

'DIFFERENCE' AND 'AUTONOMY' THEN AND NOW: FOUR DECADES OF CHANGE IN A WESTERN DESERT SOCIETY

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I begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people on whose ancestral lands we meet today. I also sincerely thank the Institute for honouring me with its invitation to be this year's Wentworth Lecturer. Bill Wentworth deserves to be long remembered as a great Australian, and especially as the statesman whose determination and persistence brought the idea of a national Australian institute for the promotion of Aboriginal studies to fruition. It was a long and tough struggle, one that you will eventually be able to learn much more about when Jacquie Lambert completes her current research.

My talk revolves around two interrelated themes: the status of cultural difference and the exercise of autonomy, and concerns the Martu, a Western Desert people of the East Pilbara region of Western Australia. It covers the period since 1963, which is when I first began working among them as a UWA Master's student in anthropology (under the supervision of Ron and Catherine Berndt, whose unfailing support to me, and enormous contribution to Australian Aboriginal Studies, and to the Institute, I would like to acknowledge today). Like many other Aboriginal people living in remote regions, the Martu still see, between themselves and other Australians, many significant differences that they appear to have no wish to transcend. A Martu expression, 'whitefellas do that', neatly conveys their recognition of certain fundamental differences. They

note the contrast, generally without value judgment and without acting on it.

I should say at the outset that, as themes, 'autonomy' and 'difference' have no analytical force per se in that neither exists apart from more pressing issues in community life, such as power relations, social cohesion and social control. Difference is a two-edged concept, which has been employed by whites both to exclude Aboriginal people and to justify their assimilation. For their part, Martu use it to validate their uniqueness and to label those things about whites and their ways that mystify them or do not attract their interest or conformity. 'Autonomy' is a slippery notion: Martu value it very highly, but within limits, because there are things that they would really rather leave to others. For many politicians, bureaucrats and commentators, autonomy means taking responsibility for actions and outcomes and becoming self-reliant, whereas for Martu it spells not only freedom from paternalistic and authoritarian strictures but also access to resources that extend their ability to forage for cash and other necessities while at the same time abdicating the hard yakka that whites used to demand as quid pro quo, and that local 'leaders' now cannot or wont impose.

From an outsider's view, though, the autonomy exercised by the Martu is minimal or even illusory, since they mostly lack the wherewithal to exercise it, either as individuals or communities, because of their quite limited access to power, knowledge, money and even good health. I will come back to these issues later, in relation to current trends in government policies concerning Indigenous Australia, and the present situation of the Martu. But first, I offer a roughly chronological overview

of what has gone on among the Martu since the Europeans first made their presence felt in the desert.

All my early research was done at Jigalong, which is about 1200 kilometres northeast of Perth near the western edge of the Gibson Desert. Established as a camel-breeding station on the Rabbit Proof Fence, the settlement later functioned also as a ration depot for the increasing influx of Martu from the desert who eventually settled there. Following the depot's closure shortly after WWII, a Christian mission was established. The ensuing struggle for the hearts and minds of the Martu was the subject of my 1974 community study, *The Jigalong Mob*, whose theme was indigenous adaptive strategies. It described the forging of new, non-traditional social entities (such as 'the Mob' of my title), successful resistance, and ultimate victory, as signalled by the missionaries' withdrawal in 1969. In a situation of chronically unstable accommodation between two antagonistic parties, the Martu reacted to their reduced autonomy by what David Martin (2005) aptly terms 'strategic engagement': they pragmatically acquiesced to an imbalance in power favouring the missionaries as local agents of the nation-state, while selectively accepting, modifying, contesting or rejecting things and ideas Western.

The Martu are but one of the Western Desert peoples who once occupied a culturally homogeneous region comprising about a sixth of our continent. Ensnared in their arid environment and insulated by its forbidding marginality, they had for many millennia enjoyed maximal autonomy and flexibility of movement in their small and scattered bands. At the same time, though, everyone was firmly anchored by multiple attachments to a home estate or heartland, bound to many others by ties

of kinship and ritual, and shared a worldview based solidly on the primacy of the spiritual realm. This was Australia's last frontier, which ended in the 1960s when the few remaining nomadic groups either walked or were transported out of their heartlands to settlements on the fringes of the desert.

Much earlier than this, though, rumours of intruders would have reached into every corner of the desert vastness, along with the arrival of artifacts and animals totally foreign to their experience. As I came to construe it from my fieldwork, the Europeans represented a scale of difference so drastic and unassimilable that the Martu consigned them to a completely separate category, one that lay beyond the bounds of the Dreaming. The strong denial of human agency at the heart of their worldview was most probably what had motivated this reaction. My attempts to interpret what has happened since stem in some part from this sudden expansion of a 'cosmic order' dominated by the ancestral creative beings of the Dreaming into two contrasting arenas or, more aptly, domains (cf. Trigger 1992). This dichotomisation was soon given linguistic reality through the words *ngurra*, meaning 'camp', 'hearth', or 'home', and *maya*, meaning 'house' or 'settlement' but symbolising the whole European socio-spatial domain.

It was clear that 'coming in' from the bush had demanded a revolution in Martu notions of self and other, and of difference and boundedness. Once in face-to-face coexistence with frontier Europeans, predominantly single male pastoralists, Martu began to categorise peoples: 'whitefella', *matamata* (mixed descent), *martu*, and after the arrival of the mission, 'krijin', a negatively evaluated category contrasting with 'whitefella'. This dynamic process of differentiation reflected the

steepness of the Martu learning curve once their formerly high levels of self-regulation were replaced by the near-constant demands of life 'under the white man's law'.

Coming in from the desert had for many Martu entailed a gradual seduction and ultimate entrapment – perfectly rendered in one man's assertion that 'we were captured by flour and sugar'. This was the initial inducement; and once they had become sedentary it would prise, rather than wrench, more of their cherished autonomy away from them. A growing economic dependence would leach them of their ability, and will, to retreat back into the desert. The second, and equally insidious entrapment and loss of cultural integrity would come, ironically, in the wake of government policies intended to end paternalism and, specifically, to *increase* Aboriginal autonomy – about which I will soon say more.

Back in the 1960s, the Martu at Jigalong seemed to me to be faring well despite their very poor living standards. True, the dramatic transition from nomadic to settled life entailed a reduced autonomy, manifest in their heavy dependence on rations and the missionaries' strongly paternalistic stance. At the same time, though, they were successfully defending their autonomy in religious matters against those who were intent on the destruction of their entire culture as 'the work of the devil'. On occasion, the male elders were even emboldened to threaten trespassing missionaries with physical harm (a not inconsiderable challenge to authority when you think that, in the early 1960s, older Martu believed the killing of Aborigines by policemen to be as legally permissible as their terrifying dawn raids aimed at shooting camp dogs). I will never forget the palpable fear of the police that

obtained back then, before the advent of Aboriginal Legal Services brought a much needed and more accurate understanding of where the police officer stood in the legal hierarchy.

The Martu sense of what really mattered in life, along with family and their huge, scattered networks of kin, was inescapably bound up with the imperative of following the dictates of 'the Law'. The dormitory kids, for all the surveillance and disciplining they were subjected to by missionaries and teachers, enjoyed daily access to their kin and to the lively milieu of the camp, so their socialisation was still primarily into Martu behaviours and values. Attempts by the missionaries to turn them from the ways of their elders and make Christians of them was having little effect. In economic terms, there was work available – at the mission for the mothers and older men and women, and on pastoral stations for the able-bodied men.

Each year's end brought the 'Pinkeye' season, when workers came home from the stations and Martu society was reinvigorated. Neither pastoralists nor missionaries interfered overtly in the 'big meetings', where religious business, centred on male initiation, took place. These meetings were the highlight of the Martu calendar: groups from several settlements would assemble at the chosen location for a few weeks of intense social activity. Throughout the year, though, ritual continued back in the various home communities, and religious matters remained front and centre for the elders, men and women. However, for those younger people not charged with the imperative of acting for the whole society, life at the missions and on stations hinted at possibilities of alternative futures. Presented with new forms of work and leisure, younger Martu had their horizons widened, though to a limited extent. They were the

first generation to face a dilemma as to how far they would conform to their elders' expectations. For their part, the elders carried on their traditional roles but their authority was undermined in a number of ways. Ultimately, the younger generations came to assert increasing autonomy while their elders found their influence diminishing.

In the decades of engagement and flow between the two socio-spatial arenas, the Martu readily accepted those things, mostly material, that posed no obvious threat to their Law. At the same time, they engaged with the whites mostly in the latter's spatial domain. There was a mutual tendency to segregation, with Martu strongly resisting missionary intrusions and interference in the life of the camp and the missionaries and frontier whites (in general) enforcing separation, both social and spatial, for their own reasons. Martu men, for example, were rarely permitted to set foot in their boss's quarters on stations, and very rarely did so in missionaries' houses.

When Myrna Tonkinson and I spent almost a year at Jigalong in 1974, we were witnesses to a pronounced rise in the tempo of change in Martu lives. First, there were social problems that had been emerging since the weighty lid of missionary control had been removed in 1969, and then out of the blue came enormous and unprecedented adaptive challenges with the implementation of 'self-determination' policies shortly before our arrival.

In just a few decades, the Martu had journeyed from undisputed masters of the desert to the cocky's boys and the missionaries' wards. Now they were catapulted from a situation of complete paternalism to managing their settlement and negotiating their bureaucratic relationships with the nation-state – but without a modicum of training or

any meaningful preparation. Jigalong was pronounced theirs, a legal Aboriginal corporation, to be run by their council, assisted by White employees whom, incredibly, they were now expected to boss. (And, I might add, they soon learned to boss, though with a twist: they judged their employees on the basis of sentiment rather than any evaluation of competence).

Not only were the Martu not ready for administrative responsibilities but their coping strategies had been focused on the very opposite: insulating their 'traditional' domain and its religious core from the kinds of 'whitefella business' threatening to invade it. That they would soon be expressing nostalgia for the now-departed missionaries they had struggled against for 25 years speaks volumes for their deep-seated reluctance to take on what was thrust upon them in the name of 'self-determination' – much of which was, in their view, really the 'whitefella business' from which they had long been excluded but also sought to avoid. They had already been forced to cope with the progressive loss of work on stations since 1968 and the impact of easier access to alcohol in the late '60s after the nearby mining town of Newman was established. To a large extent, these conditions happened to the Martu rather than being controlled by them, with often catastrophic consequences for their society. Consultation was and continues to be expressed as an ideal but inadequately effected, as the goals and schedules of officialdom differ greatly from those of the Martu.

Policies of 'self-management' undoubtedly brought about some positive changes in Martu confidence levels and skills in dealing effectively with whites, but there is also ample evidence of the conspicuous failure of these policies to significantly ameliorate Aboriginal

disadvantage (cf. Sutton 2001:128-30). Although generally welcomed as offering Aboriginal people the right to make their own decisions (DAA 1983; see Tonkinson and Howard, 1990:67-74), the new initiatives soon showed troubling signs of not matching their underlying ideals. The Whitlam government's term 'self-determination' was later changed to 'self-management'; and though the word 'autonomy' was not used, it suggests much the same idea. Both concepts are variably realised in time and space, and are also constrained, inasmuch as Aboriginal policy is framed within financial and political limits imposed by the dominant society, and subject to the whims of particular governments. In 1985, John von Sturmer (1985:48) presciently warned that the language of 'self-determination' concealed a discourse aimed at drawing Aboriginal people inexorably into the corporate State, either by their direct recruitment into the bureaucracy or more indirectly by the creation of 'Aboriginal organisations' that would be invited, required or compelled to participate in government decision-making. As inimitable former AIATSIS Chairman, Ken Colbung, put it to me at the time, 'Are we talking about Aboriginal-managed organisations or managed Aborigines?'

At Jigalong, this 'capture and encapsulate' element was a significant factor in undermining Martu cultural integrity during the self-management era, and it is easy to see why: it eroded the boundary between the ideational domains that the Martu had erected and maintained with considerable success up to that point. While the Whites assumed that the Martu were incapable of self-regulation, the Martu reinforced the separation of domains to ensure autonomy in those areas they valued most highly. In fact, many senior Martu came to view, and use, the council as a convenient buffer against direct bureaucratic

dealings between the camp domain and agents of the dominant society. The separation and paternalism that had freed Martu of much of the day-to-day minutiae of administration also regrettably prevented them from acquiring knowledge and skills necessary for effective self-management. Consequently, when white officials decided it was time for self-management, the Martu were neither willing nor able to put it into effect. In some of my published work I have highlighted a fascinating aspect of domain separation on the part of the Martu; namely, their refusal to apply the organisational and logistic skills so patently exemplified by their 'big meetings' to comparable situations in the white domain. Yet I have heard whites complain that they could not organise their way out of a paper bag. This stems from a quite different leadership style, about which I will say more shortly.

Regardless of how they are perceived by others or of what policy dictates, the Martu, like other remote Aboriginal Australians, have clung to their differences. They want to retain their present distance and level of autonomy, but also the right to participate freely in some aspects of Australian society (cf. Trigger 2004); they self-identify as Martu first, and Australians second, if at all.

The vision of self-management held by many interested parties during and after the 1970s included the notion that Aboriginal people would eventually take control of their communities. However, the Martu were not given the tools to make this a reality, whatever their attitudes towards change may have been at that time. This period has seen a dearth of effective leaders, possibly because leadership in traditional Martu society was highly situational and context-dependent, and always included kin considerations. Kinship systems function relationally and

conditionally, so they do not leave room for individuals to make and enforce decisions for what they may see as the common good. This of course begs the question of whether or not there can *be* any notion of 'common good' in a kin-based polity, especially when the matter at hand is categorised as 'Whitefella business' (cf. David Martin 2006, Nic Peterson 2005, David Trigger 2005). Today, emergent economic inequalities in desert settlements tend to favour those, predominantly men, who hold leadership positions through a kind of community inertia, and seem to act more often in the interests of self and close kin than as dispassionate community leaders.

A dimension of Martu society that has always been kept separate from 'whitefella business' is the religious life, the particular concern of mature men and women who have earned the status of ritual leaders. In recent decades, the erosive forces of Westernisation that conspire to weaken Martu resolve have led to attenuation of the flow of knowledge from elders to the younger adult generations. A youth's journey from first initiation to marriage used to take about fifteen years, but this period is now severely truncated, along with the volume of religious knowledge and traditions being transmitted, and the number of mature men available to conduct the necessary 'Law business'. Serious gaps have appeared in the ritual hierarchy of their once vibrant and complex religious system. The interdependency that made the system function efficiently is now insufficiently active in other religious contexts. This is most evident in the induction of novices into higher grades, which entails the transmission of vital knowledge and assignment of religious responsibilities, and in the conduct of ritual activities during the bulk of the year when there are no 'big meetings'. The time allotted to Law

business has shrunk since the 1960s, even though it is no longer constrained by the demands of the pastoral economy. What still transpires mostly relates to male initiation and remains highly valued, as are the regional ties nourished by these meetings. Regarding the diminution in ritual activities, elders complain that they are 'too tired' and that the young men are too preoccupied with sex and drinking, while younger men in turn blame the elders for being lazy and failing to pass on vital knowledge. Some elders also complain that they are not being consulted by members of the middle-aged generation to whom they wish to transfer religious knowledge. The current standoffs within the male ritual status hierarchy may yet be resolved, and the Law will undoubtedly persevere, though not as the edifice it was even thirty years ago.

In the mundane realm, expectations since the 1970s that Martu would eventually occupy all the major community roles have not been realised, and today there are more non-local staff than ever before in their settlements, including Aboriginal people from elsewhere and even occasional young European pack-backers who respond to job ads placed in Perth, and are paid CDEP wages. This has occurred reportedly in response to a marked reluctance of Martu to work locally. With notable exceptions, those few who have the qualifications or experience to take on such jobs do not consider the top-up to their CDEP wage sufficient to make it worthwhile. Also, working in their own community can be all relatedness and little autonomy, so they will be subjected to 'jealousing' and to criticism. Exposure to the risk of shame and anger, many say, is 'not worth it'; and besides, there is no moral evaluation of work that links it in Martu minds to feelings of self-respect. As Peter Sutton has noted,

there is an abiding tendency to forage among resources that are already available rather than producing substance through labour.

Among Martu, strong cultural continuities in sharing practices and obligations to kin, the *bêtes noires* of policy-makers intent on turning every Aboriginal family into a fiscally responsible economic isolate, will ensure that they will not be penniless and hungry, though the weekly feast-famine cycles that plague these communities affect even well-paid Martu. There are conflicts inherent in combining demand-sharing and other kin-based Martu values with the wage economy and the kind of individualism that many policy makers and commentators take to be the ideal. This is part of the dominant society's reluctance to accept difference colliding with the Martu tendency to cling to many of their values no matter the cost – at least to the eyes of observers like us. There is also gambling, the redistributive functions of which are well documented, though the personal costs perhaps less so. In the Martu case, changing conventions (about withdrawal from card games, and hoarding and spending proceeds, for example) may be indicative of pressures towards greater material consumption and increasing individuation. Still, the vast majority of Martu remain equally poor, so no one seems about to become anything beyond a bit more selective in their attitudes to sharing.

On the question of conformity to a work ethic favoured by the dominant society that entails punctuality, sticking to schedules, and so on, Victoria Burbank's (2006) recent account of why Aboriginal people may be reluctant participants in Western institutions is apposite. Her focus on dissonance, along with comments by a doctor who has worked among Aboriginal people for decades, led me to ponder the implications of yet another cultural continuity among desert people: a very high tolerance of

discomfort. Martu habitually put up with hardship and huge inconvenience without expressing frustration or reacting against the situation or vowing never to repeat the ordeal. An unpalatable consequence current government thinking is that the amelioration of pressing community problems in remote Aboriginal Australia can be made to succeed only by deliberately increasing levels of discomfort until they trigger the desired reactive behaviour, and it could be that people like the Martu simply endure more hardship.

The Martu have done a number of things suggestive of the kind of autonomy they desire. For example, they have increased their mobility as a result of several changes: the lifting of bureaucratic controls, the loss of pastoral employment, the establishment of outstation communities, and, more recently, the retention of access to one's monetary entitlements in the event of visits to other settlements. Increased vehicle ownership, and better road construction and maintenance, have also facilitated a greater tempo and range of Aboriginal movement. While intensifying the ethos of inclusivity among desert people, access to vehicles has many costs: accidents, recurring expenditure on repairs that drain limited resources, and vehicle ownership itself – and sometimes big trouble with hire purchase companies, especially since the debt so often outlives the vehicle. More significantly, a lot of the Martu's current involvement with the justice system concerns motor vehicle offences: unpaid bills and fines, lack of licences, ignored summonses and breached community work orders – testament to a value system that rates obligations to kin as immeasurably more important than accountability to bureaucracies they see as having little or no moral claim over them.

The Martu readiness to travel, on whatever pretext and sometimes with just minutes of forewarning, is a major manifestation of their sense of autonomy today. Core values reinforce the virtues of nomadism, mobility and spontaneity of movement. Temporary absences and time spent visiting kin elsewhere may, amongst other things, function as a kind of pressure valve that eases some of the tensions entailed in staying put in a remote community. Yet mobility can be disruptive for settlements when kids are taken from school at a moment's notice, or attempts to run training programs are foiled by strongly felt obligations to attend funerals, or when leaders use their privileged access to resources to evade their responsibilities by fleeing from community crises instead of attempting to resolve them.

Another major change pertains to difference and autonomy concerns relativities internal to the Martu social system; the way women and young people have exploited changed circumstances to increase their ability to function as what many refer to as 'free agents', at the expense of the power wielded by mature men. Gender relations favouring greater female autonomy began changing on pastoral stations, continued at the mission when older widows successfully asserted their right to refuse remarriage, and by the 1970s saw young women becoming increasingly successful in ignoring their parents' wishes about arranged marriage and their sexual conduct more generally. These assertions of autonomy, however, entail costs as the girls risk losing the protection of kin, leaving them more susceptible to violence. There has also been an alarming increase in adolescent pregnancy, low birth-weight babies and other problems. Men, too, are now marrying much younger than they used to and parental or community control over youth is minimal, so

transgressions that used to result in severe public chastisement and beatings often go unpunished.

It is now more than forty years since my first sojourn in the desert, and I have made countless returns in the intervening decades, so, as a living exemplar of anthropology's extended case method, I am taking this lecture as a good opportunity to tackle some of the questions surrounding policy failures. Increasingly, reports and articles by journalists, academics and various commentators are cataloguing numerous problems and paradoxes in Aboriginal communities across the country. Broadly similar historical responses to oppression, racism, displacement, poverty and marginalisation undoubtedly account for some of these similarities. Also, the onus for coping and surviving has always lain with the small powerless minority, which, as Austin-Broos (2005: 6) observes, has had to draw on its existing institutional resources, making an impact on emerging difficulties, for better or worse. Today, both the costs and the benefits of staying remote are palpable and widely observed, so the imperative remains to refine our theorising and analysis to better comprehend the nature of Aboriginal responses. Perhaps we can then offer practical advice to those highly placed non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people charged with the responsibility for bringing about positive and enduring change.

Over time, a succession of governmental policies has been based on the gulf of difference between Aboriginal and other Australians, and aimed at either overcoming or maintaining it. Despite our nation's avowed multiculturalism, government policies concerning Aboriginal Australians seem to have become more intent on discounting 'difference'.

This shift was suggested in the decision to abolish ATSIC in 2004, but also in 'practical reconciliation' strategies and a determination to mainstream service delivery to Aboriginal Australians. Last year, we had what is possibly the clearest indication of federal government thinking about 'difference' when, in a number of speeches, the then Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Amanda Vanstone, heralded a major shift from 'the theoretical and ideological to the real and practical' (2005:1). She characterised remote Aboriginal communities as 'living museums' whose inhabitants need to be moved closer to where economic opportunities exist. Senator Vanstone seemed to be implying that the maintenance of 'difference' is debilitating to remote Aboriginal peoples, and that the tyrannies entailed by this kind of distance/difference would at least be minimised, if not removed, by impelling them into a more active economic and social engagement with the dominant society. Few would challenge the notion that cultural differences may impede economic participation, but in this case no indication was given as to how and why. There is a strong tendency on the part of many in government and of commentators to concentrate on cultural difference rather than structural inequalities in seeking to account for a variety of problems.

The preference of most Aboriginal people living in remote locations to stay where they are often leaves them severely disadvantaged by poverty and the lack of access to services and opportunities available elsewhere, and exposed to a range of dysfunctional and damaging behaviours wrought by some of their number, but they can also protect people from adversity. As gleaned from Vanstone's punchy rhetoric, Aboriginal people in remote communities face two choices: to stay with 'culture' along with a lifelong welfare dependency that undermines 'local

authority, material well being and social-moral coherence', as Diane Austin-Broos (2005: 2) has put it, or else migrate and embrace some ill-defined 'mainstream' culture that foregrounds economic values and urges universal engagement with them. The federal government is also signalling that it is not prepared to support the first of these options indefinitely. There is a not-too-subtle message in much of the recent policy rhetoric that 'difference' in many of its manifestations equates with dysfunction and – unless of course it entails positive economic outputs, as in the case of much Aboriginal art production, will not be supported. This trend would seem to render 'self-management' as little more than assimilation by another name. Perhaps my friend Betty Meehan can again aptly evoke a *bon mot* she attributes to former NT National Park Ranger, Danny Gillespie, about the bureaucratic reading of 'culture change': 'we've got the culture, you've got to change'.

The implicit choice between staying put so as to maximise difference and cultural autonomy while suffering disadvantage, and emigrating to towns, where your difference is on show to an audience of critics, and where disadvantage often persists, raises the question of possible alternatives. From my experience of circular migration in Vanuatu, where I have also been doing research since the 1960s, and from past patterns of Aboriginal seasonal pastoral employment, it seems that both provide possible models for participation in the workforce while retaining a base in one's homeland. Noel Pearson, who has contributed much to debate about alternative strategies, is also prominent among those Aboriginal leaders who are unhappy with ideas about 'cultural autonomy' if their effect precludes solutions to Aboriginal disadvantage and premature death.

How ready, though, are people like the Martu to move away from their heartlands and the autonomy and security associated with that life? ARC research Myrna Tonkinson and I have done recently confirms the continuing pull of country and 'home'; everyone we interviewed in remote communities expressed a preference for staying put rather than relocating to towns. Most people want to be able to visit towns or cities and enjoy some of what they offer, but not to abandon their home places.

As things stand, if people like the Martu are either lured or compelled away from the homelands they have often struggled long and hard to win back via successful claims to native title, most will be reluctant émigrés – in, but not of, towns. There they are largely segregated by a sense of difference held positively by themselves through their Aboriginal identity, and negatively by entrenched racist attitudes among many of their co-residents. Today, significant numbers of Martu live in Port Hedland, Nullagine, Marble Bar, and Newman, and a few reside in the Perth metropolitan area. Some of this migration has been necessitated by chronic health problems that require people to remain close to services unavailable in home communities, notably dialysis. As reasons for their move, Martu also cite the availability of public housing, Aboriginal reserves and proximity to a range of services catering to Aboriginal needs.

Town is at once more exciting and dangerous than home, attractive for its shopping, fast-food and liquor outlets, and often the supportive presence of many kinsfolk. But it is also alien, overrun with whitefellas and traumatic when drinking fuels violence and fatal accidents. There are 'shame' factors, especially when inebriated relatives are in the public gaze, and of course there are police, always on the lookout for those being

sought for various kinds of infraction or outstanding debt. Deep ambivalence is evident in individual Martu commentaries, where the same factor, for example grog, is cited as both positive and negative. A number of town-dwelling Martu are heavy consumers of alcohol and state this as a, or the, major reason they live there. Many others, however, are non-drinkers who have come to town principally to care both for their alcohol-misusing adult children who are drinking, and/or grandchildren who are being neglected as a direct result.

Our research in Newman indicates that although children growing up in town increasingly identify it as 'home', as do many long-term resident adults, the basis of their identity is still strongly 'Martu'. Apart from a few dwellings on the township Aboriginal Reserve, their housing is dispersed and many have non-Aboriginal neighbours, yet their friendship networks and social world are almost exclusively Martu. They betray no hint of any desire to abandon their cultural heritage, and regularly travel back and forth to the Martu settlements, often to attend funerals, and feel entirely at home among their desert relatives. Their present level of autonomy includes the freedom to return to their old homelands at any time, and they place high value on this - it energises and sustains them. And of course, many others now live out in their homelands, though are frequently on the road.

Understanding that Martu dealt with the shock of the new by locating Europeans entirely outside their Dreaming-ordained cosmic order helps explain why, still today, a striking feature of their outlook is their general lack of curiosity about the nature and workings of the world 'out there'. Our recent ARC research strongly suggests that at all age levels fundamental orientations to the world show remarkable stability;

many Martu values, attitudes and behaviours remain firmly anchored by deep emotional attachments to home, kin, country, and sentiments about sharing and compassion.

This cultural conservatism does not sit well with many values prominent in Australian society, such as those relating to property, time management, employment, wealth accumulation, future-orientation and education. Education probably best exemplifies this stark contrast in perspectives, and the distance separating tradition from modernism (cf. Sutton 2001:132). As in other hunter-gatherer societies, formal instruction was mostly absent as a framed activity, and learning took place predominantly via unstructured observation and imitation. Remote area schools today have never been better equipped or (in many cases) staffed, yet among Martu attendance levels and scholastic performance have probably never been worse. The lack of employed locals as suitable role models could be a factor, but schooling as a means to an end has little meaning to Martu children, given their circumscribed horizons.

The strong desire of the Martu to maintain both a measure of distance and key elements of a distinctive identity has long been in tension with an ambivalence and inconsistency on the part of other Australians towards difference, comprising both demands for more responsibility and the wish to limit its expression. There is a lack of fit between what governments and others interpreted 'autonomy' to mean, and how it was understood and used by people like the Martu. What most of us thought and hoped would transpire once paternalism was eradicated by the new policies clearly did not, and the big question for anthropologists, other researchers and policy-makers alike remains, 'Why not?'

Whatever room to manoeuvre was increased for the Martu via 'self-management' they have used to amplify and sustain their cultural distinctiveness, but at a certain price that they are apparently willing to continue to pay. The issue of how difference is perceived and dealt with is moot here. The Martu have never expected whites to behave in the same manner as they do; they simply accept the difference and feel that they and whites occupy parallel domains, with no need for either comparison or value judgments about which one is better. This is not the case for members of the dominant society, who have always assumed that Aboriginal Australians would embrace what was presented to them as a superior way of life.

A lot therefore depends on how much difference Australia as a nation will tolerate and how long remote peoples like the Martu can continue to resist assimilation. Their difference is likely to remain salient for them and for others, with both positive and negative consequences. Current policy directions strongly suggest that the nation-state is looking to claw back some of the manifestations of Aboriginal autonomy it does not approve of, like allowing children to make their own decision about attending school, or the use of recreational drugs, or spending patterns it considers aberrant. Shared Responsibility Agreements, viewed by critics as a carrot and stick approach that is more coercive than collaborative, are about modifying autonomy, reducing difference, and doing things for people's own good. The current prominence of SRAs strongly suggests that the federal government's price for allowing so-called 'living museums' to persist in remote Australia will be a more active coercion of their inhabitants into community-based reciprocal duties aimed at minimising or removing problems, identified via consultation between its

agents and community organisations, often under duress. Minister Tony Abbott's call for a 'new paternalism' seems to have supplied an apt label for current policy orientation.

As I noted earlier, the reluctance of the Martu to apply the organising principles that serve them so well in their own domain to what they see as that of the 'whitefella' (Tonkinson 2006) has denied them effective control over many administrative and development-related matters. While this no doubt has partly satisfied their strong desire for autonomy, their continuing struggle to keep the two domains discrete has been perilous precisely because it renders their Law incapable of dealing with problems that flow from the whitefella arena. This has left Martu autonomy in thrall to grog, cash and motor vehicles, for starters. The wall separating the two domains has certainly become much more permeable to elements of 'whitefella business', so if the Martu *could* somehow succeed in stimulating a flow of knowledge, strategies and power deriving from their Law to the whitefella domain, this should enhance their level of control over circumstances that continually challenge them. The ways they are adapting funerals, for example, hint at the kind of syncretism I have in mind here.

The need for transcendence of what could be termed 'the domain problem' is manifest in the wake of native title, in the form of the recently constituted Western Desert Lands Aboriginal Corporation (WDLAC) as the Martu's regional 'prescribed body corporate'. Such bodies are meant to function as the conduit through which Aboriginal native title groups will mediate their economic relationships with the wider Australian society, so their potential role must not be underestimated. The success of WDLAC will depend significantly on the extent to which it can also serve

and satisfy its constituents. Some Martu have already expressed the hope that this regional forum will respond to pressing matters of Law and tradition in addition to its major economic function, and most particularly that it will bolster their Law. A flow of enabling power out of the Martu domain could well give WDLAC the kinds of strategies and skills necessary to make it a truly effective institution. Models for success are being identified in several communities, as Mick Dodson has pointed out, so there is hope for a positive and enduring outcome.

Forty odd years on, much has been achieved in the Martu's quest for their version of self-management, and they now deal with the wider world with a higher level of self-confidence, but probably also with more cynicism than optimism. They are still much poorer and unhealthier than the population at large, though materially better off than before. The warmth, humanity, compassion, resilience, and, above all, sense of humour that captured me in the sixties are still very much in evidence, though today's is certainly a considerably more fraught world – funerals are, after all, by far the commonest contemporary ritual. The biggest challenge facing the Martu, as I see it, will be to maintain sufficient strength and continuity in the workings of their Law, especially in its religious manifestations, that it can continue meaningfully to be the linchpin of their cultural integrity.

I would like to conclude with heartfelt thanks to the Martu for taking me on 43 years ago, convinced that their Law was well worth telling the world about. They were right, of course, and it still is, though considerably more complex in the telling.

[Bibliography soon to follow]
