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**The Community Game:
Aboriginal Self Definition at the Local Level**

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The Community Game: Aboriginal Self-Definition at the Local Level^[1]

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This paper was written for my Nan, Doreen Claire Peters.

Prologue

In many, probably most, research projects, a researcher is more likely to need to deal with community representatives rather than with every community member. Among Indigenous societies, however, there is hardly a more vexed area than the politics of representation. Nevertheless, one of the questions that a researcher has to address is the identification of and consultation with appropriate representatives of the people who are to be the focus of or affected by any research. [2]

I decided to research the topic of ‘Aboriginal Community, Identity and Self-Representation’ in the north west region of NSW, which is the rural community I identify with both socially and culturally. I was inspired to write a paper about Aboriginal people living within the Walgett Shire Council after I had read a book commissioned by the Walgett Shire Council and the Walgett Historical Society, by Historian John Ferry, author of *Walgett before the motor car*. The most obvious oversight to me was indeed his failure to acknowledge the contribution Aboriginal people have made towards the development of the town.

The concept of ‘community’, however, was inspired by my own experience as a researcher and documentary filmmaker for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and my own personal relationship to my grandparents who are from the north west. As a proud member and descendant from the north west of New South Wales, I have found the Aboriginal people in this area are the most fiercely independent, resilient and individualistic in their opinions and lifestyles, and are as boldly explicit in their manner of self-expression as any Aboriginal community I have worked in. But perhaps this is the case for anyone who chooses to write about their own community, for nothing can be so rewarding or challenging. As an Aboriginal researcher of documentary films for many years in other Aboriginal communities across Australia, I wondered if my personal connection would allow me immediate access to hidden knowledge, or a better opportunity to produce a more accurate description of Aboriginal communities, whether conflicting or complementary, and whether or not I would be contributing something of benefit to the community as a whole. Throughout this project I needed to consider how I would obtain research material from individual Aboriginal people, and how the approach I took in this project compared to the research ethics that I have used in other Aboriginal communities.

The following is a brief outline of experiences I have had in researching other communities. On approaching (selecting) communities, I would firstly ask what they would like researched and for what purpose, then figure out whether or not it related to anything that I found interesting or had any understanding of. Upon arrival I would often be required to go through written or unwritten protocols which derived from the common knowledge, traditionally based, that one must be invited into territory and conform to the ‘laws’ of the country they are entering. To demonstrate that I was carrying out the proper protocols within the community by being seen with an ‘acceptable’ person, I would attempt to develop trusting, strong and ongoing relationships with the local community, organisation or spokespeople who in turn offered their guidance regarding my research. Initially I could not be certain if the spokesperson that I was guided by was well liked, or had particularly difficult power

relationships with the locals. If and when I did find the latter to be the case, then this again presented another set of ethical questions that I had to deal with at a later stage; that is, whether I could assume the spokesperson was connecting me to appropriate or conflicting sources needed for my research.

The most important factor I had to consider for this project was whether or not I would allow my research to be monitored or 'consented' to by organisations, particularly since I was more interested in exploring individual concepts of 'community'. I was concerned also with seeking individual opinions about their community, while maintaining their privacy. I was aware that I could be doing the kind of harm researchers often do by scrutinising the inter-personal relationships of Aboriginal people. Researching my own community was different: I was acutely aware of the damage simply because this time it was my own mob, for not only would I have to be accountable for my actions, but so too would family members and friends. In hindsight I feel that my personal connection to my community may have given me some advantages to conduct the research. My greatest frustration was knowing the work was going to be an incomplete and an ongoing process. This discussion paper therefore is perhaps stage one, simply initiating dialogue on the idea of 'community'.

During interviews my strategy has been to present myself as an individual, although Aboriginal people are experts on researchers and their funding sources, the effects our reports have upon their lives, and our own aim for prosperity; in other words Aboriginal people are experts in researching researchers. Legally one needs to protect oneself with release forms signed by individuals on behalf of themselves and clearly counsel interviewees of one's intention regardless of how negatively one may be perceived. My most personal commitment is to interview people as individuals with individual voices and not as community representatives: Aboriginal people are individuals and need to be respected as such and not pressured into thinking that they are speaking on behalf of a race, community, organisation or doctrine, which I usually find is a relief for many. The greatest set-back in doing research this way is that one is required to work very personally and independently much to the uneasiness of local organisations and groups where I would be an 'outsider'. Because I have chosen to interview individuals I apologise to those I missed. This is an ongoing process, however, and I invite your participation in this discussion paper for future research.

A valuable resource for my research has been the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies' (AIATSIS) report *Research of Interest to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* commissioned by the Australian Research Council and published while I was a Visiting Research Fellow at AIATSIS. Another valuable resource was Barry Smith's *The Concept 'Community' in Aboriginal Policy and Service Delivery*, an Occasional Paper written for the North Australia Development Unit in 1989.

Introduction

The concept of community invokes notions of an idealised unity of purpose and action among social groups who are perceived to share a common culture. To some extent, 'community' and 'culture' are treated as synonymous, rather than as principles operating at different levels of social realities. Indigenous culture is therefore seen to define Indigenous community. This, of course, is not so. [3]

This discussion paper raises the question: 'what constitutes an Aboriginal community'?

It examines how some Aboriginal people identify with communities, and explores how they are represented and conceptualised both internally and externally. The short term aim of this paper is to encourage readers to examine popular notions of Aboriginal 'communities' and their historical development and to ensure further debate about how Aboriginal people identify and determine one's 'community'. I argue that today's popular notions of community, identity and self-representation are increasingly problematic for 'rural' Aboriginal people's quest for native title, reconciliation and self-determination.

My initial intention was to probe, demonstrate and prompt discussion amongst community workers and researchers. Some of the internal conflict that one encounters when attempting to consult Aboriginal communities, led me to believe that a better starting point for discussion was with an account of the development of our communities, identity and issues of self-representation. Another aim of this paper is to ask readers to examine the role government policy played in the development of Aboriginal 'communities' and their contemporary social organisation, geographical boundaries and cultural identities. While Aboriginal people did not passively accommodate new and imposed, introduced and artificial colonial boundaries, it is clear that missions, reserves and pastoral stations have become Aboriginal communities which are now an integral part of Aboriginal people's heritage and are fundamental to Aboriginality. This paper requests readers to resist and to challenge the desire to search for an 'authentic' Aboriginal cultural identity within the confines of a colonial framework. It asks the reader to embrace Aboriginal people's legitimate claims to communal identities regardless of conflict and heterogeneity. I want to ask readers to focus on the role governments played in formulating concepts of Aboriginal communities, and to appreciate the ways in which Aboriginal people have actively played 'the community game' to their own advantage. My longer aim is to raise discussion amongst Aboriginal people who feel they have become the winners or losers in the community game, and how they can seek to balance inequalities. Finally, I hope to inspire Aboriginal people to develop their own definition of Aboriginality on a local level, and redefine who and what constitutes an Aboriginal community, its identity and a more accurate and appropriate system of self-representation in that community.

A Brief History

The focus of my study is the Aboriginal people of the Walgett region in north west New South Wales. Massacres and land grabs took place as early as 1826 when Governor Darling told white settlers to take vigorous measures for their own defence against the natives in the north west. [4] Consequently Aborigines had put up a kind of guerilla warfare resulting in casualties occurring on both sides. [5] By 1836 the new squatters were granted the right to graze livestock on the north west plains, but again Aborigines disputed the invader's 'rights, occupation, and hegemony, though not in a manner that the invaders would call war'. [6] So great was the Indigenous loss of life in Britain's colony that a year later the British House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines recommended that special codes of law be established to 'protect' Aborigines from extinction until they 'learned to live in a civilised and Christian manner'. [7] The British control gave way to the colonial control in the 1850s. Within all the Australian colonies the conventional view of Aboriginal culture was that it was in irreversible decline and by the 1880s, especially in the southern parts of the continent, the whites were endeavouring to 'smooth the pillow of a dying race'. [8] It was thought even for those

who survived, that the extent of their psychological damage would eventually add to the reduction in numbers and facilities, resulting in the inevitable destruction of Aboriginal society. [9] In New South Wales the Aboriginal Protection Board (APB) was formed in 1883 to look after this 'dying race' and help the remnants assimilate into white society.

If the task for the APB was to assimilate Aborigines, then it is ironic that they should expect the Aboriginal people on the north west plains of New South Wales to assimilate into white society while enforcing segregation laws which kept them isolated on reserves and missions. It is arguable that being restricted to missions and reserves actually assisted those families to keep their links to their history and each other.

Notwithstanding some of the longest and bloodiest massacres on the north west plains of New South Wales, such as the notorious Hospital Creek and Myall Creek massacres in 1838, descendants from the Weilwan, Uralarai, Kamilaroi and Ngemba have continued to survive. Aboriginal people retained their Aboriginality and their own concepts of social and geographical boundaries despite invasion. While it was thought that Aboriginal culture was dying and the people had lost their connection to land, Aboriginal descendants living on the north west plains argue that they have maintained ongoing relationships to their sacred sites and traditional lands, having never left it. Today, it can be argued that the population of Aboriginal people living in the north west is higher than it was prior to invasion.

Missions, Reserve And Pastoralist Stations

Some white historians have argued that the APB set up missions and reserves intending to control rather than protect Aborigines, [10] and that reserves were white initiatives aimed to 'cure' Aborigines of their 'nomadism' and be useful to white employers. [11] While the pastoral industry is blamed for being the single most important agent in the destruction of Aboriginal society, [12] the ways in which my Aboriginal elders went about their lives on reserves, missions and stations are far more complex than some white historians have argued. For many Aboriginal elders, their illustrations of mission, reserve and pastoral life are neither simply negative nor romantic. It becomes clear when talking to them that missions and reserves have become as vital to their identity as sacred sites and ceremonies of significance; their generation recalls the days when 'proper values' [13] were kept. This is more significant and relevant to them than the way white historians have spoken about missions and reserves. Goodall argues that some people's memories tended to be viewed through rose coloured glasses, and that Aboriginal people were most likely to brush bad memories aside with a 'not too bad' or denial of them altogether, [14] yet this doesn't adequately explain why they should have such favourable memories. I suggest that a possible explanation for this could be that their memories of their ability to resist is more significant than the oppression they endured.

When my grandmother Doreen Peters first began telling me her story of when she was a nine year old, she talked about the sixpence a week she never received during five years of domestic service on a pastoral station. My grandmother's stories of the cruelty of whites on pastoralist stations always concluded with several accounts of how she overcame it. [15] While recent memories of assimilation policies and segregation practices have perhaps caused them internally to reject 'white society', memories of 'survival' and 'resistance' to whiteness are an essential component of Aboriginality. In this way Aboriginal people actively participate in the construction of their own Aboriginality; they have control over those issues and harness them for their own

benefit.

Elders

When an invading culture has a leadership stemming from a predominantly patriarchal framework of power relationships, the result of invasion is devastating, for matriarchal and gerontocratic roles which tend to become obsolete. Today in many Aboriginal communities definitions of who and what elders or leaders are is extremely diverse. The towns of the north west are no exception. When I asked elder June Barker from Lightning Ridge who she thought elders were, she said she had never heard the word 'elder' used so much as she does now. 'These days you hear people call someone who is only 38 or 40 years old, and they call them elders'. [16] While there is much controversy over who and what an elder is, I was told that an elder was someone of my grandparents generation and older. As June Barker points out, age alone is insufficient: they had to be people who were perceived to be intelligent by the group also. In order of priority, I was obliged to the elders in my own family first and foremost, then anyone else who was significantly older than I were called 'Auntie' or 'Uncle'. Those 'recognised' elders who came from another 'country' would have to be treated with respect, but they did not speak on behalf of your 'countrymen', and you did not call someone 'Uncle' or 'Auntie' unless told to do so.

In Walgett today there are several elders and families who come from other 'countries' surrounding and overlapping the Walgett Shire. Angledool mission is situated within the Walgett Shire and is perhaps the main mission many families who live in Walgett identify with. Claire Simpson, my great-grandmother, born in 1887 and died in 1958, raised her family on Angledool mission. Her mother, known as Emily, a 'full-blooded' Aboriginal woman spoke Uralarai and Kamilaroi, and lived around the Angledool region roughly between 1860 and the 1920s, for most of her life except when she was apprenticed out for work. There are many other reserves, missions and local pastoral stations occupied by older and established families who still live within Walgett today. For even those families who did not live at Angledool mission have since married into Angledool families or have extensive ties with them. The generation of people who spent their childhood on Angledool mission have since become elders, and either live in surrounding towns such as Walgett, Brewarrina, Collarenebri, Lightning Ridge and Goodooga, or have moved to the cities.

Recent studies with Angledool elders in 1996 suggest that Uralarai and Kamilaroi people in the north west hold strong historical connections to missions and reserves and have retained enough community spirit to reconstruct themselves as a people of their own land despite years of colonial oppression, institutionalisation and displacement. [17]. Even though they were restricted by government policy to live on missions, reserves and pastoralist stations, Doreen Peters' generation played a large role in the reconstruction of what we identify as contemporary Aboriginality. Proclaiming Angledool as their site of Aboriginal heritage and culture, their links to Angledool were perhaps strengthened by the terrifying events surrounding the night it was abandoned at midnight during winter in 1936 when families were split and forced onto the back of cattle trucks and transported to unknown destinations.

Their identities were rooted in their ability to survive mission and station life, as opposed to identifying with a traditional life, history, site and experience denied to them. The hardship they endured has since become an almost accepted part of Aboriginality, as though an aspect of being Aboriginal is the expectation of communal

burden and suffering. My grandparent's generation had very little education, worked for rations of poor quality foods and goods, and were removed from their parents during childhood. Their hardship was not 'public' knowledge like it is today. Subjected to restrictions, segregation and a limited mobility only permitted by exemption papers or 'dog-tags', they were usually told where to live and work whenever the local authorities felt necessary. Although retaining cultural and traditional values was very important, it was not the main focus of their concerns; their immediate affairs were how to overcome hardships and to protect and raise their families. The extraordinary task for this generation was not only to remain connected to their Aboriginal identities, but also to ensure their children did not experience the hardships that they had endured.

Doreen Peters, my grandmother, always insisted that the families who lived on Angledool up until the 1930s were closely related to the bloodlines of traditional clans who existed in the area before white settlers arrived. [18] She asserted that Aboriginal people didn't just die off and disappear, that in fact those who survived almost always returned or were sent back home to their traditional lands, to marry locally or to work on the pastoral stations. It was her generation who still spoke their native mother's tongue as children, or could still hunt and gather if 'allowed'. They maintained knowledge of their parent's dreaming stories, songs and dances, while they remained on traditional land, regardless of the new white boundaries and fences. Family and clan relationships were still known as a distant recollection, skin names of who should marry who was still important, even if unrecognised by Christian values or Government laws.

Curious why I had never heard my elders refer to the 'land as their mother', I asked my mother if she ever heard any Uralarai elders use the phrase when she was a child. My mother felt the concept was relatively new and that the first time she had ever heard it was on television at the time the Yirrkala people were fighting Nabalco at Gove Peninsula in the early 1970s and that she was more familiar with the concept of a sky-dwelling god. To her, the land was only as significant as the people who took care of it, but to think of the land as 'mother' was totally foreign to her. She also brought to my attention one time 'traditional' clan names, such as Kamilaroi clan groups called Murri, Ippai, Cubby and Cumbo, pointing out that there were families who had peculiarly similar surnames, spelt Murray, Hippitts, Cubby and Cumbo, which she assumed to be common European names. For her the importance of names and language is that they can identify people to a place and time, even when oral histories and memories have become somewhat distant. Though notions of 'sharing' and 'caring' arose in part from out of the hardships and necessities of 'forced' communal living on pastoral stations and missions, my mother remembers as a child particular family groups on Bangate Station, holding 'a great sense of responsibility for each other'. Although their privacy and independence was highly regarded, [19] it nevertheless remains an enduring feature of Aboriginal families whose 'extended' family responsibilities are evident in the role of modern day grandparents who participate notably in the raising of grandchildren.

The Next Generation

With the efforts of the older people in Walgett, and with what they told us, we felt we could do whatever we wanted to do. We looked at ourselves and thought, well we can do whatever we wanted. So I suppose I looked at myself, and I was well, one of the first people to get a school certificate from high school by reading second-hand books and that, but because of the efforts of my mum I thought, well I'm going to give it my best shot. [20]

When Keith Hall was talking about his mother, Jessie Hall, he was talking about a generation of people who had little opportunity but believed that their children had every right to seek the opportunities that they themselves were denied. The single most significant political event to occur in Walgett were the civil rights protests. On 13 February 1965, 29 students led by Charles Perkins arrived in Walgett bringing national public recognition to 'segregation' in the north west. The protesters in Walgett, and the angry response to them of the white Walgett towns folk attracted national media attention to an invisible and shameful part of NSW's racist history, and to the deplorable conditions to which Aboriginal people were subjected. Walgett, and later Moree, became the measuring stick by which the media would gauge the level of racism in rural NSW. The Freedom Ride had stirred the hearts and minds of the Aboriginal people who lived in Walgett, who took up the challenge by continuing their own struggles for Aboriginal justice in local and national affairs.

In retrospect, the Freedom Ride was simply a part of a larger and longer movement for Aboriginal rights. Perkins and the students had brought a more confrontation style, and the Aboriginal conditions and demands had become much more visible to the wider society. The passing of a Referendum in 1967 gave the Commonwealth government jurisdiction in Aboriginal affairs, and declared Aboriginal people as a part of the population of Australia. [21]

During the late 60s and early 70s the media had flocked to Walgett or Moree whenever public interest in black politics arose. An ABC TV's Four Corners program in 1971, for example, revealed Aboriginal ex-serviceman Reg Saunders' plans to encourage the local Walgett Aborigines to set up their own credit union. The program focussed upon the economic, health, education, religious and housing issues in the town. It showed a very earnest Mayor, Mr. Jack Baker, who with local Aboriginal people sought funds to set up scores of Aboriginal housing commission homes, relocating families from their makeshift homes on the fringes of the town. The next generation of Aborigines took advantage of the media's attention on their issues. Now, with televisions in their homes, Aboriginal people began talking to the cameras and seeing themselves on television. Deemed 'political agitators' by journalists, some of them became television heroes to us, such as Harry Hall, Michael Anderson and many others.

Several Aboriginal youths who had moved to the cities for an education added to their educational experiences by being actively involved with national 'black' political affairs. Just five years after Australians had supported the change in the Constitution, one young man from Walgett, Michael Anderson, with three other Aboriginal protesters, set up the Tent Embassy outside old Parliament House. He among many other young Aboriginal people began appearing on national television alongside other international protest movements, such as the anti-Springbok Tours, Malcolm X, the Black Panther movement, the anti Vietnam war protests and the Women's Liberation movement. The Yirrkala court battle with the Nabalco mining company in Arnhem Land received wide publicity. The Gurindji people at Wave Hill with their ongoing strike against Lord Vestey's 'slave wages' [22] were supported by large numbers of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the eastern states. In the same period, for the first time in Australian history, Aboriginal people came together on a national basis on the single issue of national land rights. Their agenda was also to direct the world's attention to poor housing, education, health and employment. Their protests, it was felt, were particularly successful with the establishment of an Aboriginal Embassy in 1972 and a

national flag. Aboriginal people had begun to develop their own national movement and identity, breaking out of the boundaries of their isolated communities throughout rural and remote Australia. The land rights movement produced its own flag as a sign of a pan-Aboriginality, designed by Harold Thomas, a Koori man from Victoria. Aboriginal activists created a climate in which taking on a national black identity required one to be politically active and aware; if one was not, then perhaps a question hung over one's strength of Aboriginality in some political circles. It was as if it was not enough to be Aboriginal by descent, but one had also to have cultural and political wisdom and be accountable to the masses of Aboriginal people on a national level. This generation gained a political savvy and an education that was denied to their parents' generation.

It didn't take long, once the land rights movement had gained momentum, for Aboriginal people to note that there were different groups with different needs for land rights. Terms like 'Traditional', 'Urban' and 'Rural' began to emerge, although currently under debate, indicative of a new consciousness arising from a national perspective of Aboriginality. A particular feature of the land rights movement was claims on the crown lands where many of the missions and reserves Aboriginal people had lived. It is ironic that while a land rights movement swept the nation, intensive relocation schemes were encouraging large numbers of Aboriginal families to move from crown lands into newly built housing commission homes within town parameters. Some sceptics saw relocation as window dressing, disconnecting Aborigines from missions and reserves, and creating black suburbs within towns. Keith Hall described his family's move into Walgett from another well known Aboriginal fringe 'community' known as Montkeila Bend.

Finally they built another 12 houses in the same street, it was a new street, and of course all the houses were all for Aboriginal people, who were made to live together in the same street. They called the new street Hope Street, it was strange like a bit of a back handed way of saying it was supposed to be new hope for the Kooris, to see if they could handle the new houses. [23]

The area that Keith Hall refers to quickly became known as 'the new camp', because all the Aboriginal people were being confined to one main region of the town. Aboriginal elders organised a steering committee [24] to advise the Walgett Shire Council of their needs and concerns, because they had a general aversion to all being lumped within the one location. There were concerns that the new housing schemes were creating black slums with the poorer quality homes. Some complaints were about the durability of 'weatherboard' walls and that there were not enough bedrooms for the average extended family to allow for privacy. While it is arguable that Aboriginal people may in fact prefer to live amongst their own families and race, the problem is when they are 'expected' by town planners to do so. Even today a typically popular concept which contributes to the mindset of 'communal' living is expecting Aboriginal people to be lumped together. Other concerns were for grasses to be laid for their gardens. People were divided on issues such as rain-water tanks, hot water facilities, outside toilets and verandahs. Aborigines would be blamed for not looking after their homes, and that they were ungrateful for the new homes the local government provided. It had not entered the planners' and architects' minds that perhaps a reason for the 'ungratefulness' and 'carelessness' of the homes could be because Aboriginal people had not been consulted about how they wanted to live and where. Today there are still strong racist notions that Aborigines do not possess a sense of 'caring' for material things and ownership. This continues to be a problem when Aboriginal people wish to buy homes or purchase

goods. A further uneasiness befalls them when they demand land rights, because many non-Aborigines fear more that Aborigines would not know how to use the land productively, rather than fearing that they would use the land for economic gain.

The land rights movement, and subsequent legislation was a very curious thing for many non-Aboriginal people. Some likened land rights to 'apartheid'; others saw land rights as a way of maintaining a spiritual connection to land, relevant only to 'traditional' Aboriginal people, a highly romantic viewpoint, where the land sought by Aboriginal people was not seen to be a part of their own economic and political growth for the future. After hundreds of years of 'white paternalism' it was feared by romantics and racists alike, that blacks were not ready to control their own affairs. Apart from the paternalism, racism and a poor public profile of the land rights movement in the late 1980s, understanding of demands for land rights was severely clouded by romanticism, widespread confusion and fear tactics generated by mining corporations and the media. It was as if no one was prepared to accept a country where its Indigenous people literally lived on the land and 'dreamed' of a culture they had lost. Although it was acceptable to some members of Parliament and a broad white population that a few 'traditional' blacks be allowed to do just that, those blacks identifying as rural or urban blacks were seen to need only welfare programs to pull themselves up and out of the 'Aboriginal problem'. As for urban and rural Aboriginal people, communities have since become the 'poor relative' in the absence of land rights.

Today the Walgett Shire takes up an area of 22,000 square kilometres, with a population of 8,550 people. [25] Although only 1,714 were registered as of Aboriginal descent during the 1996 census, this figure is debatable, since many Aboriginal families do not fill out census forms. The reasons are perhaps the same as those leading to low numbers of Aboriginal people registered on the electoral roll, the general rejection or suspicion of census forms by those Aboriginal people who were not included in the Census until after the 1967 Referendum. Other major reasons could be due to the severe lack of numeracy and literacy skills and feelings of intrusion upon their privacy.

In the town there are several Aboriginal community services. The history of Aboriginal services in Walgett goes back to the mid 1970s when the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal pre-school were set up, and the Barwon Aboriginal Community Centre in the 1980s. Today the most central services are the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal Lands Council. There are also Aboriginal employment services and schemes such as the Community Development Employment Program. Also important are Aboriginal education services and committees on three school campuses in the town (the public primary school has over 90% of Aboriginal pupils), and the two Aboriginal Education Officers based at the Walgett branch of the NSW TAFE department. Walgett also has an Aboriginal Legal Service, several Aboriginal Health Workers and an Aboriginal Nurse at the Walgett District Hospital, Euragai Goondi which is a home for the elderly, operating also as a conference centre and accommodation service, Aboriginal Police Liaison Officers, Aboriginal Meals on Wheels workers, an Aboriginal community worker for the Department Of Community Services, three Aboriginal football teams, an Aboriginal Lawn Bowl team, and Aboriginal Cricket, Golf and Darts teams.

The township itself lies at the junction of the Barwon and Namoi rivers, which are the natural boundaries for the two traditional language groups who share the shire. They are the Kamilaroi and Uralarai groups. On the outskirts of town is one mission and one reserve. The mission is called Gingie, on the Barwon River. The Namoi Reserve along

the Namoi River is no more than three kilometres away from Gingie Mission, and slightly north east of the town, and on the other side of the town's levee bank. Within the levee bank, there are black suburbs, which is a noticeable feature of the township. Apart from a sprinkling of black and white families in homes on the north-eastern side of Fox Street, which is the main street of Walgett, the Aboriginal dominated areas are sometimes casually referred to by some of the local Aboriginal youth as, Vegemite City, top camp, lower camp, the Bronx and the like.

Communities

Definitions of community are as diverse as communities themselves and there is no one definition of community which applies in all cases. Communities cannot be assumed to be homogeneous. To make this assumption is to ignore the diversity of groupings within communities. On the other hand, community can be used as a shorthand way to describe groups of people who indeed share a culture, including common linguistic characteristics, common geography, common culture and a common history. [26]

The term 'community' became popular by the mid 1970s after the Whitlam Government established the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and finally abandoned assimilation as a Commonwealth government policy. The term was used to enable the government to distribute funds for welfare programs and the delivery of services to Aboriginal people. It was seen as the medium which would automatically be culturally appropriate, democratic, and at the same time politically and socially acceptable to the majority of Australians. [27] Since that time Aboriginal people across Australia have become so good at playing the 'community game' that many have begun to believe it. [28] Initially many were sceptical about the Wran government dividing New South Wales into twenty three Aboriginal Land Councils, ignoring traditional boundaries, family relationships and kinship structures. Aboriginal community organisations have become the 'gate-keepers' of the communities they service and somewhat problematic because the prominent and dominant families in the town are likely to have an advantage over other Aboriginal families. They consciously foster the use of this concept for their own advantage and to the disadvantage of less powerful language groups and families. [29] Since Aboriginal people have historically survived over two centuries of oppression and division, it is unrealistic to expect long existing inequities and cultural and political divisions amongst Aboriginal people to disappear just because they now have government funded organisations which determine their avenues of self-determination. It is particularly unrealistic to expect all loyalties to kin and tribe to disappear when the structure of 'community boards' is based on western notions of representativeness. [30] The use of the term community without Aboriginal consultation, self-analysis and definition has in fact acted as a barrier to their own self-determination, setting communities up for administrative failure, thus denying Aboriginal people the opportunity to work through the development process, with specialised professional support, and in their own time. [31]

The relationships between community workers and those who use the services raise questions concerning equity and privacy, both of which challenge those who idealise 'community as unity' and notions of 'sharing and caring' within Aboriginal communities. Now not only are Aboriginal people unequal to the economic status of

whites, they are further divided amongst themselves, with families against families or even family members against each other. This is a concern not specific and characteristic to the north west alone. It appears that the provision of government funding to community services under the label of 'self-determination' is creating further welfare dependency in Aboriginal communities and widening the socio-economic gap between the people who fund the services, those who work in them, and those who depend upon the services. Many Aboriginal community workers feel that they are being torn between their positions as community workers and the people they service. When servicing their own community (and sometimes even family members), they are being placed in a position where they are actively participating in holding authority over their own families and friends, while relying upon the 'enemy' [32] (government) to fund local self-determination programs.

A solution to the problem is far-reaching and complex. To automatically reject government funds and programs is indeed reckless. It is also naive and neglectful to overlook the many tireless efforts of many Aboriginal community workers who are dedicated to Aboriginal self-determination. Nevertheless patterns must be broken if there is going to be progress towards an Aboriginal state of socio-economic and cultural 'independence' which can only work if it is rooted from a community grass-roots level. I believe that the Aboriginal people of Walgett and the surrounding towns in the north west can become critical thinkers and leaders towards this vision, because Walgett has first a long history of political activism, second the high proportion of Aboriginal people in the area, and, third the high number of professionally skilled Walgett Aboriginal people who currently live and work outside of Walgett.

Leaders and the Community

So called leaders in our communities are just there to answer the questions that the government doesn't want to answer. And those leaders, can't win, they can't please blackfellas, they can't please the government. You're enemies with everyone, glory without power. If you had any brains you wouldn't get into the jobs, as window dressers. All the money is taken up by just running the organisations like cars, photocopiers etc. it's just about running the organisations, so they look like their doing a lot of work but they are spending most of the money on just running the organisation and not the services. So it looks like we are busy doing things, but all we are busy doing is running the organisation. Like I say, the glory without the power. [33]

Aboriginal elder Harry Hall, is not alone in his criticism of leadership. In their research for a leadership development program in Indigenous communities, Margaret Cranney and Dale Edwards from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, found Aboriginal people on a national basis were frustrated with the ways in which Aboriginal people voluntarily/involuntarily emerged as leaders. These ways include (1) one who is already a 'cultural leader' is groomed or nominated by that community as a leader, (2) one is thrust into the role by peer pressure and expectations, (3) one is seen to be an expert on a subject or issue, (4) one is elected to positions within community organisations or as representatives in their local governments (5) one is perceived as a 'role model' and has gained the respect and qualities of honesty and integrity in accordance with community wishes, (6) one is publicly in the forefront of media promotion, (7) governments appointed a person formally or informally as an

adviser, and finally (8) individuals assert themselves and express the opinions in the interest of self-promotion. [34] There were two conflicting thoughts on the issue of Aboriginal leadership, first, that Aboriginal people's notions of leadership clashes with white concepts of leadership, and second that conflict would always arise when Aboriginal people are expected to conform to the latter. Examples of this can be seen in communities like Walgett, where there are 'experts' in their fields who cannot always act in accordance with 'natural leaders' or elders, and vice versa. So they are faced with the impossible task of trying to account for everyone's interests. Therefore complex relationships have to be constantly dealt with, before a question of balance and democracy within that community can be acquired. This is to deal with issues of bloodline, age groups, gender roles and representatives of larger family groups, as well as evaluating the disproportioned economic differences amongst them. So who becomes a leader is a highly vexing question and a laborious task.

The large numbers of Aboriginal people who had left Walgett permanently are referred to by some of the locals as 'out of towners'. Many of them still have relatives and elders living back home, but encouraged by families to leave the mission and the restrictions of small town life, they moved to towns like Bathurst, Orange, Wagga Wagga, Dubbo, Armidale, Newcastle and the Central Coast. Others moved to Sydney and Canberra. Their motives included pursuing employment, furthering their education or raising their own young families. Although having left the area for several decades, when asked 'where is home?', they still identify their original town, Walgett, Lightning Ridge, and so on as home. Equipped with the education and employment skills that many had intended to return with, it is thought by some that they need to re-acclimate themselves before contending with local affairs; however this is not necessarily the feeling that relatives may have when a member of their own family returns. It is also a limited mindset which rejects the skills of the 'out of towners', especially since an extraordinary number of Walgett 'out of towners' have great achievements and much to offer their 'home' community, for example Danny Rose, the former director of Aboriginal Health, who currently runs his own consultancy organisation; Doreen Peters who is the Regional Manager of the NSW Aboriginal Police Liaison Department; Keith Hall, former teacher and NSW Department of Education Senior Officer; Barry Thorne, Senior Policy Officer for NSW Department of Health; Ricky Walford, International Rugby League footballer and teacher; David Nicholls, Aboriginal Police Liaison Officer in Kings Cross; Beryl Van Opoloo, restaurateur and gourmet cook of Aboriginal cuisine; Bob Morgan, Director of the Aboriginal Education Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney; Don Jenner, final year Law Student at the University of New South Wales; and the many more Aboriginal people who went to school in Walgett.

Identity and the Community

Government bodies have popularised the three criteria for the identification of Aboriginality, which generally are that one must be of Aboriginal descent, identify with the Aboriginal community, and be recognised by the Aboriginal community. While some may believe that the definition of the government's three criteria for Aboriginal identification must be restricted to criteria one alone, this notion is problematic, however, particularly for those Aboriginal people objecting to the large numbers of people who seemingly lay claim to Aboriginality as a means of gaining status or benefits. Since they lack the experience of being Aboriginal, it is understandable why so many Aboriginal people would object to this. Proof of ancestry is also problematic, as is

identifying with a community, particularly when that community no longer exists, or is an introduced white boundary such as Redfern, Eveleigh St or 'Vegemite City'. For not only is it difficult to do, it also opens several opportunities for 'whites' to make claims to things which are essentially Aboriginal by necessity or nature, such as native title, government funding and service programs, or becoming representatives of Aboriginal issues. Perhaps a solution would be for Aboriginal people to define their own terms of identity and culture as distinct from non-Aboriginal Australians followed by a declaration of Aboriginality, discussed and defined at the community level, as opposed to the present criteria which is the result of government bureaucrats in consultation with a handful of Aboriginal 'leaders'. Having a sense of one's own Aboriginality depends very much upon the community with which they identify. It is interesting to note popularised notions of 'Aboriginal communities' which generally assume that they are: (1) caring, and generous in all things, (2) that poverty and hardship is inevitable or even acceptable, (3) that there is no need for materialistic values, (4) that independence and individuality is frowned upon if it isn't in the interest of the masses, (5) that outside help or control is automatically rejected and solutions can only be found within the confines of that community, and, (6) that everyone's socio-economic, cultural opinions, experiences and expectations are shared. Other more general notions of community are: (1) that they fall between four groupings i.e. grass roots, locals or local organisations and services, bureaucratic and the national Aboriginal population, (2) that a concept of 'community' or 'mainstream' exists and the movement of Aboriginal people is fluid between the two, and, (3) that every Aboriginal person belongs to the Aboriginal community, but where they live, what occupation they have and what their political views are is dependant upon whether they are in the industry of assisting other Aboriginal people. Today very few Aboriginal people will admit that a part of what they do is without the intention of benefiting the 'Aboriginal Community'.

Self-Determination and the Community

This romantic view of 'community' is what some have described as the type of romanticism that one can afford to have when they don't have to live in the community. Less romantic views of 'community' had arisen out of the 1980s when the term 'mission mentality' was used by Aboriginal activists to describe the 'dependency' upon the government 'handout' system that Aboriginal people have become conditioned to. 'Mission mentality' was also used to describe a type of 'culture' which emerged from the lifestyles and values arising from out of the Aboriginal Protection Board and Aboriginal Welfare Board era on missions, reserves and pastoral stations. It usually meant that people were fearful and/or powerless to challenge white authorities, or act independently of their Aboriginal neighbours for fear of retribution from their neighbours and the authorities. It is indeed most interesting to note more about what and why Aboriginal people explored notions of 'mission mentalities', therefore this paper invites readers to take up the concept of 'mission mentality' for further discussion. It is crucial to understanding the root meanings and implications of the term if we are to fully comprehend current trends in 'community' thinking. The same self-analysis and courage must be applied when and if we are to understand current hierarchical structures and notions of representativeness amongst the Aboriginal population.

If the most effective way to control self-determination programs is for governments to fund and develop them, then surely the first step towards a meaningful economic and cultural freedom would be to move away from government dependency. Acknowledging

what role Aboriginal organisations play in maintaining the welfare status of Aboriginal people, as ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘representatives’ the organisations have since become part of the cycle of Aboriginal dependency on government funding. One possible step towards breaking the cycle would be for the existing services and organisations to use the networks they have access to, seeking long term aims and strategies from the people they serve. Rather than depending upon the Federal or State powers that design and implement funding and programs with the national interest in mind, a meaningful and appropriate solution can be found at a local level. This is particularly important since most funding programs go to the more ‘traditional’ Aboriginal communities or to the urban centres. With more than 50% of Aboriginal people dependant upon welfare, [35] and after 28 years of self-determination programs and increased spending upon welfare programs, it is time for governments and Aboriginal leaders to admit the failure of current self-determination policies. It is glaringly obvious to those at the local level that the alarming increase of factional fighting, the economic inequalities and the perpetuity of a welfare state are in fact narrowing opportunities for achieving the original aims for self-determination.

Native Title and the Community

For my immediate family nothing has ever been so divisive as the overlapping native title claims currently under review in the Walgett Shire. Such was the case when my Grandmother, who was 83 years old and came from Angledool, gave me permission to go out to Angledool and take photos. Members of my immediate family back in Sydney were being told that I had no right if I didn’t speak to ‘this leader or that leader’. In fact it was vehemently felt by my family that I had precedence as my permission came from one who was more elderly and held more traditional status than those who were more ‘politically’ appraised by local organisations. The question is therefore, have community organisations or individuals who hold communal political status at the local level a right to deny access to land to those direct descendants of the land because they are not locally and politically conjunct? Underpinning the problem are the overlapping claims coming from several of the long established families within and around the town. In August 1996 a meeting brought together a variety of Aboriginal parties to lodge an application for native title for the Uralarai people in north west New South Wales. After twenty three months of unsuccessful negotiations between several of the Aboriginal parties, another hearing was held between the 20th and the 23rd of July 1998, between First Party claimant Mr. Michael Anderson, representative of the Euahly-i Dixon Clan and all other interested parties. It was made clear to the Aboriginal parties, who accounted for several Aboriginal extended family members aligned with the claim, that there would be overlapping claims to the same territory. This required all parties to get together to agree upon common boundaries. Each representative of a family or clan would agree with the other representatives on what territory belonged to each. Leading up to the Tribunal hearing, party statements were circulated amongst the thirteen parties. [36] Since the first party claimed the vast majority of Uralarai territory, leaving the other twelve parties to divide minor sections of their traditional lands amongst themselves, it has proven to be a very sensitive and distressing time for all Aboriginal families involved.

Claimants are required to produce written and oral evidence proving their continuity to traditional culture and connection to land, and to provide historical evidence directly linking them to the ancestors who occupied territory at the time of the British

declaration of sovereignty in 1788. Yet white property owners who have held land titles for less than 20 years would hold more written evidence of ownership than any number of Aboriginal people who claim traditional ownership. This negation of their 'rights' reinforces dissension and a powerlessness. Elders say this is reminiscent of the experience of growing up 'under the Protection Act'. To provide written evidence in a manner often designed by the whites who oppressed and may still misrepresent them is a ludicrous notion to many. It is debatable whether written records by white people are less immune or subjective than the Aboriginal people who rely upon oral histories. Limited by a lack of cultural knowledge and their own social and economic interests, written documents are either produced or held by whites. With an increasing pressure to provide written evidence, Aboriginal families from the north west are left scrambling to decipher the intention of white anthropologists and historians to prove their connection to their lands, thus leaving a debris of poor and broken relationships amongst many Aboriginal families in and around Walgett. These broken relationships are likely to take many generations of healing, a process to continue long after native title claims have been won or lost in the Federal Court.

Reconciliation and the Community

Not enough people have been engaged in the debate of Reconciliation. The majority of Aborigines fail to see the overall relevance of it. This is sad since I would like to encourage Aboriginal people to participate in light of the up and coming referendum for an Australian Republic and changes to the Australian Constitution in November this year. [37]

When I interviewed Labour Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner in 1992 about Reconciliation, I was yet to film the first meeting at Parliament House with Prime Minister Paul Keating. Aboriginal people were protesting on the lawns outside Parliament House supported by Aboriginal leaders such as Charles Perkins, Paul Coe, Kevin Gilbert and many others. The general feeling at the time was that there was nothing to reconcile. In my interview with Pat Dodson, the Chair of the Reconciliation Council at the time, he was skeptical but nonetheless hopeful that Reconciliation would achieve practical outcomes for Aboriginal people and the wider Australian community. Its initial aims in brief were to bring about widespread public awareness of Aboriginal concerns and issues, compensation (which has seemed to have lost focus lately) and to produce a document to be completed at the end of the ten year period of Reconciliation. Those who I interviewed at the time, it seemed, held hopes for some form of treaty to be drafted. Yet nine years later we are currently seeing a draft declaration which is being circulated amongst 'community' Aboriginal people for comment. It seems that the draft declaration was only being circulated amongst some Aboriginal communities, and the draft declaration was yet to reach Walgett residents by the time this paper was written. It seems that the concept of Reconciliation was just something to help white Australians feel a bit more informed and less unproductive. As far as actually making a difference in their own lives, Reconciliation was by and large described as somewhat non-effective in their daily lives and needs. Although urged by Democrat Senator Aden Ridgeway as the 'small chink in the armour of white ignorance', he as well as members of the Reconciliation Council continue to encourage Aboriginal participation in the process which may be considered as beneficial to possible future changes to the Australian Constitution.

The question remains, as raised by a few Walgett Aboriginal residents, ‘What is there to reconcile, and why should the onus be on us to reconcile, when it was them who did the damage?’ [38] It is as if they are now being asked to participate in the development of a document of reconciliation as a part of a process that they were told by the government to participate in, and one that they did not ask for in the first place.

A number of the people I interviewed commented on how ironic it was that Aboriginal people should be asked to focus upon Reconciliation with the non-Indigenous people in Australia. It was more important to them to deal with their own internal divisions and the factions, brought about after years of ‘white manipulation’ of black people’s desires of living in equality and harmony with each other and the land. Yet even this comment exposes a degree of romantic idealism stemming from what can be critically akin to overtones of homogenetic conceptualism. At the same time Aboriginal people are first to resist all notions of ‘sameness’ when asked to make a national Aboriginal agreement of the Declaration of Reconciliation. No doubt expecting Aboriginal people to share a homogenous viewpoint on any issue which derives from white government policies and legislation is overly ambitious or simply naïve, considering that for over 50,000 years Aboriginal culture did not aspire to pan-Aboriginality or national solutions to their community’s problems. Even at their best Aboriginal people are particularly wary of anyone who speaks on their behalf, or more particularly on their ‘communities’ behalf, especially when they don’t come from that community. Aboriginal people almost always dismiss having others speak on their behalf just as much as perhaps white people resist and reject being represented by their Prime Minister or local member. Yet there is almost an expectation that if Aboriginal people are not seen to be in agreement with their ‘leaders’ then they are in conflict and disorganised and thus ineffectual.

Australia has a long history of white governments and authorities dividing Aboriginal people against themselves and each other. In the *Bringing them home report* about the stolen generations, a common experience for the children was to reject other Aborigines and Aboriginality. They were taught to vehemently reject their parents, their homes, their communities, history and language. With almost three out of every ten Aboriginal people institutionalised between 1910 and 1970, there is no doubt for many of the stolen children or even for those Aboriginal people who grieve the loss of land, culture and justice, just who should be doing the reconciling with who and what. This perhaps may seem to many, to be the main focus of their concerns, as opposed to more white awareness programs or drafting a declaration for something that they didn’t even ask for.

Conclusion

This paper was written to raise discussion about what is an Aboriginal community and how does one define who lives or works in them. The intention was to raise the point that it is essential that Aboriginal people at the local level must play a part in the process of self-definition of their communities. It is crucial that Aboriginal people themselves identify and define their community—what are its distinctive features and history—and acknowledge the input they have had in the shaping of their community and identity.

I ask also that people be fearless in their attempts to raise questions about the impact that white governments and their policies have played in the development of popularised notions of ‘community’. I would ask them to examine the cycle and ‘rules’ of the ‘community game’ and how it can become a win/win outcome for all Aboriginal people in the community they live in. This paper also asks readers to investigate why there are

so many Aboriginal ‘suburbs’ in small rural towns and cities. Why has it become acceptable that ‘black suburbs’ across Australia continue to flourish as poverty stricken areas, to be romantically viewed as a part of contemporary Aboriginal culture?

By writing briefly about my own family history, our own native title claim and relationship to our home town, I’ve attempted to see how particular concepts of contemporary Aboriginal ‘culture’ and identity have developed in my own experience and in the region as a whole. By addressing current criticisms of definitions of ‘eldership’ and ‘leadership’ I have tried to encourage discussion and to prompt further debate in the community as to how they see elders and what they think are leadership qualities.

I hope this paper will bring forth discussions on the importance of self-definition, as opposed to having bureaucracies determine who and what is a community or an Aboriginal person and what their structures of representation and socio-economic needs will be. In my endeavour to critique the roles of Aboriginal community organisations I hoped to look for solutions to break what seems to be an increasing cycle of welfare dependency. More importantly I wanted to highlight the impossible tasks required of community organisations and their workers who are left as the proverbial ‘meat in the sandwich’. Nevertheless, I have offered a suggestion as to how the resourcefulness of local Aboriginal community organisations, who are in the unique position of holding extensive networks, can promote the process of community ‘self-definition’. I have tried to give acknowledgement to the outstanding achievement of Aboriginal people from Walgett who, against all odds, became success stories and major contributors to national Australian Aboriginal affairs, and hope to encourage them to take their skills back to their community. By briefly addressing broader issues such as self-determination, native title and reconciliation, I have tried to make relevant how broader national issues relate to my community, and the complexities arising from national Aboriginal political agendas and how they surface in rural communities.

With the history of Aboriginal political affairs over the past three decades, like any other Aboriginal community, the Aboriginal people of Walgett certainly have been involved with many innovative and national programs. It is with that sense that I am assured that Walgett is a community that would have the ability to tackle their internal issues illustriously and sensitively, bringing light to the myths of the community game.

Notes

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community, not white man's laws and fences.

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