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The interethnic practice of
local governance in Aboriginal
settlements in desert Australia

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Abstract

Drawing on research undertaken at a remote Aboriginal settlement, the paper describes the interethnic practice of local governance as actors implement a policy of self-determination. A typology of seven actors is proposed, largely based on meeting attendances over a ten-year period: the silent majority, spectators, local employees, leaders, permanent resident outside employees (PROE), resident departmental officers (RDO), and external stakeholders. Employment proved to be an important predisposition to leadership. The local polity revealed a political pluralism and innovative confederation of organisations to tackle the complexity of the problems at hand. Significantly, all of the examples of successful innovation observed involved productive social relationships developing locally between leaders and trusted outside employees. The paper draws attention to the paucity of study into the interethnic practice of local governance and argues that this is due to the lack of attention to the critical role of outside employees practising in Aboriginal organisations, and the reticence of researchers to embrace the complexity and indeterminacies of the interethnic field. It concludes with a call for attention to the conditions for successful practice, including the training and professional development of practitioners.

Theorising interethnic practice

The paper draws primarily on research undertaken at the discrete Aboriginal settlement of Kowanyama, on Cape York Peninsula.[1] In comparison with the settlements found across desert Australia, Kowanyama is large, with a population of approximately 1000 people. Under self-determination policies,[2] an informal confederation of local organisations formed in Kowanyama from the late 1980s to the late 1990s. Whilst local government authority was formally vested in the Kowanyama Aboriginal Council (Council), a large proportion of decision-making occurred through a number of other local organisations, including Kowanyama Land and Natural Resource Management Office and the Counsel of Elders (Land Office), Kowanyama Community Justice Centre and the Justice Group (Justice Centre), the Cattle Company, the Women's Group, the P&C Committee, and a number of smaller informal bodies. The collective decision-making that occurred through these organisations, through both formal and informal means, can be collectively described as local governance.

The research examined the decision-making and interactions that occurred through two of the main instruments of self-determination policy: participatory planning and self-governance. Compared with Aboriginal settlements in desert Australia, Kowanyama is progressive, with a record of achievement and financial accountability. A number of local initiatives came to be widely heralded by government and academics as best practice, especially those arising from the three principal organisations: Council, the Land Office, and the Justice Centre. Kowanyama therefore provided a powerful case study to examine the conditions of successful practice and innovation in governance.

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1 The research was undertaken in the course of a doctoral thesis through the University of Queensland (Moran 2006).

2 At a Federal level, 'self-determination' policy was introduced as a platform of the Whitlam Government from the early 1970s. It was implemented unevenly across the states through the 1980s and 1990s. By the early 2000s, considerable disarray and disagreement emerged over its merits, culminating with the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in 2004, and a shift in Federal policy to 'mainstreaming'.

The study revealed considerable complexity and indeterminacy operating in local governance, evident in the interactions of leaders and employees practising on an interethnic field between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains. People have great capacity to negotiate complex systems, so the study of their actions can reveal powerful insights into the workings of the system. The collective decision-making of these actors can be described as interethnic practice.

The interethnic practice of actors engaged in local governance has been little considered in research. The extensive anthropological literature on Aboriginal Australia to emerge during the 20th century described the Aboriginal polity mostly in terms of its uniqueness, diversity and fragmentation, with diffuse and contested authority systems, including tensions between individual autonomy and collective relatedness (e.g. Martin 1995, 5). Through the 1990s, anthropologists were still largely preoccupied with the cultural obstacles to engagement with the wider society and the lasting tensions between Aboriginal societies and the welfare state. There was a propensity to describe the 'width of the divide' and the many obstacles to participation and representation, including factionalism, rivalry, nepotism, and deleterious family politics (see Rowse 2001), but with little corresponding analysis of how actors achieve agency in managing the functions of local governance.

The seminal work of Fred Myers (1986a), for example, described the politics of the Pintupi as an inward ethnocentric polity with a relative detachment from external agendas of administrative management. According to Myers (1986a, 264), the 'big men' of the Pintupi were more preoccupied with the welfare of individuals assigned to their care under the kinship system, than with any corporate responsibility to a community council. Myers (1986b) stressed the inconclusive nature of meetings, the lack of outcomes and that decisions were often not binding. As Rowse (1992, 49) commented, "Myers' arguments that meetings need not have substantive outcomes binding on participants raises questions whether the Pintupi ever make collective determinations about their desires, needs or actions, as they deal with the 'outside world', or whether they ever could, if given the chance by relaxation of 'Euro-Australian control'."

Patrick Sullivan was one of few anthropologists of this period to adopt an intercultural stance to the interactions occurring within Aboriginal organisations, based on his work with an outstation resource agency in Halls Creek in the Kimberley. Sullivan (1988, 1) concluded that "community organisations are inherently ambiguous, situated at the intersection of cultural systems, and occupying positions within two incommensurate structures at the same time." The ambiguity results from their activities being directed toward two distinct domains: the first being to the Aboriginal domain and the appearances of self-determination; and the second being to the non-Aboriginal domain and its mechanisms of administrative control.

Several studies examined interactions with the wider society through consideration of the role played by Aboriginal 'brokers', as they acted out patron-client relationships with non-Aboriginal patrons (Howard 1978, 33; von Sturmer 1982). Whilst now quite dated, Rolf Gerritsen (1982b; 1982a) stands out for his relatively detailed typology of five actors, based on his observations of Ngukurr (Roper River), Lajamanu and other discrete settlements in the Katherine Region in the late 1970s. According to Gerritsen's typology, among the local population there were dominant men, prominent men, and followers. Among the outsiders, there were adventurous men (Aboriginal employees by birth and/or descent from elsewhere), and their non-Aboriginal counterparts were either service whitses or wayfarers. Gerritsen's prominent men were more obligated than dominant

men, and less able to refuse followers. Prominent men tended to establish outstations away from the centres where dominant men held sway (Gerritsen 1982b). Adventurous men were outsiders (often of mixed race descent) who possessed whitefella skills but lacked the security of living on their own land among their own kin. Adventurous men had a higher level of expectation of services and often escalated demands, encouraging other residents to be more demanding of government allocations (Gerritsen 1982a, 27). Non-Aboriginal residents in discrete Aboriginal settlements were either service whites (e.g. teachers, nurses) or wayfarers, who were employed locally, prone to frequent relocation, and whose most powerful members cultivated relations of patronage with Aboriginal leaders.

These studies were of limited application to the practice of local governance in Kowanyama under self-determination policies. Consistent with other ethnographies of this period, they were based on ethnographic generalisation of socio-cultural interactions, along a traditionalist–modernist axis. They are not specifically attuned to the interethnic practice of governance, as evident in meeting attendances and working relationships with non-Aboriginal service providers.

Why then, has the interethnic practice of local governance been given so little attention in study of Aboriginal affairs? There are two possible explanations: (1) an ideological 'blinding' of non-Aboriginal practitioners operating at the local level; (2) the bipolar position between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains and the reticence of academic researchers to engage with the complexities and indeterminacies of the interethnic field.

On the first point, Batty (2005, 211) insightfully draws attention to how policy makers have ignored relationships that have emerged between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people involved in the practice of Aboriginal self-determination.

> *The paucity of work in this area can perhaps be attributed to the constraints imposed by the policy of Aboriginal self-determination itself. Its logic does not readily accommodate notions of intensive engagements between blacks and whites. On the contrary, it presupposes the impossible notion of an autonomous Aboriginal subject, located in an essentialised space beyond the bounds of ordinary social dependencies. It is not surprising therefore that these relationships remain poorly theorised. Indeed, at the level of practice, non-Aboriginal employees of Aboriginal organisations rarely figure in the official representations of the organisations they work for, even if they themselves are often involved in the construction and promotion of such representations.*

On the second point, researchers have tended to treat 'communities' as cultural isolates. Without negating the depth of cultural interactions that take place within the Aboriginal domain, most studies in Australia have positioned Aboriginal culture within an administrative vacuum. Whilst clearly unintended, these studies effectively promoted a rationale for the marginalisation of Aboriginal people from local government decision-making. Anthropologists have only recently focused their attention on the practice of local governance (e.g. Smith 2005; Sullivan 2006). Martin (2003, 9–10) was one of the first to signal this change, arguing:

> *… it is no longer defensible to resort to the mantra of 'cultural appropriateness', nor to that of Aboriginal traditions and customs, in determining the core principles by which effective Indigenous organisations should be established and operated … the challenge is to develop distinctly Indigenous organisations which nonetheless facilitate effective management with the dominant society rather than limiting it.*

In moving from autonomous domains to interethnic practice, anthropologists have signalled a shift in analysis "of the 'intercultural', away from an emphasis on an 'interface' between separately conceived domains, towards an approach that considers Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social forms to be necessarily relational, and to occupy a single social-cultural field" (Hinkson and Smith 2005, 158). In her review of the literature, Holcombe (2004, 2) concluded that "delineating culturally distinct structures is no longer relevant", describing instead a shared hybridised 'third space' (Holcombe 2005, 222, 226). This study is an example of ethnographic research of actors from both ethnic systems practising in this 'third space'.

An interethnic field of practice

Twenty decision-making forums were analysed at Kowanyama, encapsulating the range of social contexts within which the actors practised under the government policy of 'self-determination'. The forums were a mixture of organisational operations and planning events, projects and other initiatives. Each forum was evaluated by constructing an institutional history, through analysis of documents and interviews of key informants. The forums took place from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, which corresponded to the period when self-determination policies were in effect in Queensland, and to the life of the now disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.[3]

The Kowanyama polity was neither a cultural isolate, nor autonomous, but rather intertwined in a complex and dialectic relationship with the wider society. Conceptualisation of the polity required a three-way plurality, across both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains, and the interethnic spaces between them (Figure 1). At the local end of the interethnic field was the local political arena. The Kowanyama polity had persistent aspects of traditionalism, including egalitarianism, 'big men' leaders, avoidance relationships, and kinship factions. A range of contemporary influences was also present, including intermarriage, sporting team alliances, a female political leadership, and an increasing acceptance of materialism. The polity was characterised by multiple and overlapping loci of power, within which factionalism, rivalry and elitism were in tension with egalitarianism, kinship obligations and the 'tall poppy syndrome'. Rather than attempting to resolve this complexity, the local political arena was better conceptualised in light of its political pluralism, as a complex of competing (and at times balancing) interests.

At the external end of the interethnic field was the external institutional milieu, which largely determined the objects of competition in Kowanyama without paralysing the different interests (Bern 1989, 175). The external institutional milieu was as fractured as the local political arena. A large and increasing number of government departments and higher-level organisations delivered an array of programs, schemes, projects and resource options. During the study period in Kowanyama, these services were increasingly provided by regional Aboriginal organisations,

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3 The Federal policy of self-determination was staunchly resisted by the Queensland Government during the 1970s and 80s. Kowanyama did not achieve self-government until the late 1980s, and the handover from departmental administration did not finish until 1990.

but with no net decrease in the number of government departments delivering the same services. The number of external agencies delivering services increased by half (44 to 61) over the ten years from 1991 to 2001. The lack of coordination among these agencies was a constant feature of local governance in Kowanyama. All attempts at government reform to improve coordination and reduce duplication seem to have had the opposite effect, with a net increase in programs, accountability requirements and administrative workload (Moran 2006).

Located between the local political arena and the external institutional milieu was the shared domain of the interethnic field. The field did not have spatial basis; it existed wherever the forces of local and external decision-making interacted. Nor did it have its own culture or social norms. It was a highly complex, politicised, and idealised field, in keeping with the fractured and shifting nature of internal and external forces. It was a place where new forms of power, knowledge, and innovation were actively forming. A determining factor in the interactions was their dialectic tension with others. Tensions and contradictions were tied together, constantly in flux, oscillating back and forth. The practitioners of local governance brokered the interethnic field and negotiated its ambiguities, indeterminacies, and interethnic dilemmas.

The practitioners of local governance faced considerable complexity and indeterminacy, whereby information was inherently variable, imperfectly specified and incomplete, requiring actors to use their discretion as situations evolved. The nature of the problems faced in local governance was only revealed through practice by proceeding incrementally through the complexity involved. At the end of successful initiatives, actors did not necessarily understand what they had done right, or in unsuccessful initiatives, what they had done wrong. Many of the successes and failures in Kowanyama were to a degree inadvertent. Whilst this is a fragile basis of action, it is the only basis which has led to successful initiatives in the contemporary history of Kowanyama.

A typology of practitioners

Through an analysis of the records of organisational memberships and attendance at 112 meetings held in Kowanyama from 1990 to 2003,[4] it was possible to posit a typology of seven different local actors in governance. Key informants were then interviewed to help interpret the findings. The following typology and graphical representation were presented in several workshops, leading to new interpretive insights. The typology of practitioners to emerge, and their respective range across the interethnic field, is represented diagrammatically below (Figure 1).

1. Leaders
2. Spectators
3. Silent majority
4. Local employees[5]
5. Permanent resident outside employees (PROEs)[6]
6. Resident departmental officers (RDOs)
7. External stakeholders

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4 Determining membership of organisations was a relatively straightforward matter for organisations which held elections, such as Council and the Parents and Citizens committee (P&C). For the other organisations, membership effectively changed on a meeting-by-meeting basis, necessitating an extensive compilation of meeting records.

5 Local employees were not an independent category, since leaders, spectators and the silent majority can all be local employees also.

6 Whilst mostly non-Indigenous, several prominent PROEs in Kowanyama were Indigenous, but not originally from Kowanyama. Each of these Indigenous PROEs had spent many years in Kowanyama, and most had married in with children, but they were still adamant that they were seen as being outsiders.
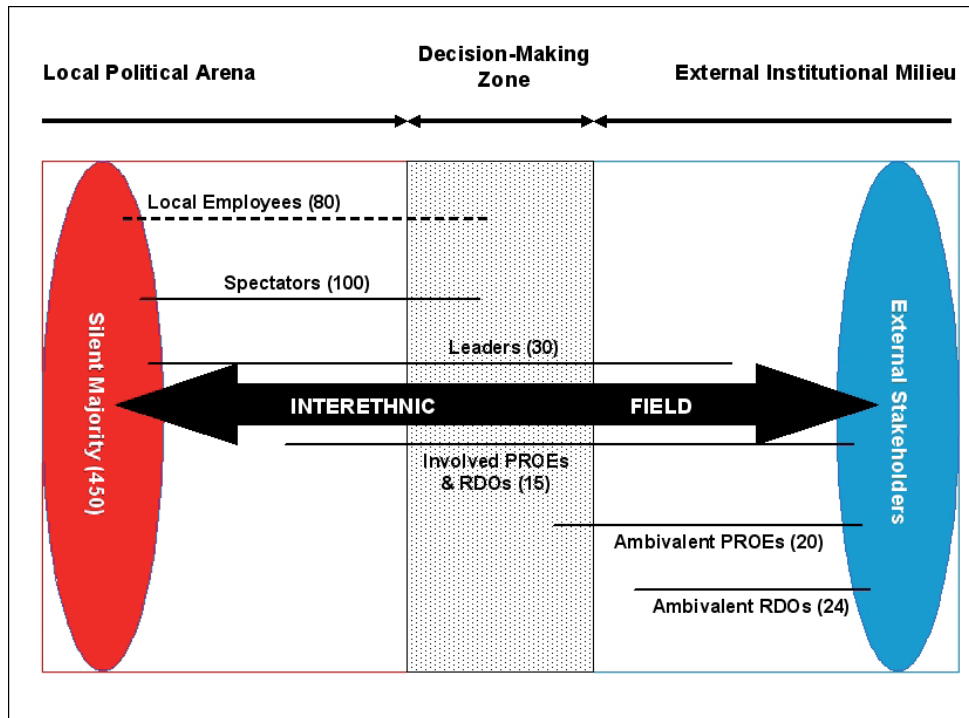
Figure 1: Practitioners in the interethnic field (see text for definitions)

Based on the 2001 Census, there were 575 adults over the age of 18 in Kowanyama. In any one year, a group of about 30 people rotated through the different committee positions and regularly attended meetings. They were the leaders of governance in Kowanyama. In any single year, an additional 100 people attended a meeting at least once a year. They sometimes showed interest in a single issue for a short period, but then backed away. They tended to interject their opinions in meetings, sometimes raising matters unrelated to the agenda and ongoing discussion, then sat back for the remainder with little interest in the proceedings. They nonetheless displayed an active interest in governance, and they may have been past or prospective leaders. They were the spectators of governance. In any single year, at least another 450 adults (over the age of 18) did not appear in the attendance of any meetings whatsoever. They did not participate in governance in Kowanyama and seemed satisfied to sit back, entrusting decisions to others, but they nonetheless had an awareness of what was going on. They were the silent majority, the constituents of governance.

Active in the interethnic field were leaders and spectators from Kowanyama, along with the permanent resident outside employees (PROEs) and the resident departmental officers (RDOs) from outside (described below). From these actors prominent on the interethnic field, a smaller subset was actively involved in the day-to-day forums of decision-making (depicted in Figure 1 as the decision-making zone). Given the adult population of 575 people in Kowanyama, there were a surprisingly small number of people actively involved in the decision-making zone: about 45 people in total, made up of 30 Kowanyama leaders, 12 PROEs and 3 RDOs. The remaining PROEs and RDOs employed in Kowanyama maintained an ambivalent 'distance' from local decision-making, focusing instead on their technical duties (e.g. Council tradesmen and schoolteachers).

At the external extreme of the interethnic field, were the external stakeholders who were engaged in the business of Aboriginal Affairs, most of whom were non-resident departmental officers, employees of organisations or private consultants. These external stakeholders lived and worked elsewhere, mostly along the eastern seaboard. They visited Kowanyama intermittently, but seldom stayed overnight.

The number of people situated in the silent majority was significant. The above-quoted figures for meeting attendance figures for leaders and spectators were for any single year. Over the ten years from 1994–2003, an additional 150 individuals appeared at least once in meeting records (50 appeared twice). Taking the higher figure (150) and adding to the leaders (30) and spectators (100) gave 280 people who participated in some way in governance over a ten-year period, which is consistent with the total number of people who cast votes at the two public referendums on record (205 and 273). That still left approximately 300 adults, or over half of the Kowanyama population, who did not appear in meeting records over a ten-year period.

The imbalance in number between the small group of leaders (30) and the silent majority (450) was a matter of considerable concern to local leaders. It is commonly held that Aboriginal people are over-consulted, but in Kowanyama, this only applied to the 30 leaders, or 5% of the population. Kowanyama spectators maintained an ambivalent distance from attending formal meetings, attending at least one meeting a year. Given the quantity of administration and number of visitors, the 30 leaders were overworked and frustrated. As has also been observed in international development settings (Dasgupta and Beard 2007), Kowanyama leaders were not an elite without mandate, preoccupied with jealously guarding their power, in the blatant pursuit of self-serving goals. Although partisan interests did at times prevail at Kowanyama, with Councillors acting in self-interested ways, these were in the minority, and checks and balances operated to curb them. Some checks and balances were externally imposed through accountability requirements, or through the observance of formal procedures for conflict of interest, but others reflected the informal workings of local internal political control. Significantly, constituents exhibited an interest in the affairs of local governance and monitored the performance of their leaders. Further, whether through concern for the polity or in reaction to criticism, leaders displayed a collective concern to represent the interests and improve the participation of their constituents. Most leaders were also eager to 'share the load' and had well-developed thoughts on how to increase participation in decision-making, which was consistent with a popular ethic of egalitarianism amongst their constituency. These basic workings of representative democracy were quite at odds with the consensus view in the anthropological literature.

The three-way split of the local population in Kowanyama, among leaders, spectators and silent majority, may appear to be consistent with that found in non-Aboriginal rural townships across Australia (Plowman et al. 2003). Such comparisons, however, must be drawn carefully. In discrete Aboriginal settlements, there is a near absence of a market economy and most resources are allocated through governance structures. In non-Aboriginal settlements, people do not need to engage with public decision-making as a means to secure resources since most people are economically independent. In the absence of the consumer choice normally found in market economies, the significance of government services and resources to the residents of Aboriginal settlements is different in comparison to their significance to other Australians. The

House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (HRSCATSIA 2004, 161) argued that Aboriginal "people's ability to participate effectively in the economy is strongly related to access to services and an understanding of such services."

Further research is required to better understand the obstacles to engagement with administrative decision-making, including perceived alternatives. The study focused on the formal business of local governance, more so than informal events like funerals, sporting carnivals, and social events. Other activities may be perceived as valid avenues of 'engagement', including employment, parenting, informal enterprises, and traditional cultural/natural resource management. Further research is also required to understand the extent to which people were using a representative system of delegates, with nominated actors attending meetings on their behalf.

It is important in this context to examine assumptions about the value of participation: do people not participate because of obstacles that prevent them, or is it a free choice that they make? Key Kowanyama informants were questioned about the silent majority and the obstacles to their engagement in governance. Many of the responses were framed in the context of people's ability to speak out. A male Councillor considered that the key to greater engagement was more meaningful employment: "Get people working around town, they'll start talking." One male elder described how he had learnt to speak "in a proper way" whilst working outside on different pastoral stations and that others in his mob were "afraid, [they've] got no way of speaking, don't know where to start, how to ask people white way for help." One female elder, known for her tough stance against alcohol, saw the silent majority in this way: "You only hear their voice come out when they're drunk". Another female elder offered: "Make sure they're all there [those involved with the dispute], then point to them and make them talk." A male elder and past Council Chairman stated: "You have to talk to those people separately." He also introduced a useful 'reality check': "Some are not interested you know." This diversity of responses suggests a range of factors involved which vary on an individual basis.

Local employment and pluralism

It was possible to further categorise leaders three ways: informal leaders, elected representatives and political activists. The majority of leaders in Kowanyama were informal leaders, positioned through their traditional stature or social standing, their ability to speak out, or most frequently through simply volunteering to attend meetings. In comparison, elected representatives were elected though a democratic process. In Kowanyama, this was limited to the Councillors and representatives of some regional organisations. Three leaders in Kowanyama could be considered as political activists, in that they acquired considerable status through their political activities outside of Kowanyama.

It became evident during the analysis that employment was a factor which influenced participation in governance. This led to a classification of local employees, but not in the sense of an independent category of the typology, since leaders, spectators and the silent majority could also be local employees. Council was the largest, and for many people, the only employer in Kowanyama. An analysis was completed of Council employee records over a period of four fiscal years from 2000/01 to 2003/04. Although the Council payroll included at any one time about 120 people, there was a high turnover, such that the median number of employees in any single year was 220 people.

The names of Council employees were cross-checked against meeting attendance records. A significant correlation was evident between leaders and local employees. About one-third of leaders were long-term local employees, and another third had been in employment at one time over the four-year period. Most of the remaining third were elders, who had a significant past employment history, but were now recipients of pensions and other social security benefits. The correlation with employment was particularly strong with Councillors, most of whom had a significant employment history before and during their term on Council. All of the Councillors elected in 2000 and 2004 had strong records of prior full-time employment with Council.

Unexpectedly, there was not a strong correlation between spectators and local employees. Of the 207 spectators to attend any meeting over the four-year period, only 38% had any employment history. Conversely, of the 356 that were ever employed over this period, only 22% were spectators. The majority of local employees were therefore from the silent majority. Despite being a strong precursor to leadership, current employment otherwise seemed to preclude people from participating in governance, because of the obvious time conflicts.

If employment prepares leaders for the interethnic practice of local governance, then increased employment would sensibly strengthen local governance (and visa versa).

It was anticipated that a history of civic achievements in governance would be a characteristic of elected Councillors. From the meeting attendance records, however, the majority of Councillors had little, and often no, prior experience in attending the meetings of the various voluntary organisations in town, and were otherwise not previously active in governance. Councillors were generally active in governance during their term, attending meetings of other organisations, but most backed away after their term was completed. This contrasted with the strong correlation with past and current employment, which suggested an electorate more concerned with a candidate's history of employment rather than their civic achievements in governance.

Beyond Council, the study also examined the personal characteristics of the wider pool of the leaders across all organisations (for the one year of 2003 only). Their personal characteristics reflected the diversity of governance and political plurality in Kowanyama. Of the 30 leaders, the split among abstainers, light drinkers, and heavy drinkers was approximately equal. There was a slightly higher number of men (62%). In terms of age, most leaders were elders (59%), although both mature (27%) and young (14%) adults were well represented. Leaders were educated and traditional, male and female, young and old, drinkers and abstainers. Modernisation did not feature strongly, with many young educated acculturated adults never attending meetings and with the majority of leaders being elders. This diversity and relative balance among personal characteristics is consistent with the political pluralism described by Bern at Ngukurr (1989, 168–169), which was "of a similar order to other small towns" across Australia, where there was "competition for positions, rewards and priorities."

Personal characteristics were more clearly discernible at the groupings of organisations. That is, the leaders of the women's group were mostly women, the elders were mostly middle-aged and elderly men, and Councillors tended to be adult male employees. This is an important finding of the study: that the function of an organisation largely defined local participation in its activities – that is, form followed function. When all of the organisations of Kowanyama were viewed together as a whole, people took different avenues to representation according to the task at hand.

The political pluralism observed at Kowanyama, both in terms of the personal characteristics of leaders and the diversity of local organisations and forums, is a sensible response to the complexities involved in the interethnic practice of local governance. The complexity can be reduced if people and organisations are positioned relative to other organisations locally and different people and organisations specialise in different functions and processes. By positioning themselves at different points in the interethnic field, people and organisations can effectively limit the 'depth' of the complexities that they contend with. They can then cooperatively tackle a complex range of administrative matters.

PROEs and RDOs

In addition to the leaders, spectators and the silent majority, and the overlapping group of local employees, there were two other significant types of actors in Kowanyama: permanent resident outside employees (or PROEs) and resident departmental officers (RDOs). Both were outside employees, resident in Kowanyama but originally from elsewhere. Both were distinct from the non-resident employees of government departments, regional organisations and even Council, who visited Kowanyama intermittently. Permanent resident outside employees were drawn into powerful positions, effectively brokering the interethnic field.

PROEs in Kowanyama dominated all management and other senior positions in local organisations. In 2003, four PROEs occupied positions of significant influence in Kowanyama: the Council CEO, Deputy CEO, the Land Office Manager and the Justice Centre Coordinator. In addition, most line managers in Council were PROEs, including the works manager, aged persons home manager, the accountant, the canteen manager, and the coordinator of the mothers' and babies' centre. PROEs were not limited to management positions, and included tradesmen, accounting personnel and computer technicians. They were a distinct group from RDOs, who were employed in local administration units of government departments, predominantly as schoolteachers, nurses, and police officers. The 2001 Census recorded that 44% of people in employment in Kowanyama were non-Aboriginal (or 43 people in total), which collectively included PROEs (both managers and technical workers) and RDOs.

Ethnicity can be misleading here, since PROEs may be of Aboriginal descent but originally from elsewhere, and so perceived locally as outsiders. Since PROEs were neither elected representatives nor informally sanctioned leaders, their ethnicity was not a determining factor. As noted by Sullivan (1996, 89), ethnicity is no guarantee that an Aboriginal PROE will have a greater understanding of, or empathy for, local constituents than a non-Aboriginal PROE with a long association with the community. Birthplace proved highly relevant since some Aboriginal PROEs were long-term residents of Kowanyama, but since they were originally from elsewhere, they were not considered 'locals'. One prominent PROE advised that he did not foresee a time when he would not be considered an outsider, even though he had lived in Kowanyama intermittently since being an adolescent, and then full-time for the previous ten years, during which he had married a Kowanyama woman and started a family. He also related a story of an established Kowanyama leader and senior manager of Council, who had lived in Kowanyama since childhood, but was still considered an outsider.

To be effective in their positions, PROEs had to cultivate and maintain effective relationships with Kowanyama people, but also with external stakeholders. Their power, as perceived by Kowanyama people, arose from the brokerage role they played with external stakeholders from the external institutional milieu. Their power, as perceived by those outside of Kowanyama, stemmed from their privileged access to the beneficiaries of the many programs of self-determination.

Although PROEs did not fall directly under the local political control, they were not immune to it. Applicants were generally recruited on the basis of their technical expertise, including, for example, financial accounting, environmental management, native title negotiations, and mediating justice systems. New PROEs were then informally 'inducted' into the organisations of Kowanyama, learning 'as they went'. Proficiency developed through gaining local knowledge, mediated informally through personal relationships and allegiances that developed through social interaction. When PROEs rose to the task, from the perspective of Kowanyama people, they could become trusted and powerful actors of local governance. To remain effective in this role, they had to maintain local relationships. This interaction was a type of check and balance, since social pressures and sanctions of participation discouraged PROEs from blatantly acting in a manner contrary to local interest.

Some PROEs resisted this social influence, and took refuge with similar-minded employees and RDOs in town, waiting for their assignment to end with growing cynicism and apathy (as noted by Finlayson 1997c). In a few rare cases, some seemingly chose a path of unpopularity through ignorant disregard or blatant disrespect of the Aboriginal domain, often in the pursuit of meeting external expectations. They did have the potential to become the gatekeepers, the corrupt, or even the 'dictators' described by Pearson (1999, 30), but this was not a significant feature in the contemporary history of Kowanyama. At worst, some PROEs came to define their support narrowly, through establishing allegiances with particular individuals and families, rather than seeking more popular support. Irrespective of their privileged positions, PROEs were focal drivers or played key supporting roles in all successful decision-making forums in Kowanyama during the study period. The ones that excelled had a strong local political support base, however narrowly defined.

Similar to PROEs, some RDOs also actively mediated the interethnic field. Positioned as they were at the local level of their respective bureaucracies, they too brokered between local demands and higher-level conditions from their departments. Their prescribed roles did not permit them the same latitude as PROEs, but some RDOs did interact locally. From the events recorded during the study period, this was particularly evident with four individuals: a police officer implemented the successful 'kiddie cop' program; a school teacher became a local historian and developed a culturally based curriculum module; a resident doctor established an 'early options group' to prevent removal of children; and a principal pioneered improved relationships between the school and the community. In a few exceptional cases, some non-resident departmental officers based in Cairns or Weipa visited with sufficient regularity for them to also become actors of the local political arena. For example, on two separate occasions, two different officers from the Department of Families facilitated meetings of the Women's Group and became heavily involved in child welfare issues.

Whilst RDOs did not fall under local political control, they still faced considerable social pressure at times from Kowanyama people. When RDOs in Kowanyama had behaved inappropriately, they felt the sanction of local opposition, whether in the form of social rejection, withdrawn participation, or formal complaints to their respective departments. These sanctions had a powerful effect, and when this had occurred in the past with a police officer, resident doctor and school principal, they sought to be transferred or resigned.

Writing generally on decentralised governance in developing countries and Aboriginal Australia, Porter and Craig (2000, 13, 19–22) drew attention to the tendency for external stakeholders to give local administrators special privileges and to insulate them from local political control. Referring more specifically to Africa, Porter and Onyach-Olaa (1999, 63) argued that this tended to "politicise the administrative cadre", which not only ensured "the continued contest between administrators and elected local leaders," but it also inappropriately located administrators between elected leaders and their constituency. This provided alternative lines of authority which by-passed elected leaders and thereby diluted "the most important relationship of accountability intended by decentralised governance." This observation certainly applies to the positions of CEO and other managers in Kowanyama, who were approached by Kowanyama people and external stakeholders as frequently, if not more so, than elected leaders. Ironically, in the instances when government has intervened to prevent any alleged excesses of elites in Kowanyama, it has acted to block the actions of the PROEs rather than elected officials.

Of the PROEs, the position of CEO was the most politicised. The study found that this arose because of the gap between administrative demands and local capacity. The CEO was situated between the large volume of administration and a room of elected officials with limited capacity to absorb administrative matters. As the CEO related, his job was to "lead [the Councillors] so they can make the most informed decisions." The CEO and his staff first vetted the administration, then worked up solutions (often together with external stakeholders) which were then presented to Council for their consideration. This endowed the unelected position of CEO with considerable power, more so than that endowed to the elected Councillors. This was as much a practical function of the volume and nature of the administration that had to be processed, as it was the motives, personalities, and political ambitions of the CEO and his staff.

Formal structural elements can be instituted to improve the accountability of PROEs, including formal policies, separation of powers, delegations and registers of pecuniary interests. These structural solutions, however, will not overcome the gap in capacity, nor resolve the fundamentally ambiguous and interstitial nature of their role.

In some cases, the position occupied by a PROE became so localised that their inevitable departure introduced a major vulnerability. The vulnerability was not only due to the obvious difficulties in placing and retaining skilled expertise in remote settings, but also to the complex, ambiguous, personal and ethical nature of the transactions that occurred and the relationships that developed. Informal institutions were particularly vulnerable. The Justice Centre Coordinator was required to broker between western legal and community justice systems, necessitating complex overlapping roles as facilitator, advocate, prosecutor and protector. Similarly, the Land Office Manager was required to reconcile a traditional ideology and cultural practices relating to 'country', with a complex environmental and regulatory land use system.

PROEs and RDOs were also drawn into vulnerable positions themselves, for example, in adjudicating the allocation of camping fees among homeland groups, in pressuring Council to follow their own policy with vehicles, and in enforcing the decisions of the justice group. PROEs thus inadvertently presented themselves as targets for local resentment, which at times was exploited. As described by Sullivan (1996, 122) PROEs find "they have protection neither from hostile white or blacks and rely, without much success, on the support of each other." For as long as there is such a marked gap between local capacity and external administrative demands, the vulnerabilities arising from PROEs will remain.

Conclusion

The study was limited to one remote Aboriginal settlement, but the analysis is broadly generalisable to other large discrete settlements across desert Australia, especially those with local government status. Critical interpretation of the findings will be necessary for settlements with a low population, with highly dysfunctional administrations, or where English is spoken only as a second language. Due to the high level of localisation that pervades desert Australia, this critical interpretation should also be preceded with a detailed contextual, historical and social analysis of local governance.

The paper seeks an understanding of the practice of governance in Aboriginal affairs, by conceptualising a decision-making zone in an interethnic field, on which actors from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains practise. A typology of seven actors has been proposed, based on their attendance at meetings over a ten-year period. Prior employment was found to be an important predisposition towards leadership, especially in election to positions on Council.

The local polity at Kowanyama exhibited a political pluralism, encompassing a complex array of balancing and competing interests. There was considerable diversity and balance among the personal characteristics of leaders and organisations. Form followed function, whereby the function of a decision-making forum decided the level of participation that was appropriate. The pluralism and specialisation observed was an innovative local response to the complexity of local governance, and indicative of a political maturity in leadership and their constituency.

The lack of prior research into the actual practice of Aboriginal affairs is surprising. By way of analogy, teachers are given a tertiary education, a classroom, a curriculum, and a career path to follow, all of which encourage productive practice. The complexities of local governance in Aboriginal affairs are no less difficult, yet there is no such training, structure, conditions or incentives to encourage successful practice. Should it therefore come as any surprise that problems arose in the implementation of self-determination policies? Furthermore, teachers have one core task, whereas the practitioners of local governance have many.

At Kowanyama, there were surprisingly few leaders and employees actually engaged in the decision-making zone where productive working relationships can occur, and these people were seriously overloaded. There is a practical need to alleviate the intensity of activity occurring in this 'zone'. With the exception of nominal sitting fees for Councillors, all other leaders were expected to operate on a voluntary basis. The number of leaders might be expected to increase if more incentives and rewards were available for participation in governance. Increased employment is

also likely to increase the pool of available leaders. The workload of leaders and employees could obviously be alleviated by reducing the ever-growing quantity of administration to be processed, through a better rationalisation of the service delivery system. There is also much scope to reduce the number of external stakeholders vying for the attention of leaders, but at the same time to increase the numbers that are willing and able to commit to the long-term relationships that are a necessary correlate for productive practice to occur. This requires some attention to the conditions for successful practice, and the training and professional development to foster the necessary skills and motivation.

The study demonstrated the prominence of permanent resident outside employees to decision-making. The interethnic nature of the dilemmas faced in practising local governance was such that no individual or group from either the Aboriginal domain or the non-Aboriginal domain could fundamentally find solutions on their own. All of the examples of innovation in the contemporary history of governance in Kowanyama involved productive social contexts developing locally between leaders and trusted outsiders. Out of the daily mill of deeds, disagreements and face-to-face activity, leaders and employees absorbed the interethnic dilemmas of local governance and reached an agreed basis on how to proceed. A seeming jumble of tasks, sometimes involving more brokering than expertise, somehow cohered to form innovative solutions to the complexity involved. Fundamental to Aboriginal participation was the primacy of interpersonal transactions, which can only be built with respect and trust over time.

Ignoring the role played by outside employees in order to satisfy ideological notions of 'self-determination' clearly prevents any serious examination of the practice of local governance. This has been exacerbated by decades of ethnographic research which has struggled to engage with the complexity and indeterminacies of the interethnic field. As well summarised by Sullivan (2007, 2), "Aboriginal development is an intercultural project, conceived and implemented in mono-cultural terms." What is needed is more interethnic research in the 'third space' between domains, including detailed ethnographies of the largely unnoticed practitioners of self-determination.

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