible to amend practices and to adopt others to control adverse effects. In some cases, such as more hygienic procedures for sub-incision and the replacement of other blood-letting rituals, this can be relatively easily achieved. In other areas the achievement of healthy practice amounts to no less than the overturn of all the daily minutiae of existence. These are not simply an individual matter but involve relations with each other and distinguish the group in its own eyes as Aboriginal. Massive intrusion in material practice is ultimately self-defeating, it tends to produce such social malaise that regular health programs are impossible, even resisted.⁷ It can only be achieved by first recognising the cultural determinants, then allowing the community itself to adapt over a period of time. This is where the rationale of an Aboriginal Medical Service is most appealing. Whether they are capable of fulfilling their promise remains to be examined.

Culture can be viewed as an interlocking series of practices and beliefs each of which is to some extent dependent on and determinant of the other. The problem of fundamentally altering Aboriginal health-related practices is therefore much more complicated than enforcing compliance with a series of instructions. For that approach to work would require a structural weakness in Aboriginal culture. There are contrasting views on how culture affects health practices. Sandall, for instance, criticises the liberal tendency to view culture as a psychological attribute of Aborigines, such that anything they do resulting from the way they think is beyond criticism, it is 'their culture'. This is reasonable. Yet his view of culture as an adaptive structure somehow external to the people involved, which has become maladaptive with changing circumstances and should therefore be abolished, is equally naive (Sandall, 1973).

In contrast, Hamilton proposes a view of culture, and its necessary re-adaptation, that 'pragmatists' such as Sandall find hard to grasp:

"Throughout history real social change has come about in two major fashions. The first is deliberate manipulation as a result of the needs and desires of a dominant group towards a minority, who are forced by one means or another to conform to the desires of the majority.....Even if such a procedure is defensible, the evidence is that the means tried in the past, and those relied on today - welfare, health and education services in particular, do not bring about the desired end; they simply result in social chaos....Social change which stems from the needs and desires of the people themselves is a different matter. Where people wish to alter their circumstances...they are likely to find ways of effectively mediating conflicts brought about by contact between two alien systems, without such mediation being destructive. Such change is usually rapid in some spheres, such as material, and slow in others, such as

⁷This, in my opinion, was the cause of failure of the trachoma program in the second community complained of in the Medical Officer's letter (above p.xx). This sedentary town group is such an easy target for welfare intervention that it has become completely demoralised and has no social cohesion as a community. Its only manifestation of cultural integrity is non-compliance.

belief systems. Nonetheless it is the only form of change which has the potential for continuity without destruction." (Hamilton, 1972:38-39).⁸.

Nevertheless, implicit in the work of many service providers is an assumption that the origin of problems lies in Aboriginal ignorance and within a generation or so acculturation will be so far advanced as to reduce significantly current health and welfare problems. There is little evidence for this arrogant assumption. Every development towards the breakdown of integral systems of culture in the Kimberley is matched by others that re-establish it. Where re-establishment has not been possible Aboriginal practices are rarely replaced by complete submersion in a European style of life. Instead massive social disruption tends to make an already severe condition intractable. The only positive alternative, difficult though it may be from conception to implementation, is to encourage the slow self-induced development in Aboriginal culture itself, a syncretic amalgamation of the new practices required for modern conditions. This demands, first of all, a cultural analysis lacking in most European interventions, secondly a great deal of time and close individual contact with communities, and consequently a good deal of financial resources. While an Aboriginal Medical Service may be in a good position to construct the problem and solution in this way, it is not well placed to address it for the following reasons.

The first difficulty such an approach faces in health, as in other areas, is that of authority (Tonkinson, 1982, Maddock, 1984). Modern health provisions have always been a European domain. As such the community members have been free to demand it, reject it, use it intermittently or selectively (e.g. only for the children), and remain capable of living a fully complete Aboriginal life without it. This poses problems for effective continuous health programs; it also has the corollary of placing health firmly in the category of colonial intervention. Its effective provision is symbolic of alien authority and undermines indigenous systems, producing social malaise precisely to the extent it alleviates the physical (Sullivan, 1986). The problem facing Aborigines and health workers is

to borrow from systems of authority concerned in the past almost solely with ritual, use also systems of cooperation in the past produced for hunting, gathering and the division of produce, and forge out of diffuse patterns of influence like those between family members, a fundamentally new form of co-operation at the community level. One significant problem for health workers is their assumption that such systems are already in place. There are no appropriate traditional systems since the conditions to produce them did not pertain in the past. This, after all, is what cultural dislocation is all about. The institution of a community council, and its representation on the committee of an Aboriginal Medical Service, cannot be a substitute for social developments.

⁸See also the exchange between Sandall and Hamilton in *Mankind* 9 (2) 1973:135-6

Following the problem of authority and cooperative endeavour, the second more specific problem of adapting health practice to Aboriginal traditional forms (and vice versa) is the incommensurate dimensions of European and Aboriginal health assumptions. As an example of this: When a person dies in the Halls Creek region the health authorities usually co-operate in returning clothes, or a lock of hair, to their community of residence for 'religious reasons'. Aborigines even now tend to attribute death to social rather than natural causes and the religious reason, in fact, is the divination of the culprit. This is frequently the occasion of a group journey to a particular waterhole where the personal effects are placed and a vigil kept. During the night a snake appears in the sky. According to one informant (who embellished the description somewhat) it has three bright lights shining like a truck, a red one on one side a green one on the other and a bright white light in front. The snake travels across the sky eventually to come to rest over the residence of the culprit. Usually other information is coupled with this apparition - a bad dream in the culprit's home that night, an incident with a snake, anything unusual. The culprit should now be killed, but the influence of the snake usually sees to it that he dies anyway. Indeed, this is frequently the proof of precisely who it was that the divination had identified.

Not only are sickness and death viewed as originating outside the organism in a complex of magical practices; is traditional health care concerned with the incorporeal realm and with social causes and not simply focussed on the sufferer. The *maban* or 'witchdoctor' is not just a technician of healing substances, nor is the healing practiced by women separable from ritual and magic practice (Bell, 1983:145-162). There are few points at which these fundamentally distinct European and Aboriginal sciences can intersect, and little attempt is made to bring them together. On the Aboriginal side this encourages the division of contemporary practice into distinct domains and ensures that health, even administered by an Aboriginal Medical Service, remains 'Whitefella Business'. On the European side the professionalisation of health care is essentially antagonistic to a cultural approach. While the two approaches may be incommensurable, this does not mean inevitably one must struggle with and eventually dominate the other. Though contradictory they can be contained together in a syncretic tension. Paradoxically, it is only through the encouragement and acceptance of one that the other can be introduced. The alternative is to remain condemned to the imposition of a technically conceived medicine from outside or the demise of Aborigines as anything but dark representations of Europeans. Narrow technical professionalisation poses problems for Aboriginal community control that are a particular feature of single service agencies.

The practice of medicine has developed in such a way that the professional is deemed to be in command of techniques, drugs, and equipment of universal applicability. It is at the core of professional conduct that solutions are applied to medical problems devoid of any other considerations (Lyons, 1984:142-3). Of course, this ideology is not realisable, and in parts of the medical profession is under attack. The consideration of social factors in disease prevention and treatment is clearly necessary. Nor is it revolutionary to consider appropriate levels of intervention according to the patients circumstances. These are clearly fields which can be expected

to flourish in community health organisations such as Aboriginal Medical Services. Nevertheless, professionalisation is a constraining factor on these organisations in two ways. Firstly, there is no resiling from the belief in correct medical procedures as opposed to wrong ones, and correct procedures are ultimately the responsibility of the professional, not the community and not the AMS council. Secondly, the command of specialised knowledge puts the professional in a privileged position in determining health care strategy. In common with housing programs, or education, health care strategy requires a vision of the nature of Aboriginal community and its desirable future. The role of the community is inherently weak in this relationship, and that of the AMS council hardly stronger. Community control of health ultimately is reduced to little more than community influence over health professionals, and this depends more on the personal qualities of the personnel than on the structure of health delivery developed by AMSs or their client communities.⁹

The influence of health professionals has two aspects. The most prominent is the command of health expertise, yet equally influential is the consequent devaluing of all other forms of expertise. There is a tendency, even in the field of community health, to view the medical problem as primary and fundamental and the cultural and social issues as secondary complicating factors. This is a pervasive problem in Aboriginal affairs, where technicians are impatient with anything but the technical fulfilment of their charter be it construction, water supply, education, health. Such single-mindedness, disguised as no-nonsense efficiency, dooms most interventions to a waste of resources from their conception. In the field of health it is reflected in the corresponding view that medical knowledge is reserved to the qualified, while knowledge of social processes is immediately available to any person with common sense. The health professional, in common with a number of other European service providers, becomes in effect an amateur social engineer. This is all the more damaging when the social assumptions underlying the program of the community health service are corrupted smatterings of colonial anthropology. These tendencies threaten the development of long term organic change in the modernisation of Aboriginal culture as well as threatening effective community control of indigenous administrative institutions such as the AMS. Coupled with the political and administrative pressures from outside the organisation they require concerted explicit programs to overcome. Some AMSs, due to the specific combination of individuals involved, recognise this and struggle to come to terms with it. They do so in the face of considerable pressure produced by their intersection not only with Aboriginal traditional culture, but with European administrative and political culture.

There is a third factor added to those of cultural intervention and professional practice that further situates AMSs as hybrid structures removed from the actual practice of traditional Aboriginal culture. This is

⁹In an interview in Kununurra in September 1986 a health professional with experience of both the Public Health Department and the East Kimberley Aboriginal Medical Service said pressure of work allows little time for long-term community development. The effectiveness of the AMS depends to a significant extent on the quality of health workers, doctors and nurses. Although the nature of the work makes it difficult to attract appropriate professionals (the AMS had been through six or seven doctors in twelve months) the existence of an Aboriginal council allowed greater enforcement of appropriate attitudes than did the government service.

their inevitable evolution as Aboriginal political organs intersecting with European political structures. This combination of factors needs brief analysis.

Aboriginal organisations tend, in the ordinary process of their establishment, to become the vehicle for the political aspirations of particular Aboriginal groups or individuals. Indeed they are compelled to secure a place in local politics and often transcend this for wider involvement. Health organisations are particularly appropriate for these developments: 1) because of their potential to produce substantial material improvement in Aboriginal communities; 2) because of their potential for attracting significantly greater funds than other forms of activity; 3) because of the access Aboriginal health politicians have to European centres of power. All these tendencies flow from the highly sensitive nature of Aboriginal health problems for Europeans. Suggestions of Aboriginal abuse of office and manipulation of organisations are common; that is not the point made here, I do not believe the question of abuse is an intrinsic consideration for an analysis of AMSs. On the contrary, at the regional and national level a group devoid of an effective political voice as well as lacking cohesion among themselves will take every opportunity to forge organs of indigenous politics, and health bodies are such an opportunity. They offer Aboriginal talents the chance to have some effect in their locality, an education in administration and politics, a general enhancement of Aboriginal status, and the forging of links with others on the basis of their explicit commitment to their advancement as a people.

These fundamentally positive developments may sometimes have negative effects. The most far-reaching is that effective political organisation removes the AMS even further from the organic integration with Aboriginal culture necessary to carry out the AMS program in the deepest sense, a self-paced adaptation of cultural practice. All the more so since political activity cannot be seen as a one-way process, as if it were produced by Aboriginal representatives and delivered to European institutions. By far the more significant effects originate in European political and administrative structures. The outcome of intersection with European political processes reflects not simply their own political aims, but also the formative influence European demands have on them. AMSs are usually established by the joint interventions of national and regional Aboriginal health organisations with State and Commonwealth Departments of Health and Aboriginal Affairs. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs in particular, as the principal funding body is involved in decisions about AMS personnel, the location of facilities, the purchase of equipment, and the extent of patient catchment areas. Necessarily negotiations over the establishment and further development of an AMS involve power plays, trade-offs, and manipulation of competing interests. The client communities are not the most intrusive consideration in these processes.

In gradually devolving control into the hands of AMSs the health and Aboriginal affairs authorities are driven by three unstated requirements. In order of priority these are that the health of Aborigines does not deteriorate and their decision cannot therefore be culpable in its results. Secondly, that responsibility be

divested into other hands (this is particularly attractive if authority nevertheless remains with the administration). Thirdly, that AMSs are run along acceptable lines concerning premises, equipment, personnel; they should not breach European expectations. These unstated requirements that structure the skirmishing between AMSs and the European administration necessarily structure the character of the organisation.

I have outlined here the problems of encouraging Aboriginal cultural development, the inherent dangers of professionalisation both for the practice of community medicine and community control of medicine, and the necessary development of Medical Services as political vehicles for European processes. In the light of these observations, what advantage at all can AMSs be said to have over conventional services? Firstly, it must be said they will not automatically do a better job simply because they are ideologically sound; some Public Health Department agencies conceivably perform better in Aboriginal communities than some AMSs could. Nevertheless, despite their inability to come to terms with the practice of cross-cultural community medicine in a deep sense, AMSs do enjoy certain intrinsic advantages. They provide potential weapons in the conflict between European administration and Aboriginal way of life, a potential that needs to be realised by the particular personnel involved. They are required to demonstrate an attachment to Aboriginal communities that competing health services are incapable of. So AMS personnel are more inclined to be selected for sympathy and rapport with Aborigines, less able to get away with the appearance of neglect of any individual's needs, more dependent on demonstrating to the communities their nominal ownership of their own medical service. AMSs are required to follow such lines by the rationale that ensures their continued growth. They are constantly susceptible to the revolt of their clients. This is a tense position for them to occupy, but like other community organisations it is precisely their fragility that offers Aboriginal communities the greatest opportunity of influence over them, and flexible and congenial use of their services.

Other single service agencies

Distinctive neo-colonial institutions are being formed in which Aborigines do gain some control over resources. A new intelligentsia finds itself in the position of cultural intermediary gaining political, administrative, and technical skills and developing a contemporary Aboriginal ideology. I reiterate that there is nothing in the structure of these organisations that would guarantee a more effective delivery of services. Everything depends upon the balance of forces both within the organisation and outside it in the colonial regime. It is here that the contradictions of their position become most strained. While it is necessary for single service agencies to present themselves as distinctly Aboriginal, there are also considerable constraints in their very institution and development encouraging them to act as mere organs of European administration. The more firmly an organisation integrates itself with the communities the less easily it can be undermined. In this sense it is important for Aboriginal organisations to maintain rather than resolve their ambiguous position. The degree of ambiguity, and the weighting towards Aboriginal or European interpretations, is both a matter of

struggle between political forces and is also greatly dependent on the field of endeavour of the organisation. Health, land, housing, law, all produce their own dynamics in an organisation according to the mixture of significances they have for the European and Aboriginal interests involved.

The ambiguity of an Aboriginal service organisation results in its activities being directed towards two distinct domains. On the one hand it is concerned with the internal processes of a social group, the development of these processes along lines of positive change, and the integration of its own primary concern with the multitude of concerns of an organic social entity. At the opposite extreme, its activities are devoted to the amelioration of social disadvantage in the broader milieu of which an Aboriginal community is inextricably a part. It is concerned to redress mistreatment in its particular area of expertise. In this sense, instead of being an outside force attached to and integrating with a complex of practices that make up a community, it situates itself firmly within the broader series of social, political, and economic practices of West Australian society. Its clients are treated as individual cases and become subjects processed through the organisation. It is along the axis between these two poles that a community service agency operates. In this second phase the organisation itself enters as part of the process of intercultural relations involving Europeans and Aborigines in the Kimberley.

There is a more general conflict that Aboriginal service personnel must confront. Their organisations are a visible target for deep-seated European resentment. The resentment of the simple presence of Aborigines among the newer European elements, and resentment of greater Aboriginal rights among the older, centres on the provision of 'special privileges' for Aborigines and the urban do-gooders and their local representatives who have 'spoiled them' and 'stir them up'. In this way, by a curious reversal, the ameliorating agencies are themselves blamed for the problems they are called into existence to redress. The Aboriginal Legal Service, for instance, is frequently blamed for greater Aboriginal lawlessness, the Aboriginal Medical Service for health problems. For example, in September 1986 the following conversation occurred between two European women waiting to see a doctor in the Kununurra Hospital. They complained about waiting too long. It appeared a wait of two to three hours was not unusual and one of them was particularly incensed that even an appointment for a certain hour could not guarantee a shorter wait. She was informed by the other that the waiting period at the Aboriginal Medical Service was usually not so long. At which the first complainer demanded indignantly: "So the Aborigines have their own doctor?". She was mollified on learning that this was not the case. Because of white resentment the AMS provides a service to the European community although, in Kununurra, it cannot adequately meet the severe health problems of the Aborigines remote from the town.

The question of discriminatory treatment that opened this section on single service agencies is again raised. Certain sections of the European population of the Kimberley find the provision of special services for

Aborigines intensely offensive. In health matters the problems afflicting Aborigines are not usually found in Europeans - trachoma, leprosy, parasites, anaemia, obesity, malnutrition, infant mortality, short adult life-expectancy. In law also, not only the proportion of persons jailed, but the offences for which they are jailed, and the pattern of sentencing, reflect racial and cultural divisions. It would hardly appear necessary to justify centres for Aboriginal language maintenance or cultural support, yet there is a strong body of European feeling that such things are wrong. There are no equivalent centres for support of European culture. There are community civic amenities, however, and the feeling is that the Aborigines should be content with them too, but on European terms. Twin shocks often strike a sensitive newcomer to the Kimberley - the immediately apparent condition of need of the ragged, crippled, sick, dirty, homeless, inebriated, and demoralised Aborigines that occupy the public places, and resentment by the well-established Europeans for the Aborigines' 'special privileges'.

In conclusion, it is clear that Aboriginal community organisations possess a complex character both in their interventions in Aboriginal culture, their attachment to European political structures, and their involvement as elements of Kimberley intercultural relations. This analysis has not touched upon every detail of their operation. Indeed, it has neglected a good deal of descriptive detail. Yet it will have demonstrated that viewing these organisations in simple one-dimensional terms, as if they had an uncomplicated formal existence reflected in uncomplicated formal operation, is extremely inadequate.

The first part of this paper considered the simple community council, its problems and the limits of its effectiveness. This led to an analysis of community service agencies with single fields of intervention. In the following section community organisations that carry out a number of service functions, the Aboriginal Resource Agencies, will be analysed. This paper will conclude with a description of Aboriginal political organisation with particular reference to the Kimberley Land Council. In all these subjects the same problems recur, though receiving more prominence in one case than another. They are the inherent, irresolvable, contradictions of a neo-colonial process - the process of intersection of socio-cultural systems.

The Resource Agencies

'Resource Agency' is a recent term applied to organisations that carry out a wide range of practical activities on behalf of member communities. There are six such organisations in the Kimberley at present, in Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek, Kununurra and Turkey Creek¹⁰ The term 'resource agency' embraces a wide variety of organisations with distinct histories and interests. It also somewhat misrepresents the nature of the organisations. While they may have been conceived in the passive role of making available

¹⁰Wyndham has a progress association that does not perform as a resource agency. Turkey Creek had a separate enclave status within one of the Kununurra organisations. This resource agency, Balanggarri, has now amalgamated its Kununurra operations with Waringarri and relocated Balanggarri at Turkey Creek to serve that area exclusively.

resources to local Aborigines, in fact their function is to deliver services as an intermediary between European agencies and client groups. They are active service providers, but are conceived of by funding bodies as the passive site of community facilities. Most of the Aboriginal workers and some of the councillors who provide services through resource agencies do not derive from the client groups themselves. Agencies therefore occupy the ambivalent position both of being 'the community', in that they are controlled by an Aboriginal council, and as workers on behalf of communities at one stage removed - its 'minder'.¹¹ It is rarely clear in which aspect the organisation is being addressed by outside bodies.

History and cultural dynamics

The history of resource agencies and the cultural mix of whites, town Aborigines, and bush communities involved with them are essential considerations for an understanding of how the organisations function in practice. In order to address the composition of resource agency councils it is necessary to describe in more detail their physical situation and their development.

The older resource agencies began life as progress associations aiming to meet social problems arising from the increasing influx of tradition-oriented Aborigines to the towns. The function of these progress associations expanded and changed according to political and administrative developments in white Australia. Newer resource agencies have been established without this history of development, and their establishment has in turn influenced the transformation of the older progress associations. In 1973 Ngoonjuwah was formed in Halls Creek as a result of tension between the tradition-oriented Aborigines on the reserve and mixed-descent town people, mainly of Moola Bulla origin, occupying State housing in the town. Bad feeling between the two was unacceptable to some town people who had always retained an attachment to those pursuing a more traditional lifestyle. Wyndham amenities club was started in 1976, as a forum for Aboriginal aspirations among town people with an Oombulgurri (Forrest River) background. Waringarri, in Kununurra, was set up not long afterwards, addressing the housing and welfare concerns of Aborigines on the reserve. The inhabitants of reserves outside Wyndham town are serviced by the Kununurra agency.

Probably the first true resource agency was Marra Worra Worra in Fitzroy Crossing. Although established in 1978-9, it did not receive Department of Aboriginal Affairs funding until 1983.¹² Its autonomous growth is probably the reason for its success, but this shows signs of being undermined as it increasingly comes under the influence of the DAA. Originally it was formed as a result of conflict between individual welfare officials and the policies of the State government. Dispossessed Aborigines flooding into Fitzroy Crossing

¹¹Paine, in his critique of theories of tutelage for the Canadian Inuit, says that the Canadian government has assumed the role of mother and its officials that of 'nanny' to the Inuit people, now reduced to the status of children. Control of Aborigines is no longer centred on large government-run settlements, but mediated through independent workers. The term 'minder' in English vernacular has a similar connotation, it means a baby sitter, and has more recently come to be ironically applied to a bodyguard or protector. (Paine, 1977:78-80)

¹²I am grateful to Tom Baxter for much of the information about Marra Worra Worra.

from the pastoral stations had an obvious connection between their welfare needs and their land needs that was distressing to committed social workers but politically uncomfortable for the government. These officers arranged cashing of Social Security cheques and a community contribution scheme based on a series of milk-powder tins lined up on a welfare desk. By 1985 its turnover was estimated at approximately \$1.5m. About 30 to 40 per cent of income came from accounting fees. There was also a cheque cashing fee of \$2, but this only allowed for a float of unproductive cash in its Broome bank account which covered the period between payment of cash and the clearing of the cheques.¹³ In later years some income was earned by organising liaison with mining companies over exploration on pastoral leases managed by Marra Worra Worra. Community contributions were also coordinated for the establishment of independent schools; first Kulkurriya, then Yiyili, Wangkajunga, Millijiddee and Kadjina. As well as accounting, social security services, and community schools the organisation is involved in outstation establishment and support, submissions and reports to government, ethnographic site clearance for mineral exploration, and economic ventures such as a handicraft shop.

Marra Worra Worra has been the most successful resource agency to date, and it was probably on this model that Ngoonjuwah and Waringarri were influenced to change, and Balanggarri, Wanang Ngari (Derby), and Mamabulanjin (Broome) have been formed.

There are two incompatible requirements of all resource agencies producing a tension which runs throughout their activities. The management of this tension produces the particular character of each organisation. Firstly, there is the fundamental requirement to translate funds originating in the convoluted forms of European rational financial administration into the raw materials of Aboriginal survival. Secondly, there is the social requirement that Aborigines be doing these things for themselves, that resource agencies be community organisations. This necessarily raises the problem of who, precisely, is 'the community' and how to balance the need for aid against the requirement that they be self-supporting. It is because even the most basic of resources such as clerical skills, vehicles, telephones, and office space are extremely rare among Aboriginal groups that resource agencies come into existence. This same lack produces the need for the intervention of Europeans and educated town people in the Aboriginal community organisations. Yet this fundamental problem must not be viewed only as a lack of skills and resources among tradition-oriented Aborigines, and therefore amenable to technical solution. It must be viewed as stemming as much from the positive presence of Aboriginal culture as the negative lack of European devices. This is the inescapable problem. Resource agencies are called into existence to support traditional Aboriginal culture, and then must attempt an amalgamation of this culture with European resources and skills. It situates resource agencies in a

¹³This is a common problem for Aboriginal organisations. Although most of their receipts are Treasury cheques, banks will not grant them an overdraft facility and distance from administrative centres can result in delays of several weeks between receipt of funds and credit to their accounts.

mediatory and functionally ambiguous position. Yet this fundamental characteristic is never properly addressed either by the organisations themselves or the government departments that fund them. The resource agencies tend either to adopt the position of managers, taking the entire responsibility away from their charges, or a position of tutelage which assumes in a generation or so the problem of culture will have dissolved and proper self-management can proceed. In such circumstances the involvement of educated town Aborigines is both resented and required. Resented, because they do not easily accept the demands of tutelage and are considered unreliable managers, and required because their involvement helps to obfuscate distinctions between European-dominated organisations and their Aboriginal clientele.

These distinctions should be examined because of the very different character of an organisation when white advisors are responsible directly to a traditional uneducated council, or when educated town people are also involved. This introduces not only a relationship between the workers and their controlling council but elements of the relationship between mixed-descent town people and their tradition-oriented kin.¹⁴ Some of the factors involved can be canvassed here. 'Blackfella' and 'half-caste' groups regard each other with a good deal of ambivalence, producing many internal problems. Whites often find it irresistible to meddle in, and thus compound, tensions arising from negotiations between the two. It must be remembered that the two groups are related by family ties and frequently by a lifetime of experience. Blackfella groups do often express mistrust of 'yella fellas' based on their own inability to read, write, and count (and consequently on the imbalance of authority with younger, less traditionally knowledgeable, and frequently female, Aborigines that more often have these skills). On the other hand they openly rely on 'their own half-caste' to intervene for them in whitefella business.¹⁵

The primary focus of their lien on 'half-caste' resources is on the person who has grown up on stations or missions in strong contact with them, but there is also a constant attempt to reassert family and group ties on town people who have long been separated from them. These people respond in a complex way. Most of them intermittently both accept and reject their membership of a wider, more traditional, Aboriginal community; the matter is constantly under negotiation. Moreover, blackfella groups do not show any greater trust for their own integrated traditional community members when these have been trained for functions such as bookkeeping or stores management. Indeed, in many matters concerning money or advice blackfella groups prefer the assistance of whites, partly because of their colonial relationship, partly because they are outside family partialities, and partly because whites can promise more. This relationship is frequently manipulated by whites and is often a source of resentment among town people. Blackfella demands strike a responsive cord generally

¹⁴This subject, including the sensitive question of labelling different Kimberley Aboriginal strata, is treated at some length in my thesis.

¹⁵A not unusual example concerns an man intent on gaining an excision from Sturt Creek station for his group who once demanded of me "you've got to help me, I've got no half-caste".

with whites who, in an ill-considered and unexamined manner, may assume that they have a responsibility to these massively disadvantaged black people to the exclusion of other Aborigines. Obviously there can be some truth in this. There may also be in certain cases the unexamined remnants of an ideology of contempt for mixed-races, and a fetishization of the exotic.

Quite frequently whites find it much easier to handle the blackfella style of political representation than the more complicated and demanding 'half-caste' style. In general blackfella groups can be counted on to give clear and firm policy directives about issues they are familiar with, for example land matters. At the same time they listen attentively to advice from their workers on matters they are not familiar with. Contrary to a large body of opinion, such advice is usually offered with painstaking attempts at impartiality. Members of the town culture, on the other hand, more frequently express the need to control and discipline their white workers, are accused of using organisations for their own political, economic, or status purposes, and not infrequently are felt to make wildly inappropriate decisions or policy statements. Sometimes white workers go so far as to try to marginalise town people within the organisations. Their legitimate rights as local Aborigines rarely receive full recognition. It is true that the simple classification 'mixed-descent Aborigine' covers a wide variety of experience, origins, opinions and abilities that need not in all cases reflect significant understanding of, or identification with, traditional Aboriginal culture. It therefore can happen that, due to their education and privileged position, whites have a greater understanding of traditional people and greater empathy with them. Most resource agencies encompass all these sources of tension, resentment, and struggles for control in varying degrees. Yet it must also be stated that within these constraints considerable cooperation and mutual affection develop also.

The Operation of Resource Agencies

A resource agency can be thought of as having three levels: a council, its workers, and its clients. It is useful to consider each of these three levels in turn as they each raise distinct issues worthy of analysis. A discussion of the councils raises the problems of representing the variety of Aboriginal interests in a region, and the difficulty of translating all these interests into effective control. Instrumental control of the agency and communities rests with the workers, and a discussion of them also allows consideration of the actual work of a resource agency. The identification of clients is less clear. There are in effect two radically distinct constituencies - the Aboriginal communities and individuals that belong to the organisation, and the white agencies that use the organisation as an intermediary, resulting in a constant tension around the question of who, primarily, the resource agency works for. It is clear from the discussion so far that the resource agency is the target of a range of different interests. White welfare agencies direct its development with their own requirements. Mixed-race town people have a special interest, as do the less advantaged black communities. The council is the site of much of this struggle. The following transcript of a resource agency Annual General

Meeting clearly identifies many of the issues, and will serve as an introduction to a discussion of the resource agency council:

ADVISOR: Well, Chairman opened the meeting. Look, we been saying now for about a month or about six weeks that we gonna have one big meeting and elect all the Council and a Chairman for next year. And talk about what happened last year and what we gonna do next year....also we've got to talk about the money that [the Association]'s got for last year and the money we've got for next year. We won't spend too much time on that 'cos nobody likes to talk about that too much. But, ah, it's important. But one thing we've gotta get sorted out first is - we were gonna have a big mob of people here, we were gonna have all the people in [x] town come out here for the election. And we got nothing really. Who we got? Have we even got Councillors here? How many Councillors we got? One, two, that's it. Three, four. Five (did I count you ?). One, two, three, four, five. We've only just got...ah six, six right. We've just got enough Councillors to have a proper meeting. We need five Councillors, we've got six, to have a proper meeting. Well, I don't know if we've really got enough people here to have an election. [RS] mob they're not here and [RH] mob they're not here. A helluva lot, [P] not here, [H] not here.

VISITOR: Well I reckon there's a reason why a lot of them didn't turn up is today's Sunday, a day of rest. Lot of them been to church this morning and, er, well, [...] Annual General Meeting to be held on a Sunday.

ADVISOR: Well there's a lot of reasons. There's always a reason nobody there. There wasn't anybody there at the last meeting and the meeting before that, the meeting before that. We been talking about it. It's not up to me to say it's going to be Saturday or it's going to be Sunday. And I don't say that somebody else says that and I say "is that alright Saturday"? Alright Saturday. Saturday's no good because there's basketball and there was a funeral and this and that. Alright Sunday. And what? And maybe we can have it next Wednesday. There won't be anybody there then. That's...the problem is that...that's why we wanted to have this meeting, get new Councillors that are gonna come round and listen to what's going on, talk about it, give me some ideas myself and tell me what to do and then they gonna go away and talk to other people. Tell them, "look, you know, we gonna have a meeting" or tell them whatever's happening with the office. Tell'em what we gotta spend the money on. Everything like that. And that's just not working. That's why I think it's a good idea to have an election but, ah, if we gonna have an election we gotta have a proper meeting. It just goes on like that.

BM: No good half half.

[...]

PG: Our best bet to have an election would be at [the Association] office.

VB: There's more people go there.

PG: Yeah.

VB: And there's not enough here. You don't count [RH community] and [SC community] and [CG community] in that thing. It's just around town and [housing development area]. That's [the Association].

ADVISOR: [Disagrees on basis of written constitution]...Look the only that...you know who comes round to [the Association]? That's [RS] mob and [RH] mob.

VB: Yeah but they're not included in [the Association]. [Visitor advises what happens at the meetings of another regional resource agency of which he is the Chairman and which has a mixture of town people and traditional bush people on the council.]

JH: [A traditional man and the only member of RH community present]. This meeting not same way like before. We can ave'im everyone, every same meeting all the time. And, people talking y'know think about it. That must be gottim (gesturing) that one, this one, this one, that one, that Community Welfare coming, telling, tell'imbut, new man, change'imbut. [Long monologue on conduct of meetings and elections.] ... One fella gotta have'im so much number, one fella might be gottim halfway number, all like this. Well, they gotta know you, what you want.

It is not necessary to analyse this extract in depth. It is clear that the Advisor is desperate for direction from an adequate council and more community involvement. He feels this will best be achieved by enfranchising the organisation's principal clients, members of bush communities and tradition oriented town

reserve dwellers. These people are not capable of pressing their claims in a head-on conflict with the town people and do not attend the meeting. The town people are reluctant to relinquish control, but also reluctant to commit themselves to any great involvement.

While most resource agencies began life with a community council on the model of the Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act, 1976 in which there is a simple relationship between an elected council of the association and its membership, by now most have seen the need to allot council positions according to the interest groups involved. Yet this is only a slight amelioration of an ultimately irresolvable series of difficulties. In the first place, it cannot be assumed that the delegates on the Council are indeed representative of their various constituencies. This is far from often the case. Especially among town people the involvement of certain families and individuals usually absolutely precludes the involvement of others. The ideal of cooperation of all the effective people of a locality in projects of mutual benefit is never remotely realised. There is a good deal more unity among bush communities. Even here linguistic chauvinism, attempts to monopolise resources for one locality, and a fundamental disagreement with the principle of disinterested representation of another's interests, prevent effective council operation.

Accepting that these difficulties are inherent in Aboriginal politics and can be taken into account, the council meets a second major difficulty. This is the provision of adequate information in an acceptable form for the council to be able to make an informed decision. Council members are impeded by a lack of familiarity with the day to day development of problems and projects as they are never actually involved in the work of the resource agency.¹⁶ This is coupled with the sheer weight of questions passed to the community for consideration, comment, or decision. It falls to the administrator to explain the context of each question. Considerable effort is put into doing this impartially, a doomed task as most decisions facing a resource agency cannot be put in a value-free manner and councillors are not familiar with considering issues in this way. (Harris, 1980:53-56). Discussion is then necessarily carried out within severely restricted language domains, and with reference to extremely limited and patchy understanding of the European institutions from which most demands emanate. Cultural and linguistic embarrassments tend to produce a communicative stasis wherein neither white, mixed-descent, nor black is confident enough to step into the other's domain and establish that all understand and find common ground on the point at hand. Nor is it at all common for the council members to carry back to their card games and camp fires any detail of their deliberations. Some of these problems are less severe if council meetings are confined to broad policy directives upon which administrators can interpret day to day issues. This is a fragile basis for action, however, and only where there is substantial solidarity between the interests involved, or goodwill on the part of outside agencies, is it workable.

¹⁶In fact they are discouraged from holding employment with their organisation by DAA policy which is reluctant to fund organisations where councillors are able to pay themselves. This is further discussed below in relation to the KLC.

Having described two major difficulties - that all interests are able to make use of a representative seat on the council and of making decisions in an information and communicative vacuum, the third difficulty arises: translating council activity into resource agency activity, taking responsibility for the enactment of decisions once they have been made. The establishment of councils on the model of European special-interest associations has the fatal flaw that there is frequently no immediate advantage of office for councillors. Far from producing disinterested well-considered and balanced decisions it results more commonly in capricious, emotional posturing made in the knowledge that no responsibility need be taken for following through. Adverse effects fall on someone else, either the workers or the client communities. Workers then have an interest in promoting a weak 'rubber-stamp' council, rather than falling foul of one that has been encouraged to be outspoken. The limited effectiveness of the resource agency council means ultimately that activities are a result of three sources of pressure quite distinct from the council itself: the demands of government funding agencies, the aspirations of educated Aborigines in a position to speak for Aborigines in general, the particular predilections, abilities, and aspirations of the organisation's white workers.

It is an unfortunate necessity that official attention focuses on the weakest part of a resource agency, its council, while its strength lies in the people who work for it, though they have no formal standing. It has been established that formal institutionalised aspects of the organisation are largely meaningless both in European and Aboriginal terms. It is at the level of actual deeds, interventions, face to face activity that members of both cultural systems are best able to absorb and reinterpret the activities of this fundamentally ambiguous organisation. The work of a resource agency falls into two categories, again categories that frequently conflict. The first category is of the immediate kind that provides a tangible result easily exchanged between the participants - practical services. The second category is the European cultural requirement to be able to initiate, continue, and account for, in permanent records, the idealised abstract expression of the first - office work. This second activity is necessarily much less available to cultural reinterpretation.

These two categories merge in the primary activity of resource agencies, the processing of social security payments. The minimum requirement for the payment of Unemployment Benefit is that a fortnightly declaration be made stating what attempts the beneficiary has made to seek work, what other income has been acquired, and that he or she is available for work. In the context of Aboriginal existence the statement is nonsensical and is usually made by the resource worker. This must be signed. Frequently the signature is a cross that is witnessed and countersigned by the resource worker, as is the cheque that follows in due course from this procedure. A cheque-cashing fee is charged, and the soliciting of contributions for bills and community projects is a separate activity following this.

Ngoonjuwah operates a more elaborate system devised by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs Area Office in consultation with the Halls Creek office of the Department of Community Welfare. Under this system

each cheque is paid into a community account. Deductions for a number of communal expenses such as meat purchases, or vehicle costs, are made of each member at a set fortnightly rate. In addition throughout the fortnight members are given credit orders for personal food supplies drawn on the local supermarket, the amount of which is deducted from the member's next cheque. In many cases this introduces a cycle of dependence where the deductions for the previous fortnight's credit orders so reduce the balance of the cheque that the client has no alternative but to immediately begin to ask for further food orders.¹⁷ The balance is deposited in their personal bankbook, which can only be accessed with a withdrawal form requiring the assistance of one of the resource agency workers.

Every fortnight while the most impoverished and undisciplined of the Kimberley population camp at the door of the office, three young women with minimal schooling manage to hand over the post-office counter some one hundred and fifty cheques, one hundred and fifty bankbooks with individually completed deposit slips, a community account deposit book in which each cheque is recorded and the sum total of which added to the sum of all the individual deposit slips exactly matches the total of the signed and countersigned cheques. In addition records of account for each item of deposit and deduction are kept.

This is the clearest example of a pervasive dilemma for resource agencies. Here the paternalistic control of the station store or the mission administration has been successfully transferred to the town. There is no concession on the part of any of the dominant systems to the Aboriginality of the recipients.¹⁸ The responsibilities of the Departments of Social Security and Community Welfare are discharged with the greatest convenience at a distance. The pressure to perform rapidly a complex accounting procedure at the same time as meeting immediate welfare needs falls on understaffed, undertrained, youngsters in a shed out of sight at the edge of town. This is done in the name of community control. It continues despite the dislike of community members with the system (expression of which ranges from persistent requests at meetings to have their social security payments in cash, to occasional individuals storming into the office, tearing up their bankbook and demanding their money). It continues despite the fortnightly pandemonium, punctuated by drunken abusive episodes, that have now led to the staff coming in at night to do the necessary bookwork and taking the next day off. It continues because it keeps the bills paid, keeps everyone fed, produces the correct forms in the correct places. It continues because a community organisation is not able to refuse to do it.

Ngoonjuwah's social security debacle is an extreme example of a problem that runs through all resource

¹⁷The ability to mobilise funds rapidly for community purposes which other communities enjoy when pension day suddenly brings a glut of cash is replaced among these communities by the haphazard accidental accumulation of funds when certain deductions exceed expenditure; for example, when vehicle funds accumulate because a vehicle is not running, or meat funds because fresh meat is shot in the bush. Because of the borderline disposable income of the community members, which they keenly feel, Ngoonjuwah is the only agency not to levy a fee for their cheque processing services, and is the most dependent on tied government grants.

¹⁸In a paper in this series Altman argues that the introduction of Community Development Employment Program funds as a replacement for Social Security benefits would be more appropriate for communities such as this. He says the scheme would recognise the lack of economic opportunities and offer minimum income support in a way that Aborigines can adapt to their particular needs. (---, 1987:11)

agency activity. While processing social security claims is the bedrock of most resource agency activity, accounting for other forms of grants comes a close second. Only after this is done can the initiation of projects, and the other important function of liaison and political representation become possible. Grants other than social security payments are made to communities for social purposes. They are administered and accounted for by an agency that stands for the community. The accounting takes precedence over the actual productive use of the funds (Sullivan, 1986:13-23). In this way the conflicting functions of the community agency brings it into conflict with the community itself. Because of its ambiguous nature it is harder to resist the danger of becoming a mere instrument of government for the discipline, control, and containment of 'the Aboriginal problem'.

Staff and Work of a Resource Agency

All of the resource agencies are in receipt of grants from a number of government bodies totalling several hundred thousands of dollars each. Each grant needs to be separately held, disbursed, and accounted for following differing procedures according to the guidelines of its source. In addition the resource agency's own income requires accounting, and the handling of social security payments must be capable of scrutiny. In common with other staff the bookkeeper works under conditions less comfortable, less secure, and relatively less rewarded than these responsibilities demand in other organisations. It is difficult to find and retain staff for these positions. Once the accounts have fallen into confusion due to lack of staff the position is generally irretrievable, increasing a subsequent bookkeeper's burden beyond tolerance. The degree to which a bookkeeper can facilitate the flow of money, and maintain their relationship with those in more instrumental positions, is the key to all resource agency activity. There are obvious conflicts here with the central function of a resource agency, which is to provide tangible service under the direction of communities carried out by community members.

The bookkeeper above all others is engaged in activity fundamentally incomprehensible to the clients, even *antithetical* to their own form of existence. Although they are seen to be disbursing money, the bulk of their activity is accounting for it. In some cases the difficulty of accounting leads to a strong aversion to disbursement. Most resource agencies go through periods of collapse where projects do not get started, or funds dry up, and communities do not make use of accumulated savings simply because of problems with the accounts. The extent to which efficient bookkeeping can be carried out is precisely the extent to which the activity can be isolated from the demanding, personal, uncontrolled, and uncompromisingly human interaction Aboriginal groups impose. The bookkeeper always fails in one of two typical ways. He or she either refuses the unique demands of a community organisation increasing the tendency towards its development as a technocratic arm of bureaucracy. Or he or she falls in love with the romanticism of the position, abandoning responsibility for the abstract representation of value in favour of personal fulfilment in involvement with the

exotic subject.

Skating over the surface of this foundation of rational accounting activity, as if it were indeed solid and immutable, the agency's resource workers carry out the instrumental functions. Here the agency intersects more completely with the Aboriginal domain. Commonly a white resource worker carries out these activities in close cooperation with several Aboriginal aides, usually from different localities, and with the organisation's council. Activities divide into mundane community maintenance and the management of specific projects. The most common and routine task is the delivery of stores to communities. When a community's vehicle is absent for a long period, or off the road, the resource agency is expected to take over its duties. Other mundane tasks the organisation is responsible for include transporting the sick or aged, organising participants for mass meetings, relaying messages, organising replacement mechanical parts, shooting fresh meat, and going shopping with clients.

These activities are all imbued with the contradiction that they appear to both sets of participants as a one-sided patronage relationship, yet occupy the institutional status of community self-sufficiency. Workers in resource agencies are frequently exasperated at the extent of individual demands that basic and simple services be done for them. For instance, there are constant demands for use of the telephone. Although since 1983 public phone booths are available in all towns, many Aborigines still prefer to pay for the use of the telephone in the office of an organisation which they feel has some personal responsibility towards them. One Aboriginal resource worker relates the sense of fulfilment she experienced when she finally encouraged one man to take his own savings passbook to the post office and make a withdrawal without her presence. Aborigines generally are comfortable with the method of achieving ends by working upon others, rather than upon the desired end itself. Out of this daily conflict is forged the kind of relationship between individuals of the organisation and members of a community that are the core of Aboriginal perceptions of what a resource agency is.

Bogged down, as most resource agencies are, in the minutiae of the daily maintenance of groups of Aborigines, they still struggle with considerable success to operate large-scale projects of long term benefit. Marra Worra Worra's independent community schools program is the first example of this. Ngoonjuwah attempted a bulk food ordering scheme and a handicraft outlet for some time. Waringarri has a well-equipped and effective construction company. Most of these developments rely on the particular concerns of individual resource workers coupled with the coincidence of interest of a funding body's local representative. Endorsement in principle by the organisation's council usually follows, rather than produces, these two requirements. It is this last aspect of resource agency work that poses the most profound problem for Aboriginal community control. Most government bodies see the agency's task as simply accounting for grants made. Most welfare agencies and local whites see it as taking over the basic feeding and clothing functions of the mission and station. The establishment of more substantial enterprises is not usually viewed with as much

enthusiasm by outsiders as it is by the resource workers themselves, and it often brings conflict with other established interests. Pushing against these constraints, resource staff tend in the process of development to lose sight of the incremental changes such projects bring about in their own organisation.

An Aboriginal community organisation is incompatible in a number of ways with an Aboriginal-owned economic enterprise. In the former a close relationship builds up between local Aboriginal staff, Aboriginal staff from elsewhere, and the organisation's white workers. This relationship is very much dependent on flexibility in dealing with the inconsistency of Aboriginal skills, external pressures by family members, sexual conflict, the capriciousness of training schemes and inappropriate funding, lack of work discipline, and the pervasive effect of alcohol problems. Many practices acceptable to, indeed demanded by, a community venture are intolerable in an economic enterprise. Aboriginal involvement in the wider economy, as corporate groups rather than individuals, is an important step towards greater power in European affairs. It is questionable, however, whether a community organisation should develop into the controller of large businesses. As the resource agency develops in efficiency, spawning new projects in the name of the community, as well as processing all the daily needs of individual community members, the possibility of effective community control recedes. It tends to produce Aboriginal advancement in general at the expense of benefit to any particular Aborigine.

The progression of development is clear. As an organisation becomes more established and efficient it necessarily becomes less of a genuinely Aboriginal community organisation and more of an intermediary vehicle for the tutelage of the people in whose name it expands¹⁹ While there are advantages to Aboriginal corporate involvement in their own economy, the disadvantages include the intrusiveness of government agencies and politicians (who provide the funding and retain de facto control) and the constraints of being tied to inherently less efficient organisations. The point I wish to stress here, however, is that Aboriginal development projects cannot arrive at any but the most superficial accommodation with Aboriginal culture. If they hijack existing culturally intermediate organisations they replace appropriate and necessary institutions with something completely different and less amenable to flexible manipulation by Aboriginal clients. Advantageous as they may be in some respects, their functions should not be confused with, or subsume, the major requirement of Aborigines for culturally ambiguous institutions of their own.

The functions of a contemporary resource agency are a far cry from the intentions of the progress associations of the early 'seventies. Somewhere in the development of social welfare and enterprise conglomerates the original aim of representing Aboriginal cultural and political interests in matters of

¹⁹One resource worker in an interview in Kununurra in September 1986 stated there was no possibility of effective self-management by present Aboriginal adults. A resource agency was managed by caretakers providing training, facilities and resources until Aborigines were capable of taking over in future generations.

immediate concern has assumed less and less priority. There are several reasons for this. The Kimberley Land Council and the National Aboriginal Conference have taken this as their major function. The tension involved in cajoling funds from government, coupled with the aggressive confrontation that is frequently a necessary part of adequate Aboriginal representation, has proved more than most advisors are willing to bear. A new feeling of pragmatism, acceptance of political weakness, and compromise with government now complements the economic development concerns of the organisations. The two approaches now meld, producing a technical, service-oriented approach to representation in which 'experts' tend to be called upon to mediate practical outcomes. Lastly, there is the simple factor of time and resources. As the organisations have shouldered increasing responsibility previously carried by government agencies their capacity to mount effective political responses has been correspondingly reduced.

Nevertheless, an important part of the work of resource agencies is still to prepare reports on proposed government initiatives, co-ordinate ethnographic studies to protect cultural interests, act as first point of contact for developers requiring Aboriginal liaison, and prepare policy statements representing in European terms the views of Aborigines. In this kind of activity the structural weakness of the organisation is most evident. Conversely, it develops resilience as an informal conglomerate of interests. Representing Aboriginal interests in politically highly-charged matters is necessarily contentious. While most European groupings are well satisfied to maintain the fiction of Aboriginal community representation where it facilitates the ordinary process of their own concerns, the numerous points of fragility in the chain of interpretations between Aboriginal and European culture are immediate targets for intervention when decisions are presented that threaten their interests. Lack of coherence between the perceptions of white workers and the variety of Aboriginal groups and individuals is frequently fully exploited.

Ultimately, however, the advantages of grass roots organisations lie not in their formal structure but their privileged access to their members reinforced through long association. It is rare indeed that unsympathetic outsiders can overcome the disadvantages conferred on them by their cultural distance. If anything more than a token level of representation is required they usually in the end come to terms with the necessity of mediation. Thus the strength of Aboriginal community organisations is to be found precisely in the area of structural weakness. It is their loose and informal attachment both to European institutions and Aboriginal client groups that allows them a certain independence as mediators. In the political arena a highly-Europeanised, development-oriented, organisation is a disadvantage. Commonly it would hire experts in empathy to report on its client's wishes. This is possible, but it increases the distance between communities and the 'whitefella business' of their administration. It introduces further dangers of professionalisation. Such an organisation has exchanged its legitimacy derived from intimate involvement with Aboriginal culture for an easily assimilated, yet structurally dependent, position as an unambiguous appendage of European administrative, political and economic systems.

In this way the resource agencies face the dilemma of whether their primary clients are their membership or the various European interests making demands on them. Consideration of this problem will conclude the subject of resource agencies in this paper.

The Resource Agencies Clients

On the face of it a resource agency's clients are its members, usually defined in its constitution. As usual this simple observation disguises considerably greater complexity. Not only does the Aboriginal clientele extend in practice beyond this narrow definition, there is a considerable hidden and influential de facto constituency in European agencies and economic interests. First I will deal with resource agencies' Aboriginal members.

Aboriginal bush communities occupy a special relationship with the towns that is essential to their composition; they cannot be viewed in isolation from the town-oriented phase of their existence, their resource bases. The resource agencies are particularly adaptable to the changes in Aboriginal residence and community status associated with the cyclical attraction/repulsion of large settlements. They tend only to service those groups not sufficiently established to attract functionaries of their own. The process of servicing them both furthers their establishment and offers the possibility of supporting the fission of established groups. It is admirably contradictory in this respect. The resource agency not only takes services to the bush on behalf of its clients, it also acts as the locus of the community in the town.

In some cases the office environs are a camping ground for Aborigines' intermittent sojourn, usually coincident with payment day. This frequently produces a certain tension in the day to day activities of the resource agency as staff struggle to carry out efficient office functions while client groups firmly claim their right to the use of this outpost of their home. The continuous physical presence of Aborigines is a variable feature of resource agencies. In some there is an easy coming and going of people in their office quarters. In others the members approach with deference and do not stay long, being no more in evidence than in many European facilities such as welfare offices and clinics. The drive towards efficient economic tutelage will increasingly encourage this travesty of an Aboriginal organisation without any Aborigines. Aborigines often themselves encourage this approach. They are frequently more comfortable with European agencies that they can stand outside and make demands on. They also rely on white authority over Aborigines in general as a means of intercession in matters where internal community authority is inadequate. Again the organisations must develop a fine balance in their activities. They must neither so protect themselves from the demands of their clients as to perpetrate the theft of the organisation, nor become so involved with clients personally on a daily basis that there is never the opportunity to put this familiarity to constructive use in working for them in the wider milieu. Because of the constant physical contact with its members the resource agency takes on a special character. As one of the few places where Aborigines are more or less welcome it naturally extends its

clientele to Aboriginal groups or individuals passing through the locality and, as a focus of Aboriginal social movements, to all Aboriginal groups anywhere in Australia. Thus the narrow conception of a membership of named groups consisting of named individuals is extended through the ideology of Aboriginality and Aboriginal political mobilisation to some form of responsibility for an increasingly wide clientele.

Just as Aboriginal groups absorb the institution of a resource agency into their own practice, and are firmly convinced of their right to its services, so the hidden clientele of Europeans also behaves as if the natural order decrees the institution for their benefit. It is in this unstated conflict that the ambiguity of the agency as it straddles incommensurate cultural assumptions can be most readily discerned. On the Aboriginal side is a clearly personal and instrumental attitude toward the functions of the agency and its individual workers which is coupled with the haziest of notions of its European identity. In the daily provision of service and the ritualised reference to councils, consultation and community control, Aborigines construct for themselves the meaning of the resource agency as an Aboriginal institution. Europeans on the other hand are equally sure they possess the truth of the matter. They are as vague as the Aborigines about how the organisation has come into being and how it continues, yet it is evident to them that it is attached to other formal European systems of politics and administration. From this mono-signific perception of the institution necessarily follow assumptions about relative power, subordinate status, rights and obligations. These occur in a variety of expressions.

The principal funding agencies such as the DAA are particularly adept at making the power of funds felt while at the same time maintaining the rhetoric of community control. The political organs from shire councils to individual minister's offices also frequently make their coercive power clear. Others, such as local businesses who demand assistance in the payment of accounts, miners who require consultation with 'the local community', church groups, 'quangos' such as the Australian Electoral Commission or governmental commissions of inquiry, academic researchers, all assume an obligation on the part of the resource agency as an instrument of European administration. Nevertheless they also frequently both resent the need for any mediation whatsoever (which they see as an artificial constraint often politically motivated) and are generally unaware of the resource constraints on the mediators themselves. The resource agency is in an uncomfortable position with these demands. It is important for its credibility, even its continued funding, to be able to demonstrate an ability to be of use to Europeans. However, working for Europeans can mean neglecting the urgent needs of their less-advantaged clients, and there is a well-founded fear that it usually conflicts with the long-term interests of those clients.

In summation of the subject of Kimberley resource agencies: It is clear that resource agencies function at the intersection of cultural systems, in the face of irreconcilable interests, incommensurate understandings, and insatiable demands. Their weakness lies in the lack of recognition that they are not simply administrative

vehicles for certain categories of Australian citizens, but that it is intrinsic to their function that they mediate between cultural systems. The obstacles in the way of this, following from the lack of a cultural perspective on the part of Europeans, have been shown to be, firstly, in the structure of the organisation. The eventual establishment of minimally acceptable councils constitutes a hybrid institutionalised representation of multiple systems of authority, decision-making, and responsibility at the level of discrete groups and communities. The council as an institution barely intersects with this more fundamental activity. Nevertheless, because of the dominance of European interpretations it is the council that stands for an organisation and community which in actuality is produced by its staff, both European and Aboriginal, in daily interaction with the communities, struggling with the practical fulfilment of their needs. The contradictions involved in the work of a community resource agency limit the ability to recruit and maintain workers sufficiently flexible to occupy a structure devoid of authority on the one hand, and yet carrying crushing responsibilities. Finally, the conflicting assumptions on which the demands of members and various client constituencies are based render the resource agency in a position of irresolvable ambiguity.

The internal structural problems of resource agencies are thrown into relief by organisations that do not exhibit them in the same degree. Political and cultural organisations such as the Kimberley Land Council have the advantage of standing outside the ordinary process of administration, much as the earlier representative organisations did. In addition its chairman is a paid worker, members of the executive in the past were sometimes also paid for their other political positions, and the expenses of meetings and travel costs are met by the land council. In contrast to resource agencies the land council has the advantage of attracting by the nature of its aims more altruistic involvement, at the same time it does not have to demand an unreasonable degree of sacrifice from its chairman and committee members. The executive has more involvement in the work of the land council because of these funds, and the relationship between them and their workers is more direct, allowing for greater unity of purpose. Thirdly, the KLC is able to focus more closely on the political and representative aspect of their work, not becoming bogged down in the multiple contradictions of such a wide variety of functions as the resource agencies. The analysis of the KLC, followed by some observations on Aboriginal political style in general, allows the stripping away of numerous complicating factors in community organisations leaving only two to account for the relative lack of effectiveness. The first, inevitably, is the problem of intercultural mediation; the second, less amenable to flexible manipulation, is the inexorable operation of European political domination.

Cultural Politics: The Kimberley Land Council

The Kimberley Land Council is of all Kimberley intercultural institutions the richest in ambiguity. Representing land interests, its special concern is necessarily closest to those of Aboriginal traditional culture. It therefore places the traditional custodian and ritual expert at the centre of the organisation's activity.

Consequently, it is by the nature of its establishment the most comprehensively Aboriginal-owned organisation in the Kimberley, and the one on which land aspirations, as both religious and political phenomena, focus. Yet it is also perceived by Europeans as the organisation with the greatest potential to affect their political and economic interests. Consequently much of its attention is directed towards powerful European forums. It has no official power either in relation to government or to Aboriginal communities. This ambivalent position is never reconciled. It cannot adequately carry out its task if it resolves itself into an unambiguously European institution, nor can there be any traditional organisation to emulate. Its structurally indeterminate position is derived from these factors .

The land council superficially resembles other community- based organisations in its internal structure. It consists of a membership, an executive committee, and workers with specific functions either on contract or on staff. Nevertheless, the operation of each of these levels and their relation to each other is unique to the land council. Its uniqueness arises out of the history of development of the organisation and its purpose of translating Aboriginal land aspirations into European political processes.

This section will explore the dimensions of intercultural ambiguity by reference to the Kimberley Land Council, describing its history and formal organisation. Then it will examine its actual operation as the activity of a number of Aborigines and their representatives and its relations with European systems. It will conclude with an examination of Aboriginal political style exemplified by the involvement of the KLC Executive with national political movements.²⁰

The Origins of the Kimberley Land Council

During 1977 and 1978 workers with Aboriginal organisations, based mainly in the East Kimberley, discussed the need for a Kimberley-wide representative organisation in opposition to the policies of the Court Liberal government. The politicisation of Aborigines themselves can be dated from the election of the first Aboriginal member of the State parliament (from the Halls Creek region) and the subsequent Court of Disputed Returns (Tatz, 1979:25-41), which involved testimony from large numbers of Aborigines. There was an increasing consciousness of rights and the benefits of unity among traditional Aborigines, and an increasing awareness of the potential for leadership and mediation by a number of Aborigines at that time working for the DAA, Community Welfare, and the Aboriginal Legal Service. There is no doubt, however, that the essential catalyst in the establishment of the KLC was the group of concerned whites who organised the initial exploratory meeting in February 1978 at Halls Creek and the meeting in May at Noonkanbah that formally established the organisation. This was a temporary coalition united in their opposition to State government

²⁰Much of the factual information concerning the land council, particularly in the early years, derives from an interview with Rod Dixon in Darwin in September 1986, and subsequent discussions. I am grateful for being able to draw on Dixon's experience and documentation generously offered. I am responsible for the analysis and description.

policies, inspired by political beliefs on the one hand and the romanticism of involvement with traditional Aborigines on the other. It was comprised of radical Catholics establishing progress associations and working with remote communities in the East Kimberley, disaffected DAA and Welfare officials, students, an Aboriginal Legal Service solicitor, a writer on Aboriginal issues for a national weekly, and an anthropologist. This loose coalition of social and political activists were united only in their broadest interests and their willingness to provide administrative support to independent Aboriginal organisations. They set the political style of the KLC for a decade and the structure worked out at the inaugural meeting established the pattern of operation of the land council as well.

The most significant development was the simple fact of the meeting itself. For the first time large numbers of Aborigines from different language groups and different social environments had come together from across the entire region for a political purpose. Necessarily the political purpose was, and still is, expressed in cultural terms - the preservation of sacred sites and the return of traditional land. The sheer activity of participation in, travel to, and attendance at the meeting, this simple expression of purpose, constituted the entire significance of the meeting for many of the participants. Groups that barely a decade later openly declare their requirements by right had at this time almost no contact with the wider process of white politics. Indeed, there had been little interaction with whites at all except mission and station personnel, little contact with other Aborigines except for neighbours in ceremonies and at yearly gatherings such as the local race meetings. Traditional political segmentation of Aboriginal groups had not been greatly overcome by settlement living. While the new category 'blackfella' was recognised as describing a wide grouping it did not carry with it any assumption of unity, this is only slowly emerging (---, 1981:48-49).

The second feature of this first meeting that has endured was the structure of representation decided on. In contrast to the bush Aborigines' simple symbolic participation by their presence, the whites involved and certain town Aborigines wanted the establishment of a structure that was functional and productive. The chairman of the Northern Land Council was invited to this first meeting and explained the structure of the NLC. Out of this example came the establishment of an executive committee, to meet more regularly than the full membership, and to be elected by the full meeting to represent all the areas of the Kimberley. It was intended that each area should be represented by one traditional elder and one young person who could read and write. Initially two chairmen were appointed, and this reflected a continuing tension between East Kimberley and West Kimberley interests. Later one full-time paid chairman was to be elected annually.²¹ From the start the two phases of the KLC were evident, a functional structure for political activity legitimated

²¹The Northern Land Council, on which the KLC structure was superficially modelled, is a statutory body established by the Northern Territory land rights legislation to research and present land claims and to administer royalty funds from the Aborigines Benefits Trust Account. The legal and economic status of the NLC bears no relation to the Kimberley Land Council, and in fact the KLC functions differently within its formal structure.

by mass participation in meetings as a largely cultural, symbolic, and integrative statement.

The question of decision-making was discussed as a problem right from the start. The executive committee was subordinate to the membership not only in formal terms but in the actual practice of the organisation; they had no ability to take decisions affecting traditional land. This is, and remains, the acknowledged prerogative of the traditional custodians. The tension arises between the necessary political and administrative demands on the executive and the difficulty of communicating detailed developments to the membership at large and receiving in return clear instructions. The initial meeting decided that over two or three days the major questions were to be introduced and discussed. The final session was to be for the meeting to hand their decision to the executive. In practice this has never worked. The primary function of the meetings, it was decided, was to raise the consciousness of the members to their place in Australian social and political processes and their ability to effect change. It was to form unity. The recurring image presented to those assembled was the ease with which one twig could be snapped, the difficulty of breaking a clenched bundle. This approach worked in the fundamentally oppositional context that the late 70's presented. When demands for particular action are made, however, the contradictory position of the executive and their white staff, falling between the aspirations of traditional Aborigines and the demands of European systems, is revealed.

A complex mixture of cultural perceptions came together to form the land council in May 1978. It has endured, and remains the single significant regional force, despite the stasis engendered by impossible requirements. Although there is substantial pressure on the land council to perform as a service agency it fails to do so adequately and remains instead little more than the simple embodiment of Aboriginal political will. To outside interests the focus of the land council, like any other organisation, appears naturally to be certain offices and office-holders with instrumental tasks. The constraints on the activity of this face of the land council will be the subject of the rest of this chapter. The primary activity of the land council is not to carry out functions but to hold meetings, each meeting reproducing in essentials the one before. The point where the land council intrudes into European circles can best be understood by first analysing this foundation.

The Meeting as Ambiguous Cultural Activity

The movement towards Aboriginal representation in the early 'seventies produced a new practice - the meeting. The KLC is the prime proponent of the large-scale bush meeting which is a single sub-type of the Aboriginal meeting phenomenon. In recent years the number of meetings of various types that Aborigines are required to hold has increased to the point where it is a significant intrusion in Aboriginal social life. Few meetings are called by Aborigines themselves to impress their needs on white workers or government representatives. More commonly council meetings are required in all communities for the Europeans to explain recent correspondence and elicit approval or guidance for action. Frequently in addition to routine business

meetings special purpose meetings are demanded by some outside agency such as a mining company, a politician, an inquiry, or a government department. There are also regular quarterly, biannual, or annual meetings of statutory groups such as the North East Regional Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Council Consultative Committee (sub-division of the Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Council, not to be confused with the East Kimberley Aboriginal Affairs Co-ordinating Committee). Added to these are the area or regional meetings of cultural groups, church groups, women's groups, and others asserting ideological hegemony over Aborigines in general. The meeting is nowadays second only to the ceremony as the most common group activity of Aborigines. Many find the constant requirement of attendance at meetings increasingly demanding, confusing, debilitating, and oppressive.

The meeting form derives from European practice where it is one of the central activities of administrative structure. Introduced into Aboriginal experience it becomes transformed according to the requirements of the task at hand and the nature of the participants. Never has it been thoroughly Aboriginalised, indeed it is doubtful whether this is possible. It remains an activity that combines, somewhat uncomfortably, Aboriginal and European elements. Not all Aborigines participate in all kinds of meetings. Broadly, there are those that 'follow government meeting' as speakers, those that go to meetings for the experience of travel and meeting, and those that never attend meetings. This is not a banal observation. Many people prepared to travel far and wide for ritual and also to be involved in the daily maintenance activities of their community declare that they have no interest in meetings over government business. While the prominent speakers generally attend all meetings, the others have various preferred levels of participation. Prominent speakers tend to construct or 'own' monologues that are produced at all meetings regardless of their purpose in European eyes or the formal standing of the speaker in relation to the meeting. Kimberley Land Council meetings occupy a special place in the general round of meetings.

KLC meetings are generally held a long distance from centres of white activity. Locations have been One Arm Point in the far West Kimberley, Lake Gregory Station and Ringers Soak in the far south, Well 33 on the Canning Stock Route in the Gibson Desert. Since the location of the meeting, which has to rotate so that all can host it in turn, is usually the home of few Aborigines, most have to travel considerable distances, often journeying for two or three days each way. This requires a sudden and massive regional mobilisation, firstly bringing people into their local service centre from outlying communities then setting off in appropriate groups, each vehicle laden to capacity with people, swags, and supplies. In this way the journey becomes a significant part of the meeting, frequently lasting longer than the meeting itself. At each town and settlement along the route groups coming from further away meet those yet to set out, gather news of those gone ahead, arrange further supplies, and use the radio and telephone services of the local community centre. Each bus, truck, four-wheel drive, and private car pushing along the four- to six-hour stages of the route in isolation is conscious of being one of a chain of mobilised Aborigines. It is a mistake to see this activity only as the necessary

mundane support of the principal business of the meeting; it is itself one of the primary activities.

Travelling into foreign country is a source of excitement and apprehension. The journey becomes the occasion for refreshing memory of places and the stories associated with them not often visited since the days of regular cattle station work. Constantly throughout the journey older people recall historical and mythological stories associated with country remembered over the horizon on either side of the road. Incidents along the route as the travelling companions penetrate further into other's territory are treated with great circumspection. For instance, a goanna encountered standing on its hind legs in the middle of the road would not be instantly killed for food, but allowed to go in case it was a supernatural emissary. Overnight camping spots are chosen with care. Often at the end of a day's travel, just short of the destination, the decision is taken to camp overnight. Many Aborigines will not enter unknown territory at night in case something forbidden is encountered or some taboo broken.²²

On arrival it is the responsibility of the hosts to provide adequate water and beef, and point out appropriate camping places. Included in these responsibilities is the reassurance that nobody will stumble across dangerous areas of mythic significance. At most meetings, if the minimum level of organisation is achieved, an atmosphere of great ease and contentment soon develops as cuts of beef are hung from trees out of reach of the dogs, tea and damper cooked on the hearths that form the focal point of camps springing up around the central meeting place. In general speakers of the same language and residential relatives keep themselves apart from other groups. Within these groupings of people who usually travel together are two or three family hearths, or sometimes men's and women's camps.

Prominent men and women seek each other out across these boundaries. Here it becomes important to determine classificatory relationships, and thus forms of address and in some cases expected behaviour. This is usually done with considerable joking. Deliberate mistakes are made in addressing one another, with merriment about the consequent duties toward each other until, by way of extending knowledge of relationship with one to that persons relationship with another, all come to understanding. This is important not only because in many regions the primary form of address is by subsection, but because it makes clear appropriate behaviour. For example, one old man is acknowledged as a powerful ritual figure as well as having a history of involvement in political struggles over mineral exploration on Noonkanbah station and the formation of the Land Council. His presence at meetings is very important. Yet when calling upon him to speak the Chairman, a much younger man, routinely addressed him with joking abuse. Incongruously, having been introduced in this

²²This behaviour derives from a traditional precedent. During initiation ceremonies there is a strict protocol of order of arrival of groups transporting the initiates. Some must go ahead, others are required to follow. When the initiates have passed the road is 'closed', forbidden, especially to women. A vehicle accidentally encountering another on ceremonial business must leave the road and face away, it is said that its occupants should be killed. Rumours that a road is 'closed' are sufficient to immobilise groups for days. It is from these experiences that reticence during approach, even to the secular meetings of the land council, derive.

way, the old man went on to speak seriously and was listened to attentively. In this way the men demonstrated behaviour appropriate to their 'djadja' relationship rather than that considered by Europeans to be appropriate to a meeting.

By such means the Aboriginal dominance of the setting is established; this is considered the correct approach for the KLC. It furthers land interests and therefore is supportive of Law. This was demonstrated at the election of a new chairman in September 1986. The new man dedicated himself to cementing unity by visiting each major community across the Kimberley and discussing their concerns. As soon as this information was absorbed by those assembled all the males rose and walked off some distance into the bush for discussion of law matters out of earshot of women. The chairman's pledge had immediately raised the problem that he was a coastal man ignorant of desert law and a procedure for inducting him needed to be established so that law matters could be freely discussed in his presence. The elders would not contemplate admitting another Aborigine to their community to discuss land matters without finding some means of integrating him with their own ritual requirements. The business of the land council is not seen by Aborigines as secular activity, though that is the European perception. Agreement in principle was quickly reached and the meeting resumed.

Superimposed on these more fundamental processes is the whitefella business that dominates the first two days of formal sessions. Here it becomes apparent that two distinct and incommensurate realms of activity are occurring at precisely the same time. There is the transmission of practical information with the implication that practical decisions will be taken, and the cultural activity of participation and attendance at the meeting bearing no direct relationship to its content. They occupy precisely the same physical, temporal, and symbolic location, yet they barely intersect. It is at the Kimberley Land Council meeting that the ambiguity inherent in the simultaneous practice of two cultural systems is most apparent. Aborigines and Europeans fail either to be dominated by or to subsume the other by the maintenance of an ambiguity that is never directly addressed.

Getting the Message Across

Usually the first two days of a KLC meeting are taken up with practical matters. The third day is reserved for community reports which are an opportunity for community leaders to stand and make declarations on the progress of their community, the community's immediate needs, and their demands for particular tracts of land. This is an important session to the men and women who have travelled thousands of kilometres for this purpose. The first two days, however, are crucial to those executive committee members and staff who require information to be disseminated and decisions arrived at on a range of issues relating to the day to day operation of the land council and its responses to current political developments. During these two days a number of other interest groups are usually invited to speak on issues they consider it important to apprise Aborigines of. Gradually the practice of early years has been eroded when only those Europeans active in Aboriginal politics were welcome. They acted as functionaries maintaining the practical aspects of the meeting

with transport and supplies, usually sat at a distance from the meeting itself, and only rarely were called upon to speak.

Beginning shortly after daybreak, in response to the demands of one or two prominent organisers, groups of older men and women drift towards a selected shade tree where they sit in a half-circle about six or seven persons deep. The women usually sit as a group at one end, or behind the speaker. A note-taker and those with an intimate concern for the subject at hand sit close to the speaker. The chairman usually regulates contributions, either discussing an issue, calling upon his white staff to explain, or introducing another speaker. The chairman is always careful not to appear to be bossing groups he has no connection with and only rarely when sure of mass agreement does he adopt a tone of exhortation or demand. Less knowledgeable speakers, especially younger town-based educated Aborigines, sometimes reveal their inexperience by breaching this convention. Beyond the ring of seated participants, at a slight distance, is another ring of people leaning on motorcars, sitting on the roof, or lying apparently somnolent in the shade. These are able to regulate their participation, leaving the meeting, drifting from one group to another, lobbying and gossiping. They maintain a subdued manner and keep their attention on what is being presented and who is performing. Beyond this circle again are groups of people remaining at the camp hearth playing cards or sleeping. Despite the opportunity of the informal setting and the proximity to each other there is very little discussion of the issues presented, either in the inner circle or its surrounds, except by the few whites among themselves. By their presence in the inner circle the group of about forty to sixty mature men and women demonstrate their commitment to the serious business of the public domain, occupying the very edge of Aboriginal culture where it connects with wider European processes. Straddling this intersection are the staff and executive members.

There are two levels of understanding to be breached in the meeting process. Firstly, the transfer of information about a subject needs to be effected; secondly, this information needs to be absorbed by the audience and transformed so that it becomes meaningful in an Aboriginal context. The protocol of communication with traditional Aborigines makes the process tenuous and fragile. The participants must understand the information and at the same time reinterpret facts produced by one cultural setting into appropriate counterparts of another cultural setting. It is not usually safe to assume this is achieved to any great degree. The speaker addresses an audience that customarily sits impassively, registering none of the consistent minor cues Europeans emit to signify the reception of messages. At infrequent intervals a burst of applause or laughter indicates that this otherwise utterly impassive audience is indeed attentive to everything that is said. It is required that the speaker offer information in simple and neutral terms without at the same time being able to supply the contextual information that enables an understanding of its significance and the formulation of a response. This is for two reasons. Firstly there is the relationship of subordination executive members and staff must take to the audience. Their position is legitimated by respect for Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal culture determines that they are not eligible to direct initiative on any question, but must respond themselves to

directives.

Secondly, there is a strong requirement that Europeans and educated representatives resist charges of manipulating an outcome for their own motives. This is to deflect political criticism and build credibility as functionaries in the name of a broad mass when they are required to act. The imbalance of power makes this a forlorn task. In one instance, the government's point-by-point proposal for land rights legislation was put to a KLC meeting with painstaking care to explain and elicit concrete responses to each point. At the same time a local State government Member of Parliament visited a community not 50 kilometres away and emerged with consent to the government's position and condemnation of the KLC, which was immediately communicated to the press.

The presentation of information, then, is necessarily slow, in reduced terms, and relatively neutral. Most highly complex issues facing Aborigines are not easily reduced to this format. Mere language-use itself is also fraught with difficulties. It is not unusual for more than ten language groups to be represented in the audience of a KLC meeting. Speakers consider it inappropriate to address the audience in Kriol; this language is for intimate settings and its use generally indicates the levity of the subject. Most commonly simple English is used, sometimes as spoken by Aborigines, sometimes a truncated form of standard English with short sentences, short words, and few qualifiers. Rarely is a deliberate attempt to facilitate communication made. On occasions members may be asked to render what has been said into an Aboriginal language. One after another people will rise and make brief declarations that further reduce the content of the information. Once a meeting was split into small groups for workers and representatives on intimate terms with the group to explain in a mixture of Kriol and English, with time for the required repetitions and interrogations, to ensure that the substantial outlines of the subject had been absorbed. This intense transfer is occasionally possible, but not congenial as a consistent practice. Even where great attention is given to ensuring that participants have an adequate understanding of a problem the response is often inhibited simply because the Aboriginal members do not know what to do about it. They look to those informing them of a problem at the same time to indicate what may be the best way of approaching it. Because of the difficulty of doing this directly, what tends to transpire is an information osmosis. It is produced by the following procedures.

Certainly there is some degree of discussion of issues outside of the formal sessions, particularly if these can be expressed in straightforward oppositions. Occasionally there are firm and strident outbursts from individuals; these are assessed in the light of the speaker's motives and degree of understanding of the subject. Added to this is the representatives' sense of a general and vaguely expressed feeling of acceptance or rejection of choices presented by the issues. This guides their actions without formal direction. It is particularly apparent when the staff and representatives are aware of the need to accept pragmatically a development that goes against the express requirements of the members or to take a short-term gain at the expense of a long-term

goal. Although opposition may only be expressed in a highly restrained manner, the representatives will spend a good deal of effort in trying to persuade the members of the necessity of their view. To an outsider this often appears as one side persistently arguing their position while the other makes no response at all. It is clear that a good deal of sensitivity is required to interpret Aboriginal wishes, consequently there is considerable opportunity for crass European interventions to elicit a favourable response if allowed. This fragility is at once a liability and an asset in KLC meetings. Ultimately it means that it is only those who possess the required sensitivity due to close proximity with traditional Aborigines who will also receive from them the mandate to represent them. The KLC has this safeguard, unavailable to other community organisations. Often the result of not sensing the necessary level of agreement is the deferral of a decision until some unspecified future time. Where decisions are arrived at it is through a process of feeling out and matching up relative levels of understanding, perceived agreement or disagreement, imposed necessity, always with the establishment of fallback positions. This is not effective material for high-powered political struggle, yet it is an organic product of Aboriginal practice. It is incomprehensible to politicians and developers used to a much more vigorous and aggressive representation of interests, something they have come to expect of the KLC in public forums. It is debilitating and frustrating to white staff who daily must face uncomfortable choices. Only the mixed-descent representatives seem capable of accepting with any degree of equanimity the ambiguous outcome of a long-anticipated full KLC meeting.

The first two days of meeting follow the same pattern. A break is taken for food towards midday, reconvening after two or three hours. Towards sundown the formal session is closed. Often fresh-killed beef is brought in and after the evening meal a performance is usually arranged. These ceremonies are not usually serious statements about country, but are recreational, amusing, and encourage the participation of all, including those whites present. Alcohol is strictly forbidden at KLC meetings. If there is a town in the vicinity, some of the whites and town-based Aboriginal representatives slip away in the evening for a social gathering in town where they camp at an associate's house. On the third day there is usually some negotiation over whether to devote further sessions to unfinished formal business, to satisfy the impatience of certain elders to make their stand on issues close to home, or to meet the requirements of various interest groups to talk to the Aboriginal people. In the past, visitor's speeches were kept to a minimum. They usually had to demonstrate something of considerable importance to the assembled people. At more recent meetings this practice has become attenuated. One afternoon session in 1986 was devoted to speeches explaining a research project by the anthropologist controlling regional liaison, the dangers of AIDS delivered by the Broome AMS doctor and liaison worker, and the evils of uranium and a particular mining company by the representative of an environmental group. The atmosphere on the third day is usually more relaxed. Attention may falter altogether and there is usually more need for calling the meeting to order. Although some individuals may leave early, it is never cut short. Even after the last session is ended business is still discussed in small groups while others

pack up and return home. Many stay overnight. Ceremonies are performed in the evening, and in the morning the temporary meeting site is abandoned. Most carry back with them a general sense of how well things are going at the moment for Kimberley Aborigines, with a more particular knowledge of one or two major questions, and a good deal of news about other communities' progress. The workers and executive committee members on the other hand retire with vague, ambiguous, tenuous and fragile directions for the continuing struggles with white interests.

Before examining this aspect of the land council further it is necessary to sum up what has been achieved by the primary activity of its members - the meeting. This section began by suggesting the initial meeting to inaugurate the Kimberley Land Council set the pattern for a decade. While the Europeans involved saw, and continue to see, the KLC as a primary instrument of Aboriginal political action with the meeting as its necessary support, the membership reverse this order of priority. The meeting is itself significant Aboriginal cultural activity. The reason workers and executive committee members persevere with the meeting strategy is not that it is effective in supporting the daily tasks of the land council, but that it has the more general result of offering the ideological support to their activity. At the meetings workers and executive committee members recharge their sense of commitment to an uncompromisingly non-European mode of behaviour. In between large-scale meetings they occupy the promontory of Aboriginal political expression, the point at which it intrudes into European political and economic processes, and which is seen from the European vantage to be the whole ground. In this way they straddle two unequal and incompatible domains. The most significant discrepancy between the domains is the haphazard, loose, and formless character of the land council as a mass organisation in contrast to its public face as a hard-line radical, activist, political force. Consideration of this second aspect requires an examination of the operation of the land council as an intermediary organisation.

The Operation of the Land Council

Initially the land council operated from the office of the Aboriginal Legal Service in Kununurra in the East Kimberley, moving its office to Derby in 1979. It had decided from the start not to apply for government funding in order to retain its full independence. Consequently, in the first two years of operation, it relied on sharing resources with other community organisations and clandestine assistance from sympathetic welfare officials. It proceeded from one public issue to another, taking up the cause of the Djaru people evicted from their homelands on Gordon Downs station, and championing the resistance of Noonkanbah elders to drilling a sacred area for oil exploration.²³

In the West Kimberley the chairman of the KLC was also the regional NAC member, and resources were

²³In August 1978 a KLC delegation, consisting of Frank Chulung, Jimmy Biendurry and Rod Dixon, attended a conference sponsored by the Aboriginal Land Fund in Canberra. The conference accepted Gordon Downs as the first priority for action. Several members then proceeded to the office of the Vestey corporation in Sydney which they occupied in protest at the eviction. The community returned, to be evicted again in 1981. (Dixon. Pers. Comm.)

shared between the two organisations in a relationship that endured until the abolition of the NAC in 1985. The first consistent source of funds to be achieved was a grant from the World Council of Churches. An office consisting of two small rooms, initially the NAC office, was taken over at the YWCA hostel in Derby. The land council now managed to employ one full time member of staff - the chairman. Other staff were obtained under trainee schemes. All were paid the same level of wages, about \$200 per week. In addition the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies funded an anthropologist. There was a strong dependence during these early years on the voluntary assistance of concerned whites who were usually young, tertiary-educated, and politically motivated. During the years of the Court government there was a firm official policy of not recognising the legitimacy of the KLC at all. The Minister for Community Welfare threatened the dismissal of staff communicating officially with the KLC as if it were an organisation with status. Both from the demands of government, then, and the requirements of its own impoverished beginnings, the land council operations consisted of little more than offering a 'shopfront' name under which to display Aboriginal opinions.

It was not the land council as a mass gathering of Aborigines that Europeans generally experienced. Nor was it the land council as a man and a telephone that grass-roots workers operated with. It was the land council as a name, an image generated through press pronouncements, that most whites related to. This fulfilled substantially the original intentions of its founders, a voice of the Aboriginal people. Yet since its foundation, simply by being a land council, it was deemed to require control and effective decision-making power in Aboriginal affairs. It was a source of continual frustration and self-examination that this was never achieved. The ambiguous institutional status of the land council, especially in the early years, was both its weakness and its strength. Responsible only for co-ordinating Aboriginal mass mobility, making pronouncements on the inadequacy of current status, and occasionally on what was required, it was equally as difficult for government to control as it was for the KLC to exert any form of control itself. Nor did it come under any systematic administrative constraints in the same way as more formal statutory bodies. Necessarily, the public face of the KLC was **oppositional**. It had neither the authority, nor the information and skills, nor the physical resources, to generate **positive programs** for advancement. It reacted instead with broad and uncompromising demands. Interestingly, its public statements generally offered some concession to pragmatic considerations, a willingness to negotiate. This was only realisable in private negotiations with European economic interests, few in the early years and usually resulting in enquiries being passed on to other community organisations. In public, suggestions of a negotiable position by the KLC were irrelevant; no government concessions could be made to indicate the legitimacy of the land council. These beginnings have led to two fundamental misunderstandings on the part of Europeans in general. An extremely weak organisation has been characterised

as a powerful and radical opposition.²⁴ A highly Aboriginalised and representative organisation has been characterised as the preserve of 'trouble-makers' influenced by that bogey of conservatives 'the white stirrer'.

The white provocateur is a pronounced image in West Australian political discourse. Independent Aboriginal organisations attracted young, educated, politically or morally motivated whites. Because they tended to work for organisations not receiving government funds and their activities were firmly antagonistic to both bureaucrats and politicians, they tended to be inadequately paid, poorly housed, without security of occupation, and consequently highly mobile. Their motives for accepting such conditions appeared suspicious to the materialist whites of the region. In truth many did have Communist Party or other marxist affiliations. Nevertheless, none considered themselves agents of such organisations but had committed themselves to Aboriginal advancement for the same general humanitarian reasons that had attracted them to radical politics in urban regions. As community organisations became more established and more funding was granted most of these activists found their way into positions as community advisors or resource workers. Whenever confrontation surfaced between the administration and Aboriginal groups these committed whites absorbed most of the aggression. This was partly because Aborigines themselves were frequently exploitative, being so concerned not to allow the capture of their organisations by whites that they tended to use them and discard them, always sure there were others to take their place. Necessarily, these whites were often opinionated, pushy, confrontationist, and self-righteous. Consequently, they were regarded critically by European interests as the manipulators of Aborigines. This reversal of their actual position produced the 'Catch 22' that effective Aboriginal organisations were not truly Aboriginal because they had the services of whites. The 'real Aborigines' could receive credence, as long as they remained ineffective. These pressures tended to create a self-identifying clique quite distinct from the kind of white workers found in less politically volatile regions such as the Northern Territory (VonSturmer, 1982:71-2). The recruitment problem confronting both government funding bodies and Aboriginal communities was the choice between highly motivated young people of no particular skills willing to accept hardship to promote the Aboriginal cause, and pragmatic, technocratic functionaries concerned more with remuneration than performance and unresponsive to Aboriginal control. Increasingly, the problem is being resolved in favour of the latter.

It was towards the end of this period in the development of the land council that I began fieldwork, in March 1983. In February of that year a Labor government won office and there was potential for substantial change in the position of the land council. For a number of reasons none of this potential was realised throughout the following period of the Aboriginal Land Inquiry, the rejection of the Seaman report, its

²⁴This perception has produced one of the most consistent ironies in the relations between white developers and Aboriginal interests. Perceiving the KLC to be radical and oppositional, as well as non-representative of 'real blackfellas', the desire is expressed to communicate directly with the communities. The logistical difficulties of this require the reliance on the local resource agencies, organisations much better equipped to negotiate Aboriginal interests than the land council. A number of agreements have been arrived at in this way that the land council would never have been in a position to enforce.

replacement by a series of lesser proposals, and the subsequent failure of these proposals in the West Australian upper house. It is only now, some four years later, that the KLC appears to be leaving the period of oppositional politics and arriving at a pragmatic compromise as an organisation providing a service to European interests, more that of an emissary than a political force.

These slow developments result from the increased material establishment of the KLC following the granting of DAA funds (since 1983) and increasing income from carrying out ethnographic survey work in advance of mineral exploration. The organisation was able to acquire a house as their office in Derby and others to accommodate staff. A transportable office was established in Kununurra. Two administrative positions were created, to service the East and the West Kimberley, held by Europeans. The number of vehicles also increased. Nevertheless, the KLC still has less equipment than most resource agencies, is able to offer its staff less in wages and conditions, is still generally less capable of performing efficiently for European interests, yet is considerably more under the influence of the DAA than in the past. The increase in material status of the KLC in the years since 1983 reflects only the general rise in status of Aboriginal organisations throughout the Kimberley.²⁵ It is not symptomatic of much greater integration with European politics or administration. The WA government still wishes to administer its Aboriginal policies through its Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority and receive Aboriginal representation through its own Aboriginal Lands Trust. In recent times there has been discussion only of improving the links of the ALT with independent Aboriginal organisations by giving them a seat on it.

There is a large gap between the KLC's own estimation of its position as the emissary of Aborigines, and European perceptions of its legitimacy and power. As the political climate has thawed slightly in Western Australia since the change of government in 1983 the land council has been more willingly approached both by government and by private interests for its sanction. Nevertheless, there are still considerable constraints on the potential for transformation of the KLC into a semi-government agency. These stem firstly from the nature of its charter and, following this, from the character of its executive committee. The KLC is in the unique position of translating a field of interest already considerably developed in Aboriginal culture into practical results in the European milieu. In contrast to the health, legal, or material services other agencies offer, Aborigines have always had a well-developed understanding of land and their relationship to it. Indeed, it is the central organising concept of Aboriginal culture. The task, then, is to accommodate two well-developed systems of land interest, but not to import one entirely into the realm of the other. Moreover, the slow self-induced adaptation of customary practice necessary for community control of interventions has been under way in land matters since the arrival of Europeans. It is the one area where such changes as migration, settlement, changed

²⁵For example, two new resource agencies have been established during this time. One old agency has a new office complex, two others are in advanced stages of planning. The amount of funds to be administered by resource agencies has increased from thousands of dollars to hundreds of thousands.

subsistence practice, increased intercourse with others, have been successfully integrated into the growth and development of contemporary traditional practice. This means that, in contrast to other organisations dealing with fundamentally European interventions, the KLC is inherently strong in the control of its subject.

There is no question that anyone but the Aborigines, and their representatives, can hold the truth of land interests. The point of weakness then becomes the question of representation, mediation and interpretation of the knowledge and requirements of traditional custodians. There can be considerable debate within Aboriginal groups over the rights of the land council to represent all Aborigines. What is not open to dispute is that no-one from outside Kimberley Law circles can legitimately make such a claim. Further, any moves away from the land council's reliance on the long, delicate, and tenuous personal involvement of elders in decisions would result in the withdrawal of support for land council decisions. It is the ability to produce appropriate Aboriginal behaviour that keeps those active in the land council in office.²⁶ This is the foundation of the land council's strength as an Aboriginal organisation, and its weakness as a political force. Its executive committee personifies this tension. It is linked on the one hand to traditional forms, on the other to the national arena of Aboriginal politics. Here also the same phenomenon occurs, though in a very different form. Performing Aboriginal politics in an Aboriginal manner which cannot be appropriated by whites produces a political style that maintains its integrity, yet is ultimately unable to be effective.

The land council executive always consists of certain older men and women active in Aboriginal ritual and outspoken on Aboriginal rights, together with younger town Aborigines also involved in or supportive of Aboriginal law, yet linked very firmly to national Aboriginal politics and more frequent contact with European institutions. Both West and East Kimberley NAC members were always on the land council Executive Committee while that organisation was in existence. The older members from bush communities suffer from all the problems of intercultural interpretation so far described here. Their presence on the executive is highly symbolic. Though they contribute to policy as much as possible, this is usually only in the form of broad programmatic directives. The executive committee's meetings reflect much more the style of Aboriginal politics on the national scene. This suffers from a number of inherent and unavoidable problems all of which can ultimately be attributed to the structural disadvantage of Aborigines in the Australian socio-cultural system. The dynamics of these problems can be drawn out here to conclude this paper.

²⁶This is not to say that other organisations could not be established that would stand for traditional elders without any of these foundations. Indeed, the proposal of the Seaman Inquiry for Regional Aboriginal Organisations raised just this fear. The Aboriginal Lands Trust is such an organisation, apparently representing Aboriginal interests yet under the control of the State government. The point made here is that it cannot achieve the objective of producing Aboriginal compliance without actually being Aboriginal in important respects perceived by traditional custodians. If they have nothing else of power and authority, they do have this ultimate inalienable right in relation to tracts of land and associated rituals.

The Origin of Aboriginal Political Style

The institution of Aboriginal representative organisations, and their inclusion in national political life, carries with it the assumption that they will perform in terms recognisable to the professional politicians they come up against. They do not do so. Indeed, for reasons to be outlined here, they cannot do so. As a result they are dismissed as deviant or unacceptable participants, rather than recognised as participants of a fundamentally different kind. The structuring effect of drawing their charter from the incommensurate requirements of a different culture have been analysed. Apart from this there are three formative pressures producing the style. Aboriginal politics is carried out differently because of the different origins of the actors, it takes on a different appearance because of the lack of institutional disguise that mainstream politics employs, and finally it retreats into its own oppositional style as the only acceptable reaction to powerlessness. None of these features are unique to Aboriginal politics; they occur in radical oppositional political groups as well as in mainstream politics. It is this sharing of some characteristics with European political forms that produces the ambiguity of Aboriginal political activity. What makes it Aboriginal style and no other is the cultural repertoire it draws upon for its expression as well as the unique historical and neo-colonial context it occurs within.

The members of Kimberley political organisations need to do more than find an accommodation with Aboriginal traditional culture. They need for their survival to be capable of fighting the competing political interests in their own locality. These struggles are often conducted with considerable bitterness; they are not merely formal. This is partly because depth of feeling is necessary to enter the arena of anti-establishment politics and personal hatred is frequently tied to heartfelt struggles, partly also that there is little tradition of the objective de-personalised conflict and sublimated aggression that is so much a part of European institutions. Enmity is swiftly made and only slowly cooled. Thus, for instance, the victor in an election is quite likely to use his influence to continually disadvantage his previous rival by affecting the allocation of resources, and public pronouncements by one Aboriginal voice against another are frequently taken up by the media. Many developments of benefit to all Aborigines of a locality are obstructed because of the personal jealousies of individuals. Equally, vital struggles with the European milieu are lost by default because of the attention Aboriginal politicians pay to their own local fights. Certainly, there is also a considerable repertoire of ideology to be drawn on that counsels unity, to put aside argument, to grant autonomy to others and meet in conciliation. The ideology is continually renewed precisely because of its necessity in the face of an antagonistic practice. This is not to say, however, that the one is more important than the other or that the situation could be reversed if only common-sense would prevail. On the contrary, the forces producing the internal conflict are precisely those that produce Aboriginal politicians and their external conflicts.

There is, then, the matter of origins of Aboriginal politicians, their roots in a turbulent sub-culture, their need to respond to the priorities established by their constituents however far removed from the national issues

these may seem, and the need to take seriously the jealousies and rivalries brewing around them. It is easy for outsiders to forget the life-history of local politicians and their involvement with one another. It is this milieu that produces the need for Aboriginal advancement, it is not reasonable to expect it to produce exemplary Aborigines also.

The problem is compounded in a second manner by this question of structural disadvantage. Not only does it exaggerate the conflict inherent in all political activism; it fails also to provide institutional forms to disguise it. The institutions of political parties, administrative apparatuses, influence over the media, complicity of the public, all serve to minimise the purely personal side of the European political repertoire. Animosity, arrogance, selfishness, corruption, ignorance, bitter faction-fighting - these are understood from apocryphal references to be considerable influences on the details of European politics, yet remain the shadowy unacknowledged counterpart of the official representation. This is the rational administration of rationally-conceived policies in the public good. Workers in Aboriginal organisations soon learn that approaching European politicians on the basis of their formal position and obligation is ineffective, their personality is always intimately bound up with their actions and a great determinant of the outcome of requests for assistance. Not surprisingly Aborigines do not have a cover for their activities, and could not make use of it if they did, precisely because their distance from European official rhetoric legitimises them as Aboriginal. While European politicians seek to disguise the 'boots and all' conflicts of their daily practice under the mantle of decorous procedures, Aboriginal politicians, on the contrary, seek to amplify and glorify it.

A simple example concerns the different approach to similar incidents involving a State politician with a Kimberley constituency. He had come to formal politics by means of his involvement in Aboriginal organisations and through personal contact was able to mobilise the Aboriginal vote. Shortly after his party came to power he was involved in an altercation in the bar of Parliament House which resulted in him being punched by a member of the opposition. Both political parties moved rapidly to defuse the incident, prevailing upon the **attacker** to make a conciliatory gesture and on the attacked not to take the matter to the courts. It was an embarrassing occurrence disturbing the decorum of Parliament House (a decorum that decrees that even members may not enter the dining room without a jacket). Yet similar incidents abound in Aboriginal political history. The stories of white opponents who attack with rhetoric and are replied to with a swift punch is a considerable element in the mythology of Aboriginal politics. One of the latest additions was this same Labor politician who involved himself in an argument on an airplane with an Aboriginal politician who had worked closely with him since the early days of the KLC. Their divergent alliances since had continually raised conflict between them and their argument in an airport lounge only stopped short of a fist-fight because of the presence of security guards. In contrast to the handling of the similar affair in mainstream politics, this incident is passed by word of mouth as proof of implacable resolve in the face of the opposition. It is a political statement in direct contrast to, indeed produced to show up, the verbal camouflage of European political

practice.

There is a third determinant of Aboriginal political style I wish to identify. It is that the powerlessness of Aborigines encourages a style apparently lacking responsibility, which they cling to as the only element of the process that is truly theirs. There is a strong unstated requirement of the European enfranchisement of Aboriginal organisations that they arrive at decisions acceptable to the administration and that they present these in an acceptable manner. The history of the NAC demonstrates that the appearance of autonomy is extended to Aborigines precisely as far as the recognition of dependence is accepted by them (---, 1983a, ---, 1983b). Most Aboriginal politicians resolutely refuse to behave in the manner demanded. A principal reason is just this knowledge that only acceptable decisions will be given credence. Unable to have any effect whatever style they adopt, they prefer to remain unequivocally alien to this process of eliciting from them the views of the administration. European politicians find this intensely frustrating. Not only will Aboriginal politicians rarely do what they are told, they are frequently thoroughly abusive at the same time, as if they were blind to the realities of power. From the Aboriginal point of view they need to carry away from these forums with whites either substantially what they have demanded or the integrity from which their demands are made. Too frequently they are required to relinquish the latter without the merest promise of the former. This engenders among them a certain *esprit* in the face of Europeans, whatever their internal divisions. It produces a kind of larrikin politics that is always game for a showdown, having been too often manipulated, disappointed and bamboozled by superior skill in dissimulation. Added to this, after years of fruitless struggle, it engenders in many a deep-seated tiredness that cannot be roused to meet new challenges but takes the simpler option of grand rejectionist gestures.

The negative factors producing this style of Aboriginal politicians is matched by the positive need to be demonstrably of the same strata as their people. The captive politicians employed in semi-government positions are distinguishable from those in government-funded independent organisations only by the latter's ability to be comfortable in Aboriginal settings. Any Aboriginal representative, whatever his origins, should be familiar with conditions on country reserves, at ease in overcrowded State houses, capable of the correct moral poses, at times more restricted than whites, at times considerably looser. They require also a repertoire of experience, knowledge and skills, that mark them as the right kind of people. In the North this is bound up with fishing, killing beef, frequent travel, football and basketball, and many less-easily identified habits and manners in their approach to each other. These activities, rather than the intense discussions of issues and strategies, are what bring Aboriginal politicians together as Aborigines with common aims. In the face of continual frustration it is what binds them and what they retreat to.

This complex of determinants of Aboriginal political style produces a patchy sporadic effectiveness, rarely able to follow through political strategies. Occasionally it formulates well-presented positions, only to

lose any advantage gained by lapsing into deliberate rejection of the appearance of 'correct and responsible' behaviour. While it is possible to understand the reasons for this approach it is evident that it increases the ineffectiveness of Aboriginal political response in Australia. Not only does it do this at the point where Aborigines and Europeans confront each other in public forums, but it has a debilitating effect on the work of the organisations themselves. Increasingly as the development of Aboriginal politics has moved away from its impoverished origins in grass-roots organisations there has been a tendency to demand the kind of resources available to European politicians and to hire the skills of lawyers, journalists and administrators. At the same time the commitment that bound white and black activists together becomes attenuated and the problem of making the most effective use of the skills at their command besets Aboriginal organisations. The control of white staff in general is mismanaged, and this final avenue of approach to problems closed off.

The experience of larrikin politics drives many white staff to despair. Others develop the opposite reaction, abandoning their own responsibilities and serious commitment in the face of what they see as a lack of seriousness on the part of their Aboriginal employers. Frequently attempts to meet European political manoeuvres are hastily formulated then fired off into an administrative vacuum. The Aboriginal representatives are either incapable of responding adequately, or too burned-out to do so, and their white staff simply fail to take up the responsibility. The relationship between Aboriginal politicians, and the results of Aboriginal political style, on white workers is an important consideration particularly in relation to the KLC and the now-defunct NAC but also to the functioning of the resource agencies. Ultimately, the simplest condensation of a political philosophy for Aborigines involved in political movements is the indiscriminate opposition to whites in general. The easy reaction to powerlessness of finding satisfaction in a moral position which unremittingly pits black against white often severely disadvantages the very cause it seeks to promote. While providing the politician with the satisfaction of cheap rhetoric as a substitute for facing difficult choices, it also is often directed at those closest to Aboriginal political struggles, while leaving the less vulnerable targets in the wider European setting alone.

In all Aboriginal organisations the self-induced vulnerability of white workers, who present themselves as a target for Aboriginal resentment, is from time to time exploited. Sometimes Aboriginal representatives publicly support their white staff, frequently they do not. The whites react to the contradiction of their position in predictable ways. Most will not hold a single position for more than two years. Many quit the entire field of Aboriginal issues at the end of this period taking with them hard won experience and knowledge. Aboriginal organisations are perpetually inducting new enthusiastic and ignorant whites. These people find they have no protection either from hostile whites or blacks and rely, without much success, on the support of each other. Those that remain can develop a deep cynicism that borders on an exploitative attitude. In some cases they are paid very well for the work they do, though without security and commensurate conditions, and this can

exacerbate divisions.²⁷

Alternatively, the contradictions of their position results in attempts to ingratiate themselves with those nominally holding power or influence in an organisation. They may so ingratiate themselves with one person or group that they cannot be removed from their position regardless of how ineffective their work may be. In some cases this is entirely bound up with a genuine attachment to certain individuals or groups and may even be seen as an appropriate way of relating to the work of an Aboriginal organisation. Sometimes it is simply a lapse after a productive period due to 'battle fatigue'. More cold-bloodedly manipulative are those whites from outside an organisation who require the consent or acceptance of Aboriginal politicians in order to carry out their own projects. There is a strong tendency among some professionals to view Aboriginal organisations as an unnecessary, irrational, ideologically-inspired barrier to their own particular project. Ironically their distance from real community involvement protects them from Aboriginal ire against whites in a way closer more sympathetic workers cannot be, and they are frequently successful at manipulating consent. In this way hardline Aboriginal attitudes actually produce less advantage for their own interests than a more diplomatic handling of their relations. Good efficient whites do not stay long in the field, others become corrupted, while the truly difficult targets escape detection and carry out their own programs with impunity.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that Aboriginal cultural politics is faced with extremely hard choices. Its lack of effectiveness derives firstly from the difficulty of cultural interpretation, but more certainly from the structural powerlessness of Aborigines and their representatives in Australian political and social life. Reaction to this powerlessness further diminishes their effectiveness. Aboriginal politics is caught in the dilemma of developing responsibility without compromising Aboriginal requirements, abandoning cheap rhetoric without abandoning the ideals it is based on, and accurately assessing the forces of alliance as well as opposition. The double-bind is that the conditions for this maturity can only foreseeably emerge when Aboriginal politicians gain some measure of power. Yet the process of dependence, tutelage, and token representation that is all the European administrative system is prepared to advance is justified precisely because of the lack of development of an effective Aboriginal force.

Three points need to be distinguished in any discussion of Aboriginal representation in the Kimberley, and any proposals for greater efficiency. Firstly, there is no sustaining the superficial view that representative organisations, community councils, meeting procedures and so on are, as they appear, the simple institutional expression of the Aboriginal people. Secondly, while not being 'of the community' (whatever that may mean)

²⁷ Again in the case of the KLC and the NAC this has been minimised by the payment of adequate salaries to the Aboriginal representatives.

such organisations do produce an Aboriginal intelligentsia, are a training ground for political skills, and have legitimacy because of their function in the European political process. Nevertheless, it is a consistent feature of such organisations that they are relatively powerless, economically marginal, and not administratively linked to European systems except in a relationship of domination. This has two results, rendering the organisations largely ineffective at the same time as it produces an oppositional, reactive, and stubborn form of political discourse.

The third aspect of Aboriginal community representation is perhaps the most important because it is frequently neglected. Both the first two observations are formulated in European terms. Aboriginal organisations in the Kimberley are not culturally European. As this paper has repeatedly demonstrated, they are intermediate systems acting as a conduit between cultures which are therefore themselves fundamentally ambiguous. Recognition of cultural ambiguity is a prerequisite for adequate communication between European and Aboriginal organisations. Further, there must be recognition of the need to retain ambiguity in order for Aboriginal corporate groups to function at all in European terms. The notion rarely penetrates the thinking of European interests that to persistently squeeze representative organisations into acceptable forms renders them unrepresentative, and therefore useless for both European and Aboriginal purposes. It is at the point where new institutions attempt to meet the needs of Aboriginal culture, and Aboriginal culture adapts to new institutions, that the creation of systems of dual meaning and purpose allow room for Aboriginal manipulation of the process. This much is fundamental. Aboriginal self-determination and self-management cannot proceed by the imposition of European structures and the demand for appropriate European behaviour; it must be a slow self-generating process occurring as a result of the manipulation and resolution of ambiguities which arise out of interaction with Europeans.

In one important respect this analysis amounts to more than a futile plea for the dominant cultural system to cease dominating. It argues on the basis of practical necessity. The material advancement of Aborigines that both Europeans and Aborigines demand can be produced, either by massive coercion on a scale that is ideologically and administratively impractical, or by recognition of the underlying processes described in this paper.

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