Understanding ‘Work’ in Ngukurr:
A Remote Australian Aboriginal Community

Eva McRae-Williams (BA, BBH, MA)
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Statement of Authorship

Except where referenced in the text of the research project, this dissertation contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or part from a thesis or report by me for another degree or diploma.

No other person’s work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the dissertation.

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Eva McRae-Williams

Date: ..................
Abstract

This thesis is an ethnographic study of the ‘work’ ideologies inherent in a remote Australian Aboriginal community; Ngukurr in South East Arnhem Land of the Northern Territory. Formerly known as the Roper River Mission and established in 1908, it is today home to approximately 1000 Aboriginal inhabitants. Fieldwork for this project was conducted in three phases between 2006 and 2007 totalling seven months.

The aim of this research was to gain an insight into the meaning and value of ‘work’ for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. First, this involved acknowledging the centrality of paid employment to mainstream western ‘work’ ideology and its influence on my own, and other non-Aboriginal peoples, understandings and ways of being in the world. Through this recognition the historical and contemporary relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the northern part of Australia, specifically the Roper River region, was found to be fundamentally shaped by labour relations and dominant western ‘work’ ideology.

The influence of this ‘work’ ideology on Aboriginal people, expressed through the policies and practices of both Governments and Missions, is explored through an analysis of Aboriginal memories of ‘work’. Ambiguity in the meaning and value of ‘work’ is emphasised and elements of Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology, as distinct from dominant western work ideology, are explored. The influence of contemporary employment arrangements on Aboriginal understandings of ‘work’ is investigated and the sometimes problematic relationship between Aboriginal cultural beliefs and practices and those espoused by dominant western work ideology illustrated.

In conclusion this research found that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have a ‘work’ ideology that is distinct from its western counterpart. Shaped by unique historical, social and cultural phenomena it is not confined to the sphere of paid or formal employment. The multidimensional nature of contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr suggests that overcoming high levels of unemployment in remote communities may not simply be about providing more ‘jobs’, training or education.
Acknowledgements

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Preface

The purpose of this preface is to introduce my own position as a researcher. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that my age, gender, ethnicity, upbringing and life experiences will have affected most aspects of this inquiry. Extending from my choice of research topic, to how I undertook the research, and to my interpretation of data.

I was born in December 1980 in Horsham, the heart of the Wimmera farming district in Victoria Australia. I have a strong farming heritage, including a homestead (Glenwillan) filled to the brim with historical archives. One archive I came across recently, encouraged me to acknowledge on a very personal level, the way in which most Australians including myself, have a history of ignorance and brutality when it comes to our relationships with Indigenous people. My great great uncle, a much respected family member whose portrait adorns the walls of Glenwillian, wrote to his family in 1865 from the top end of Australia:

When we were out 20 of them [Aborigines] tried to sneak up on our camp at night. They got within 20 yards before they were discovered, we fired 3 shots at them and they retreated. In the morning we followed them and gave them what they deserved.

I have included this quote, not to expose the wrong doings of my uncle, but rather as a way of acknowledging that, as a researcher I am embedded in a larger framework of Australian history and culture. I am a child of western colonisation and culture and have no familial (blood) ties to the Indigenous Australian population. My parents are both Anglo-Australian and would be classified as middle-class. Both are university educated and hold higher degrees. I have one younger sister and for the most part we grew up on a small organic farm near Ballarat in Victoria.
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of work is complex; its purpose, structure and value has changed over time and its meaning can be interpreted from many historical, social and cultural perspectives. This thesis compares the work ideologies inherent in western culture and those which have developed within an Australian Aboriginal community, Ngukurr, in South East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. It describes the issues and differences within and between these ideologies and how they have influenced Aboriginal perspectives and experiences of employment within this specific community.

This thesis rests on the principle, postulated by Laguerre (1980: 528), that an “anthropology of work must be above all an anthropology of ideologies” (Laguerre 1980: 528). As Nord et al. (1990: 58) have pointed out work, values must be treated as socially constructed notions and that an “inquiry into the origins, functions, non-functions, and dysfunctions of particular work values in individual cultures is needed”. They have argued that such analysis is important in the context of continual global economic growth and that it has the potential to facilitate a better understanding of ourselves and our culture. The purpose of this thesis is to accommodate this need and explore such potential through an investigation of the possible divergent genesis, meanings and values of ‘work’ and ‘employment’ within the context of the remote Aboriginal community of Ngukurr.

The notion of employment is at the centre of dominant academic and public discourse around ‘work’ in remote Aboriginal communities. It is the perceived ‘problems’ associated with a lack of employment opportunities, plus a high rate of unemployment that is constructed as needing resolution. The assumptions behind this perspective stem from a particular understanding of ‘work’ its structures, values, and meanings. In modern capitalist societies ‘work’ has to a large extent
become inseparable from economic discussions and is most often associated with paid labour and market participation. This kind of work is not only given meaning through its economic potentiality, but also by an entrenched ideology that maintains that it is important to social identity creation and individual well-being. In contemporary western societies ‘work’, or more precisely ‘employment’, has become a way of defining ourselves and others.

Thornton (1980) suggests that built into the practice, institutions and social philosophy of industrialised societies is an entrenched sense of the necessary connection between a certain typology of work on the one hand, and being a politically responsible citizen on the other. She argues that it is not surprising that groups of people with basically different work practices and a different consciousness of work should find themselves politically marginalised. It is thus not unexpected that bringing these groups into fuller political participation and increasing their role in social decision-making should be widely considered as a process by which their members enter into the order of work, as legitimized by the reigning ideology. They must contribute through labour and consumerism to the dominant economic system. Aboriginal people today are employed in many industries and in varied positions (ABS 2006a). There is also a continuing growth in positive employment outcomes and opportunities for Aboriginal people throughout Australia (see HRSCATIA 2007). Yet, Aboriginal unemployment rates have continued to be much higher than those of non-Aboriginal Australians (Fox 1985; Altman and Gaminiratne 1993; Hunter 2000, 2005). In the 1970s, to combat the high unemployment rates of Aboriginal people, particularly those living in remote areas, the government introduced the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). This remains the primary source of “employment” for Aborigines in remote Australia.

Currently in Australia, unemployment levels are relatively low at 4.3 percent (ABS 2008a). However, within the Aboriginal community, unemployment levels remain comparatively high at 14 percent Australia wide. In remote areas only 46 percent
of Aboriginal adults are classified as employed (ABS 2008b). Aboriginal unemployment rates feed into the problematic construction of ‘work’ in remote settings. Aboriginal people, particularly those residing in remote communities, are often seen as not contributing to the economy. They are “routinely criticised for their use, or perhaps more correctly misuse, of ‘taxpayers’ dollars’, and for the special benefits they receive” (Crough 1993: 2). Members of modern capitalist societies not actively engaged in paid employment are commonly stigmatised by mainstream ideology and institutions as undeserving and a burden upon society (Anthony 1977; Probert 1989; Sennett 1998; Beder 2000).

Parallel to this perspective is one that sees Aboriginal people through an altruistic lens of charity and in need of help. An ideology where work, and hence employment, are highly valued and indicative of self fulfilment and purpose constructs those who are unemployed or unemployable as lacking the potential to succeed. Engagement with the market economy through paid employment is commonly argued to be critically important if Aboriginal people are to find a way out of the social and economic problems facing them (Trigger 2005). In June 2007 the Federal Intervention into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, highlighted this perspective through its proposed initiative to create “real” employment for Aboriginal people. The former Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, stated in early August 2007:

With no work and no hope of getting a job, many Aboriginal people in these communities rely on passive welfare. In an environment where there is no natural social order of production and distribution, grog, pornography and gambling often fill the void.

What do viable economies and jobs have to do with preventing child abuse? Unemployment and welfare dependency may not cause abuse, but a viable economy and real job prospects make education meaningful and point to a life beyond abuse and despair (Brough 2007).
Study Focus and Research Question

The contemporary debate around the “problem” of Aboriginal unemployment is embedded in a wider discourse around equality. Equality is usually measured using comparable quantitative data on, for example, health, education and employment. Statistical equality is the keystone of Aboriginal policy; meaning that the aim of policy is to have Aboriginal employment levels, health and education outcomes comparable to those of mainstream Australia (Coombs 1972; Folds 2001). This goal has remained at the core of Aboriginal affairs policy and it is a goal that is now deeply embedded in Australian public policy approaches (Altman, Biddle, Hunter 2004: 19). Subsequently, there is a strong focus on the need for Aboriginal people to engage more effectively in the western market economy. The aim is to overcome cultural barriers, which are believed to inhibit Aborigines’ ability to attach the same meaning and value to employment or ‘work’ as espoused by dominant Western institutions and cultural discourse.

The prominence of employment in measures of equality attests to the fact that mainstream ‘work’ is assumed to be a central component of engaging in the world and a critical factor affecting life quality. There have consequently been many studies on employment levels within Aboriginal communities. These studies all place emphasis on the importance of improving employment levels by recognising and overcoming barriers, and providing more training and job creation projects (see Altman and Gaminiratne 1993, Hunter 2000). The ideological assumptions of the importance of employment have influenced most public sector programs. These programs generally assume that the main aim of Aboriginal people in remote communities is to move from unemployment to employment through searching for work and engaging in education and training (Young 1985; Fuller, Howard, Buultjens 2005).
This assumption is rarely questioned by governments committed to creating policies and programmes directed at increasing Aboriginal employment levels. This mindset precludes alternative ideologies of work and can misconstrue the success or failure of programs and levels of useful or meaningful work. Young (1985: 23) argues that governments ‘continue to ignore Aboriginal aspirations for and perceptions of employment...Aboriginal ideas about the purpose of employment, both now and in the future, have not been adequately taken into account’ (Young 1985: 23).

This thesis stems from a need to better understand the perceived “problem” of Aboriginal employment, or more precisely, unemployment in remote communities. It will question common assumptions associated with the purpose, meaning and value of work through analysing the historical, cultural and social components that have influenced the development and construction of work ideology in the study setting. I argue that the collection of employment statistics and their usefulness in measuring life quality in remote Aboriginal communities may be limited. Statistical data is based firmly within a western ideological framework that attaches particular significance to certain forms, structures and meanings of work and excludes other understandings or perceptions of work. This thesis attempts to query the western assumptions underlying work through analysing Aboriginal experiences and perceptions of work in a specific remote community. This thesis poses the following question: What is the meaning of work in a remote Aboriginal community and how is it valued? Answering this question will contribute to an improved identification and understanding of alternate ‘work’ ideologies.

In order to answer the posed research question the following objectives have been developed.

1. To explore the ideology behind western work and the development of a “work ethic” and to examine how this influences both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people’s perception of work
2. To explore the relationship between western work ideologies and structures and Aboriginal culture and practice

3. To investigate employment options and in particular the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP)

4. To document Aboriginal experiences of work, and to describe Aboriginal perceptions of work

5. To gain an understanding of the meaning of work and the choices that Aboriginal people make in relation to work.

Study Site: Ngukurr

![Figure 1: Location of Ngukurr in Northern Territory](source: SEALCP)
Ngukurr is in South East Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. It is 310km from Katherine, the closest regional centre and is accessed via the Stuart and Roper Highways. It is both remote and in the wet season usually inaccessible by road. The community is not serviced by public transport and car ownership is limited, adding to its isolation. The census data for 2006 recorded a population of 915 residents (ABS 2006b). Taylor, Bern and Senior (2000) however, claim that census data may underestimate the population due to the mobility of residents in remote Aboriginal communities and the difficulties in administering census collection forms in these communities. Using multiple data sources, they estimated a population of 1200 people in 2000. They also conclude that Ngukurr has a high population growth rate. Therefore it could be argued that the 2006 census also has underestimated the population. The 2006 census data reveals a youthful population, with more than half (58.3%), of residents under the age of 25 and 38.6 percent under the age of fourteen (ABS 2006c). This population structure is in sharp contrast to the aging population demographics of mainstream Australia (ABS 2006d) and is more typical of a developing nation.

Ethnography

This study has been conducted within the field of anthropology and so is ethnographic in format, with the primary method of data collection being participant observation. Spradley (1980: 54) explains that participant observation has two purposes: ‘(1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation’. As Spradley (1980: 57) points out:

the ordinary participant in a social situation usually experiences it in an immediate, subjective manner...the participant observer, on the other hand, will experience being both insider and outsider simultaneously… Doing ethnographic fieldwork involves alternating between the insider and outsider experience, and having both simultaneously.
The participant observer, as Holy (1984:29-30) contends, does not participate... “in the lives of subjects in order to observe them, but rather observes while participating fully in their lives...research means, in this sense, socialization to the culture being studied”.

I conducted fieldwork in Ngukurr between early 2006 and late 2007. This involved a number of shorter visits and three extended periods of fieldwork. I recognised from the outset of my research that communities rarely represent a unified opinion or view. Instead they are composed of disparate and sometimes opposing interests. People within a community may have a range of views concerning work its value and place in their community. The level of interest in work constructs, understandings and meanings may also range from complete indifference to significant interest. It was therefore necessary to talk to a wide range of people, both those employed and unemployed, those who were young or old and females and males. By forming relationships within the community and developing and extending these over time, I was able to obtain an understanding of the range and complexity of views concerning work and its values.

My research was an evolving process, which started from the beginning of my field research. I kept detailed field notes, which I summarised daily, paying particular attention to key themes, recurring patterns and future lines of enquiry. My field notes also recorded my own feelings and understandings of particular events and situations, allowing me to monitor my assumptions and how they changed over time. As Steier (1995: 3) states “if we begin to examine how we as researchers are reflexively part of those systems we study we can also develop an awareness of how reflexivity becomes a useful way for us to understand what others are doing”. From this process of continual review, I was able to develop both questions and a questioning style to guide my fieldwork investigations.

Undertaking anthropological research in remote Aboriginal communities involves developing intimacy with individuals and exposing oneself to the nuances of
community life. It is about developing close relationships with research participants that extend beyond the sphere of research. I was privileged enough to be invited to participate in the kinship system, moving from being a stranger or “munanga” (meaning a white person) to someone with a place in the cultural framework of the community. I was given the skin or subsection name Naritjan and consequently had particular and specific kin relations with those around me. I was adopted into a family and gained many relatives including mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles, brothers, sisters and various kinds of cousins. The establishment of these kinship connections have meant that I have commitments to these people outside of those deriving from my research.

Engaging in fieldwork becomes much more than collecting data. The experience is profound and causes one to question many of the norms within one’s own society and also within oneself. Trying to understand and describe a culture and its social existence in all the richness and complexity it exhibits is at times overwhelming. I often experienced feelings of uneasiness in the writing process because the ideological tools I must use are often discourses, structures, words and phrases from outside of, but dominant over, those I am describing. My feelings around engaging with remote Aboriginal people within a research framework are effectively captured by Cowlishaw (1999: 27),

As I write today, I see this disquiet as based on the fact that I was forced to participate in the drama of race relations, an unnamed struggle where shifting meanings and painful misunderstandings are rife and where moral and political truths are elusive.

Thesis Outline

The research has been strongly influenced by my own personal journey and the structure of this thesis is a reflection of this. The first chapter introduces the study setting. It begins with my first impressions of the Ngukurr settlement and then provides a summarized history of its establishment and the evolving governance structures and polices that have shaped its present context. The township’s
infrastructure is then described, as is the daily patterns of life of its residents. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a ‘sense of place’ in which to position the following chapters’ descriptions, findings and analyses around the concept and phenomenon of ‘work’ and its surrounding ideologies.

Chapter two describes my research methodology and provides an insight into the nature of my engagement with the Ngukurr community. The third chapter begins with a discussion of my own experience of ‘working’ in Ngukurr and draws together my findings around the experience, behaviours, attitudes and beliefs of other non-Aboriginal people employed in the community. This discussion emphasises that, within the context of Ngukurr, the commonalities and assumptions within the ‘work’ ideologies and behaviours of this population were essentially challenged. The chapter then questions the cultural and social framework in which my own and other non-Aboriginal peoples ‘work’ ideology has arisen and reviews literature on the development, meanings and values of ‘work’, or more precisely ‘employment’, in western capitalist societies.

Chapter four investigates the nature of Aboriginal engagement with western ‘work’ ideology and employment structures in the Northern part of Australia, with a particular focus on the research setting. It reviews literature that documents and analyses these labour relations and draws together my own fieldwork findings around Aboriginal memories of their past encounters with western ‘work’. The purpose of this chapter is to draw attention to the nature of these past relationships and analyse their potential impact on contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies in Ngukurr.

In chapter five, the contemporary employment situation in Ngukurr is discussed and its affect on ‘work’ ideologies explored. The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) is the dominant form of paid employment in the community and as such is the focus of this chapter. Literature that discusses the development and evolution of CDEP is touched on and its introduction and
continuing yet tenuous existence in Ngukurr described. The chapter discusses my research findings regarding Aboriginal understandings of the purpose and meaning of CDEP and investigates Aboriginal attitudes deriving from their experiences of participating in this program.

The next chapter (chapter six) first takes a step back from the dominant western ‘work’ ideology of paid employment and highlights that, within the living memory of some Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, is a consciousness predominantly shaped by a hunter-gather lifestyle. Literature that discusses the notion of ‘work’ in hunter-gatherer societies is reviewed and its implications for understanding contemporary Aboriginal work ideology touched on. I then expand on my research findings concerned with the contemporary social and cultural world of Ngukurr. With reference to relevant literature I describe the reality of Aboriginal social and cultural engagement and the associated systems of kinship. It is argued in this chapter that in Ngukurr the ‘work’ involved in ‘engaging in the world’ primarily shapes the ‘work’ ideologies of Aboriginal people and significantly influences their engagement with and understandings of western employment.

Chapter seven, drawing heavily from my own personal experience, further explores the lifestyle of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. Through literature it investigates the notion of a culture of poverty. It explores the way in which children; violence; malnourishment; overcrowding; and gambling shape Aboriginal understandings of ‘work’ in Ngukurr. It also investigates how these factors influence that meanings and values of western employment. The following chapter (chapter eight) draws together all previous findings and discusses their impact and or influence on the ‘work’ ideologies of younger ‘working age’ individuals in Ngukurr. It introduces the notion of a ‘social career’ and argues that this ‘career’ is both separate and yet linked to dominant western work structures and ideology. It suggests that the ‘social career’ for many has become the preferred ‘work’ choice.
The concluding chapter summaries my research findings, highlighting the conclusions I have drawn from each of these themed analyses. It discusses and provides the discourse that will realise the objectives outlined in the research and addresses the research question posed. This chapter then draws upon my study, my sensibilities and my insights to proffer some recommendations for further research and policy considerations.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCING NGUKURR

Introduction

This thesis is an ethnographic study and, as such I feel that first it is important to provide the reader with an opportunity to develop a ‘sense of place’. This chapter aims to do this through providing an introduction to the study setting, before delving into the more focused analysis of the following chapters. This chapter also documents the recorded history of the establishment of the Roper River Mission, which subsequently become the government settlement or Aboriginal Community of Ngukurr. This includes a description of the pre-mission, mission and post-mission periods of the settlement. It also highlights the changing structures of authority, from mission, self-determination to the governance situation today. It is not the purpose of this thesis to provide a coherent historical account but rather to draw relevant information from the limited primary texts. These texts provide a range of perspectives including historical, social, anthropological and agricultural and have been used to provide a background to this thesis.

First Glimpse

Ngukurr is a remote Aboriginal township on the northern bank of the crocodile infested Roper River, some 100 kilometres inland from the Gulf of Carpentaria. The town is 310 kilometres by road from Katherine, the nearest regional centre. Road access is often cut off entirely during the wet season, which stretches from November/December to April/May. The countryside around the community is ecologically described tropical savannah. It has areas of open grassland,
woodlands of sparsely spread trees, jungle oases beside powerful rivers and winding creeks. There are many rocky outcrops and escarpments that create breath taking horizons.

Once turning east off the Stuart highway just near the small town of Mataranka, and driving for some time through beautiful savannah country, the sealed road changes to dirt and corrugations. The journey often involves frightening encounters with speeding road trains and the crossing of two forded rivers. While during the dry season these crossings are usually only covered by 30 to 50 centimetres of water, they can sometimes be much higher and crossing them is a decision that involves an amount of courage. Just when you think that the road stretches out into the distance forever you come over a hill and again hit bitumen. This is when you get your first sight of the township of Ngukurr.

The most surprising thing for me when first arriving, was that a town actually ‘exists’ in such a remote place. It is not a town in the middle of nowhere that you just pass through on your way somewhere else but is itself the end of the road. It has little in common with the remote towns you might come across in the Australian outback, that show evidence of a once prosperous past. These towns often give the impression of sleepy ghost towns, with their one service station, a couple of houses, and a few old locals reminiscing about the past in the historic pub. Such an image is in sharp contrast to what you encounter when first entering Ngukurr. It is busy with people, bustling with life, and is very much a place of the present.

**Historical Context**

In order to understand the contemporary situation in Ngukurr it is important to gain an understanding of the history of this settlement. The work of Cole (1969, 1979, 1985), Harris (1990), Bern (1974, 1976), Thiele (1982) and Taylor et al. (2000) are drawn on extensively in this historical section. Cole (1969, 1979, 1985) and Harris
(1990) come from the perspective of historians and have concentrated on documenting the history of the Roper River Mission while under the control of the Christian Missionary Society. Aboriginal perspectives are limited within these histories, the dominant focus being on the recorded experiences of missionaries.

Bern (1974, 1976), an anthropologist, conducted fieldwork in Ngukurr in the late 1960s and early 1970s and provides an insight into community politics during this period. His PhD thesis “Blackfella Business Whitefella Law: political struggle and competition in a South East Arnhem Land Aboriginal Community” focuses on Aboriginal kinship systems within the Roper region and how these affect authority and competition for prestige in the organisation of specific Aboriginal ceremonies. He also investigates the structures and struggles of authority and power between Aboriginal people and Government or mainstream society, as well as documenting the complex political struggle that was occurring between particular Aboriginal families in the community.

Thiele (1982) conducted his fieldwork in the late 1970s and returned briefly in 1981. His thesis, entitled “Remote Aborigines in Australian Society: A case study of an Aboriginal-owned enterprise: The Yugul Cattle Company”, also focuses on relationships of authority and power between Aboriginal people, the government and mainstream society generally. His work concentrates on the political dynamics of the Yugul Cattle Company, a business based in western economic and work ideology. Thiele’s (1982) thesis emphasises the complexities and power inequalities inherent in bringing together western work ideology and Aboriginal culture. The more recent work of Taylor et al. (2000) is not solely focused on political and power struggles or inequalities but is rather a baseline profile for social impact planning. Together these works will be used in the following section to piece together a picture of post-mission Ngukurr.
Pre-Mission

The main Aboriginal tribes or language groups in the Roper River region before colonisation were Mara, Alawa, Wandarang, Ngandi, Ngalagan, Manggarai, Ranjbarngu and Ridarngu. European intrusion in the region began with Leichhardt’s expedition in 1844. This was followed by an expedition by Gregory in 1856 and another by Stuart in 1862 (Cole 1969, 1985). However, it was not until the 1870s that European people began to move into the region with more frequency and in significant numbers (Cole 1969, 1985; Bern 1974; Harris 1990). During the late 1870s graziers began droving thousands of cattle through the region en route to the Victoria River district and the Kimberleys. Aboriginal people resisted this intrusion, attacking a number of European people, raiding their stores and spearing their stock (Cole 1969, 1985; Harris 1990).

Many of the pastoral leases taken up in the Roper River district proved difficult to run efficiently and produced little income and consequently most were abandoned in the 1890s. Harris (1990) argued that while the cattle leases failed, primarily for economic reasons, the pastoralists generally blamed the Roper River Aboriginal population for their demise, basing this on the fact that they had speared some cattle and made life difficult. Through the attitudes of the pastoralists and some writers of the period, a picture of Roper River Aboriginal people as vicious and victorious began to prevail in the minds of the colonists. Both Costello (1930) and Durack (1959) regarded Aboriginal hostility as the main reason for the failure of pastoral enterprise in the region.

Searcy’s 1909 account provides a sharp contrast to the portrayal of Aboriginal people as the victors within the colonial situation. He tells a very different story, one in which Aboriginal people were viewed as pests and where it was common for pastoralists in the area to randomly attack and kill Aboriginal people (cited in Bern 1974). Harris (1990) mentioned that in the four years from 1899 to 1903 all the unleased and abandoned land of the region was acquired by the large London based Eastern and African Cold Storage Company. He suggested that during this
time gangs of ten to fourteen European men were specifically employed by the company to hunt out all Aboriginal inhabitants of the area and shoot them on sight.

Harris (1990: 148) quoted an Aboriginal man from the area, who was a child during this time,

Oh terrible days we used to had: we never walked around much ‘mongst the plain country or groun’. We used to upla hill alla time to save our life. Our old people you know used to take us away from plain or river or billabong. Only night time they used to run down to get lily, alla young men you know. Can’t go daytime, fright [of] white people. Too many murderers went about killing native

Harris (1990) also recorded the story of an Aboriginal woman from the Warndarang language group who spoke about how her family used to hide under the vines in the creek and only a small number of adults would sneak out from time to time to search for food. She stated “they just regarded us Aboriginal people as animals” (Harris 1990: 697). This period of history saw the drastic and tragic depletion of the number of people associated with the Ngalakan, Warndarang and Ngandi tribes (Harris 1990). Bern (1974: 72) has argued that by the end of this period of European intrusion, the Roper region had been the scene of continuous conflict for over a quarter of a century and, while the Europeans (including representatives of the Cold Storage Company) had all but deserted the area, “the Aborigines in the early 1900s were uprooted, harassed and decimated”.

**Roper River Mission 1908 – 1968**

The Roper River community, which has since developed into the township of Ngukurr, began life as a mission settlement founded by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). It was one of the earliest missions established in the Northern Territory. In 1906, the CMS began organising and putting into practice their plan to set up a Mission for the Aboriginal people of this region. By 1908, the Mission was functioning. Cole (1969, 1985) has argued that when the Christian Missionary Society started the condition of the Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land was deplorable. He suggested that the Aboriginal population of the area had been
decimated and that the remnants of the local societies were dying out. The killing of Aboriginal people did not stop at this time but the presence of a mission did contribute to such atrocities becoming less common in the area (Cole 1969, 1985; Harris 1990).

A small number of Aboriginal people began to camp with the missionaries as soon as they arrived in the Roper region and this number continued to grow (Cole 1969, 1985). There were over 200 Aboriginal people residing with the missionaries within a few months of their arrival in the Roper region. However it must be recognised that this number fluctuated, as Aboriginal people continued to follow their previous seasonal movements, new people arrived and others left to work on stations (Cole 1969, 1985). Yet Harris (1990) suggested that at no time was there less than 70 people resident at the mission.

A consolidation of the Roper River Mission occurred between 1913 and 1914 and the Mission was extended to Groote Eylandt. This latter Mission was set up to cater for those children deemed as half-caste, who it was believed would be more able to assimilate into mainstream society if they were separated from those termed full-blood Aborigines (Cole 1985). The comments of a Bishop at this time capture this attitude,

> It is important that the half-caste children be treated and dealt with separately and distinct from Aborigines. There must be a separate establishment for half caste children, and their teaching and training, next of course to religion. The tendency of the half-caste is to sink to the level of Aborigines (cited in Harris 1990: 723).

In 1916, the Roper River Mission was swept away by flood and the missionaries had to begin the process of building a new mission station. This was a long and arduous task as many resources and supplies had been irredeemably lost as a consequence of the flood. Cole’s (1969, 1985) history of the Mission documents the many difficulties encountered from its beginning up till the 1930s. The complications related to its remoteness and isolation, which affected the availability of resources and supplies. It also suffered from numerous problems
between missionary staff, whose personal incompatibility created much tension and adversely affected the functioning of the Mission. Cole (1969, 1985) has briefly touched on the fragmented nature of the Aboriginal tribes residing on the Mission and the difficulties this caused. Taylor et al. (2000) has also emphasised that during this time the Mission lacked stability and the resources to carry out its aims adequately. However by the 1930s and into the 1950s the Mission was sufficiently resourced and was better staffed (Taylor et al. 2000).

In 1937, Rev R.C.M Long visited Roper and commented on the amount of progress that had been undertaken within the Mission’s built environment. He stated about life on the mission that “One was struck by the earnestness and happiness of the Roper River people as they went about their ordinary duties and gathered for their various assemblies during the day” (cited in Harris 1990: 738). However, in the early 1940s the Mission was again swept away by flood and a decision was made to move the Mission 10km upstream in order to avoid such devastation in the future. This new site is where Ngukurr is situated today.

The Federal Government’s assimilation policy, introduced in the 1950s, had a significant impact on the settlement. Through the provision of funds a general store was opened in 1956, electricity was reticulated to the homes of Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal staffing was increased (Thiele 1982). In 1960 Aboriginal people on the settlement began to be paid social service benefits. However, the majority of this money did not go to individuals but was paid directly to the missionaries for settlement expenses.

In the later part of 1962, the missionaries decided to establish a Station Council comprising eight Aboriginal people and eight non-Aboriginal staff members. The development of the Station Council was an expression of the assimilation policy of the time. The missionaries’ view was that the establishment of this Council would educate the Aborigines to except “responsibility” (Bern 1974: 313). However the immediate result of this development was that an amount of separation and
distance was created between the Aboriginal residents and the non-Aboriginal Mission staff. This placed a degree of power into the hands of a few Aboriginal spokesmen. The communication lines between the staff and the community were controlled by the Aboriginal Council members (Bern 1974), who acted in effect as gatekeepers.

The legal power of the Christian Missionary Society was curtailed by the 1964 Social Welfare Ordinance (Thiele 1982) and the Mission lost the authority to expel recalcitrants and to hold its own courts (Bern 1974). In 1965 the Roper River Mission was the first in the Northern Territory to pay all the Social Services Department Age Pensions, Child Endowment and some Welfare Branch allowances direct to Aborigines. In the same year the communal kitchens were closed (Cole 1969). Thiele (1982: 140) argued that, partly because of this increasing economic independence and legal equality, Aborigines on the settlement became increasingly unwilling to give the CMS the authority it needed to run the community. It was during this year that the CMS began planning to leave the settlement.

Bern (1974) has argued that even at the height of the mission period, the missionaries and their institution were unable to fully dominate the lives of the Aboriginal town dwellers. They were, for example, never able to suppress traditional religious beliefs and practices. However, while the Aboriginal groups brought together by the Mission had lacked internal cohesion and a common identity, by the end of the Mission era the Aboriginal residents had built a unity through shared experience of institutionalised life, and by stressing certain common social and cultural features (Bern 1976).

**Post-Mission - Ngukurr**

During the period of the government takeover of Ngukurr, the Mission attempted to come to an agreement whereby the control of the Mission land lease, resources and local shop would be handed over to the local Aboriginal community.
However, the Mission lease, together with most settlement property, was taken over by the government rather than being transferred to Aboriginal control (Bern 1974). The shop, however, was relinquished by the government, as had been requested by the resigning Mission authority. The administration of Ngukurr from 1968 to the mid 1970s was the responsibility of the Federal Government. The formulation of policy, all major administrative decisions and all finances were controlled by the Northern Territory Welfare Branch in Darwin. Taylor et al. (2000: 11) suggested that a consequence of this arrangement for the organisation of the settlement was a bifurcation of the population into two categories – outside staff and the local community – in which the former had a monopoly of the positions of authority. Bern (1974, 1976) argued that during this time local participation in decision making disappeared almost entirely and that the Station Council, discussed above, ceased to have even the limited decision-making power it had had under the Mission.

**Self-determination and governance**
The 1970s marked the era of self-determination in Aboriginal policy. While self-determination was about recognising and respecting difference and incorporating Aboriginal culture into the liberal democratic nation of Australia, Rowse (1998: 224) pointed out that:

> …the actual culture, the social world which Aborigines inhabited, was seen as a deficient social space, which required ongoing tutelage. This actual social life was not defined as ‘culture’…What needs to be understood is the way the idea of preserving an autonomous sphere of Aboriginality become a token incorporation, a rhetoric which ignored, over-rode or tried to reshape what it could not recognize as ‘culture’. The space of culture was purely esoteric. The recognition of sacred sites and the paying of royalties to traditional owners were the formal practices which proved the rules and allowed all else to stay the same

Thiele (1982) has discussed the impacts of this policy direction in Ngukurr and suggests that, while there was much rhetoric about consultation and associated activities about self-determination, the government still had immense power over Aboriginal lives. During this time, the Ngukurr Township Association was
developed. This was a Council comprised wholly of Aboriginal representatives (Taylor et al. 2000). In 1988 a key political event occurred where the Ngukurr Township Association was superseded by the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council (YMCGC) scheme. The term ‘Yugul Mangi’ was chosen as a name to signify that Ngukurr people were a single people and by implication that their unity should override their differences based on ‘tribe’ or language. This governance structure was not only concerned with the immediate township of Ngukurr but also encompassed its surrounds including many outstations and smaller settlements including Numbulwar and covered 12,269 square miles of land. There was heated internal debate when this occurred, for many Aboriginal people feared that there would be excessive concentration of power in the hands of Council and loss of autonomy for other organisations. They argued that there would be a lack of representation from outstations, women, and particular land owning groups (Taylor et al. 2000).

The governance of the YMCGC was divided into 7 ‘tribal’ constituencies (tribe was used in a broad sense equating to language group). Taylor et al. (2000) has argued that while the seven tribes are not artificial constructs, there were some difficulties which could lead to manipulation of both membership and elections. “Many residents of the Yugul Mangi area and particularly Ngukurr had, through extensive intermarriage and adoption, claims to be members of two or more of these tribes” (Taylor et al. 2000:13). This electoral structure placed significant weight on traditionally-based notions of authority and gave ‘tribal elders’ crucial power in the electoral process and ultimately led to the exclusion of Aboriginal women from office. In 1997, the YMCGC was reorganised and the seven ‘tribes’ were replaced with 20 clans. These clans continue to form the basis of Council representation. As Taylor et al. (2000) highlight, the term ‘clan’ is used not in the ethnographic sense but simply as a descriptive term used in an effort to establish lines of alliance within family groups to facilitate cooperative working arrangements. The rationale for this change was to enable more people to have a
voice and to transfer responsibility for the provision of services to each of the clan groups (Taylor et al. 2000).

In 2003, the Council was dismissed because of its financial insolvency and the scheme underwent major amendment with the original land base doubling in size and servicing approximately 1,573 people. The new Regional Council now took in the former Hodgson Downs (Minyeri) pastoral lease and the predominantly Alawa Aboriginal community residing there. This extension was a product of the Northern Territory Government’s push for multi-locality or regionalisation ideas for Community Government Councils (Sanders 2006). This was the system of government in Ngukurr until very recently, and while it suggests an amount of Aboriginal control over settlement affairs, it must be remembered that real administrative control was still in the hands of non-Aboriginal people, in positions formerly referred to as town clerks and currently chief executive officers (CEO). Taylor et al. (2000:11) state that:

…the Council has often been heavily dependent on the town clerk’s expertise and accordingly has afforded the position a large measure of independent control of Council’s budget and priorities.

Since the work of Taylor et al. (2000) there have been five CEOs in as many years working for the YMCGC. This instability in staff and administration affairs has been related to various differences of opinion and understanding between Aboriginal community members, Aboriginal Council members, non-Aboriginal staff, including the CEO, and the Department of Local Government.

On the 11 October 2006, the Minister for Local Government announced the Northern Territory Government’s reform program for local government. The reform resulted in a new framework of municipal and shire Councils that incorporated the whole of the Northern Territory on 1 July 2008. The Minister justified the wholesale amalgamations of Councils into seven so-called “super” Shires by arguing that ‘a shire of less than 5,000 people would struggle to be sustainable in the long term’ (McAdam 2006: 4-5). Sanders (2006: 17) states that
…not only would it increase the size of local governments by bringing
together current organisations, it would also increase the diversity of
interests within these organisations…If this reform agenda, or anything
like it, is implemented, even in twice the time frame specified, the
Northern Territory local government system and its relations to
Indigenous interests will soon look very different…

It was proposed to YMCGC that they be incorporated as a ward within a large
Katherine East Shire (now Roper-Gulf Shire) that would bring together a diverse
range of communities including: remote Aboriginal settlements and outstations;
open towns; and pastoralists and roadhouse owners. They were told by
government representatives that the area covered by YMCGC would possibly have
two representatives on the new Shire Board. Members of the Board would be
selected through a common-roll election process, unlike that of the YMCGC which
is based on clans. It was possible that only one seat or possibly no seats would go
to Aboriginal representatives from Ngukurr.

Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were very concerned about the change from the
Community Government Council to a Shire. They felt that they had little say in
what was happening and lacked information on what the changes would actually
mean ‘nobody know what is going on up there in the Council, but its going to
happen’. There was a strong sense that this change would further undermine the
limited power Aboriginal people in Ngukurr had over their own lives… ‘nobody
can’t make decision here now’. A Council member explained that he was finding
it very difficult to understand the change to shire and even more difficult to try and
explain this change to other members of the community. His anxiety is captured in
the following quote:

Nothing happening here the changes just come and confuse us, and then
nothing changes…maybe this shire change will leave us with
nothing…. nothing….maybe it will be good for more houses, I nomo
sabi [don’t know] im [its] going to happen anyway and mela [we] don’t
understand
A community meeting was held on the 16\textsuperscript{th} March, 2007, in order to provide Councillors with the opportunity to explain the change to shire to the community. The Council president explained to those present that ‘\textit{we got to go with it}’ meaning the change,

..the minister is going to come down next week, that’s the man to ask your questions…we don’t know what is really going to happen…we will try and help you understand and answer your questions but nobody really knows what these changes will actually do...

The Minister for Local Government and the Member for Arnhem arrived in Ngukurr on the 23\textsuperscript{rd} March 2007 and held a community meeting. The member for Arnhem, Malarndirri (Barbara) McCarthy explained;

It’s really really big changes biggest change the NT has ever had. It is going to change all our lives… This is serious change…Don’t be afraid of the change but its important to think of how you want this change to happen …Many people have been asking me what is this Shire? It is communities being brought together, like in other states…we got to work out which way communities want to mix…This word [Shire] is going to go on for 18 months…its all still talk…be proactive…change is going to happen but you have got to think how this change is going to happen…

An influential community elder and Council member directed this comment to the government representatives:

Munanga [white people] understand this shire mela nomo sabi [we don’t know], they bin try all kind system, behind that the munanga [white people] benefit the blackbella [Aboriginal people] get nothing go nowhere…from experience this won’t work for us…why don’t you sometime listen to us…the Community Government been the worst one, nobody got any say…I want to tell the Minister every year they change the name but im [its] the same system really, la munanga [the white] system. Blackbella don’t change every 5 minutes, we stay the same, why don’t you sit down with us, study us properly, you don’t understand us

The Minister replied to this feeling of disempowerment and concern by lamenting:

There is a lot of truth in what you have been saying. I ask myself the question, have communities improved in the bush, no, we are going backwards… the government have allowed this to go on, they haven’t had the guts to say you have no support and they don’t want to admit
that they ask of you things other Councils are never asked to do...the
government always chuck it back to the Council, its always viewed as a Council problem not one of lack of support ...we hope this Shire may take this problem away, make a stronger voice and give us more money and the ability to use it more strategically...this isn’t going to fix everything but I think that it is a real opportunity that people have ...they can’t say you are a Community Government Council its your problem you deal with it, they will have to listen...we hope it can help us tackle some of the issues and protect certain programs in communities...

The above discussion illustrates that governance within Ngukurr is at a turning point and that there is much uncertainty around what the change to a shire system will actually mean for people living in Ngukurr. This uncertainty of future is a great cause of concern for many community members and often it accumulates into a greater sense of fear, insecurity, hopelessness and disempowerment.

These feelings of disempowerment were reinforced with the sudden Federal Government announcement of the “Emergency Intervention into Remote Aboriginal Communities” on the 21st of June 2007. This Intervention shocked and frightened many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr and seriously added to apprehensions associated with living within the context of an uncertain future. One man commented:

All this change, all happening at once. What do they expect of us...mela [we] can’t cope with all this change. Maybe it will be good but nomo [no one can] understand all this at once...my head is spinning... everybody stressed out...

The Intervention involved the Federal Government taking over Aboriginal communities and appointing Business Managers, who were to oversee the Intervention changes and who were to take up positions of power above that of community CEOs. These government appointed Business Managers would have a direct line of communication to the Federal Government in Canberra. The appointed Business Manager for Ngukurr visited for the first time on October the
5th 2007 and took up residence in the community in early November 2007. With the Federal election on the 24th of November 2007 being won by the Labor Party, previously in opposition, the future direction of the Intervention, as well as how it would work with the proposed Shire amalgamations, was and remains unclear.

These uncertain times in the administrative structure, the rapid and unprecedented changes to community decision making are reflected in this township as yet another attempt at control and disempowerment. Despite these uncertainties, the township today remains a vibrant and busy place where family groups are critical to ongoing day to day activities.

**The Township Today**

Ngukurr is known to its residents as comprising three distinct parts, these being ‘top camp’ or ‘silver city’, ‘middle camp’ and ‘bottom camp’. When someone describes where they are staying it will usually be in the form of, ‘the blue house langa [toward] bottom camp’. However, this is not to say that there is only one blue, or green, or yellow house in bottom camp but that people are so familiar with every house, who resides there, and the specific relationships between people in the community, that they instantly assume that you will know to which one they are referring.

Unlike the earlier description given by Thiele (1982), Ngukurr now has sealed roads and established trees, green grass and gardens in both public and private spaces. The sealed roads however are in need of repair and there are many areas with large pot holes. There are few privately owned cars in Ngukurr, and only a small number of Council vehicles (approx 10) and non-Aboriginal vehicles. Human foot traffic is by far the most common form of transport. There are also many unsealed foot paths, which weave and wind through the township, often cutting through people’s yards and creating short cuts from one place to another.
Aboriginal people in Ngukurr refer to their houses and the yards around them as their ‘camp’. Somebody’s camp may in fact comprise more than one house but still function as a single place of residence, with people moving in, out and between the houses on a regular basis. Many Aboriginal people, including children, choose to sleep in a variety of houses, moving around the community on a regular basis, with no particular connection to one house or one room. The camp yards are highly used spaces where it is common to see groups of people sitting on tarpaulins or mats, talking, playing cards, or just watching the world go by. Sitting on the ground is most common but sometimes people may have pulled up an old milk crate, flour drum, old chair or children’s pram to sit on while engaging in the above activities. Within one camp there will often be more than one gathering of people, and if people get tired of the conversation, company, or card game of one, they have the option of moving to another. Movement between camps is also a common occurrence.

Children are also active in and around camps, playing in groups, cooling off around taps and hoses, climbing on things and generally having fun as children do. These groups of children are often referred to by adults as that ‘babymob’, or ‘kidmob’, or ‘biginnimob’. These groups are regularly comprised of ten or more children varying in age and sex, with those that are older visibly looking after the younger. One of the favourite children’s games is known as ‘holey’ and consists of throwing coins towards a small hole in the ground and then taking turns in flicking the coins into the hole. The different games that children play are extensive and often very innovative. In contrast to the average non-Aboriginal experience, Aboriginal children do not only interact with large numbers of children during school hours or on special occasions, but are consistently in the company of numerous others. Little babies (those that can not walk) also enjoy a very social life with adults directing a huge amount of attention towards them. Everybody wants to hold them, kiss them and play with them; babies are the undisputed centre of attention.
Many camps in Ngukurr are also the residence of numerous dogs. These dogs come in all varieties and sizes, Chihuahuas, Dingo-cross, Ridgebacks, Bull dogs and everything in-between. While there are some that make their home at the shop or tuckshop or are lost or ‘Walnu’, as Aboriginal people would say, meaning without an owner, most are attached either to particular individuals or to particular camps. They are usually much loved and play an intimate role in people’s lives. Yet, as with the children, they are given a greater amount of autonomy than in the non-Aboriginal context and are free to roam around the community. Dogs play both a positive and a negative role within camps. They are important in creating camp security but unfortunately contribute to health concerns by getting into bins and spreading rubbish. Due to the large number of dogs, they often function as packs and aggressively protect the camp area. People therefore will often not walk into another family’s camp without first calling out to a resident due to a fear of ‘cheeky’ dogs.

**Housing**

Houses in Ngukurr may at first shock those not used to being in an Aboriginal community. They often have a dilapidated look about them, with graffiti on the inside and sometimes outside walls. Usually this graffiti is nothing particularly offensive but just peoples names, their relationship to others, and sometimes important phone numbers. For example:

- OMS [only myself]
- JBSMTOU2 [Jack John Brown, Sarah Mary Taylor, only you two]
- EBWSFW2BS [Emma Betty Will, Sophie Fran Will, two best sisters]
- DBHBCBWBOLF [D Brown, H Brown, C Brown, W Brown, one little family]

Most houses are divided into about 3 to 4 separate bedrooms and have a kitchen, bathroom, usually two toilets and a common area (lounge room), and/or a built in veranda. The bedrooms, which in reality are also living areas (not just sleeping areas), are often inhabited by more than one person: for example, a husband and
wife and their children; a group of sisters or brothers; or a grandmother and a number of her grandchildren. Sometimes these rooms can be separately locked, which enables a greater amount of security for both people and their belongings. The interior of these rooms usually contains a number of mattresses, often a TV and DVD player and sometimes a fridge. People will often store food within their rooms as a way to preserve it for their immediate family or for personal needs. There is usually also some open shelving on which people put clothes and other possessions, commonly things like photographs of relatives. Many, but definitely not all, of the rooms have functioning older style air conditioners and the windows are usually heavily covered with material in order to block out light and ensure privacy.

The common areas of these houses - the kitchen, lounge room, covered verandas and bathrooms - are occupied and used by all the families residing in the house, sometimes up to twenty-five people and often their dogs. These areas are usually completely bare of furniture. However, there may be mattresses for those who commonly sleep in such areas. It is unusual for there to be doors on cupboards and even more unusual for there to be much stored on shelves. The kitchen will most often have a functioning stove and oven, used for boiling water for tea (commonly in old sugar tins), cooking and heating up meals (usually something with beef), and baking damper. The sink has a hot and cold tap. However, the bore water supply in Ngukurr contains large amounts of calcium which builds up in wet areas, staining the sink and often affecting hot water systems by blocking pipes. There may be a common fridge within the kitchen, but usually it is quite bare of food and may only contain bottles of cold water. This is because a fridge in such a common area is open to all, especially children, who walk past and any food or drinks contained within are quickly consumed.

The bathrooms and toilets are usually in a state of disrepair. With so many people using them this is not surprising. It is not uncommon for there to be no hot water or for a toilet to be blocked. The common areas of these houses are often less
clean than the separate rooms. Because there are so many people in each house it seems that it is often unclear whose responsibility the common areas are, or in fact if they are anyone’s responsibility. This is not to say that certain people don’t attempted to keep these areas clean but with so much foot traffic and so many children and dogs this is in itself a full time job.

**Community Buildings and Amenities**

The one shop, which is still owned by the community, and the Council buildings are in the centre of the township and during the day are a locus of activity. The shop is a relatively old building built in the 1970s and insulated with asbestos. It is small for the number of people it serves and is generally overflowing with items, workers, shoppers and children. The shop sells a wide range of goods such as, food, clothes, mobile phones, toys, camping and household items. However the prices are high compared with similar shops in less remote areas. Due to its remoteness, lack of competition and high demand, it also runs out of fresh fruit and other essential products on a regular basis. There is also a takeaway food outlet within the shop with customer access being through a window on the outside. The verandah outside of the shop is a place to meet and talk, ask for money or food from relatives, or supply such items to relatives. It is a place to pass the time and keep up to date with community issues and business. There are also always many dogs in the vicinity waiting for scraps to be dropped or fighting with other dogs over these scraps.

The Council buildings are opposite the shop and are where the CEO and other non-Aboriginal staff, such as the CDEP coordinator, the Housing Manager, and Bookkeepers have offices. It is the place where people collect their mail, and where some Aboriginal people are employed in the Centrelink office and the Territory Credit Union, or as receptionists and pay role staff. It is where Council meetings are held once a month and where Council business is conducted. The surrounds of these buildings are also popular areas for people to sit and talk or watch the day-to-day goings-on of community life. It is in the grassed area at the
front of these buildings that community or public meetings are usually held. This central precinct is also often the place of public protest; if someone has a problem or opinion they wish to share with the community, it is here that they will state their case in a raised voice for others to hear.

The school is on the outskirts of town and is often used as the place of children’s games, whether it is designated school time or not. The school buildings are also quite old and are in need of repair. They are also inadequate in size and resources to accommodate all the school age children in the community. Therefore class sizes are frequently big and toilets are often blocked or not functional. Opposite the school is the Women’s Centre, basketball court/shed, tuckshop and pool. The Women’s Centre is usually very quiet, with the dominant activity being the daily preparation of meals for the elderly.

Sporting facilities include the basketball court, which is in a large shed with open sides which can be shut when the need arises. This shed is not only used for basketball games but also other functions and is the place where regular discos are held. Basketball games are held most weeks, with one night being dedicated to women’s basketball and another men’s basketball. Women’s basketball is taken very seriously and is “political business”. During all stages of its organisation, team composition, and game playing, long held and complex family rivalries are enacted and negotiated. This activity is wholly the domain of women. Due to kinship protocols, it is unusual for men to attend games, particularly the brothers of those playing. It is not unusual however for arguments to erupt between individuals or groups of women and for these to continue beyond game time. Men’s basketball by contrast is less politically intense.

Discos are usually held at least once a week and they can occur on any night of the week. They are very popular with children as well as teenagers but all ages are usually in attendance. The disco night will begin around 7pm when it gets dark. The dance floor will be full of children dancing in groups, playing running and
playing ball games and generally exerting copious amounts of energy. The adults will congregate around the outside of the basketball court, often sitting just on the edge of the shadows. Flashing coloured lights and very loud music complete the scene. The genre of music played is quite diverse but is predominantly R&B, Hip-hop, and chart music. There is a particular style of dancing for girls and women and a different style for boys and men. Both are unique, exhilarating and contemporary. Sometimes boys will dance in the style of the girls and this will cause outbursts of laughter from the crowd of adults and teenagers on the fringes. From a very young age Aboriginal children are very dexterous and proficient dancers and compile complex and energetic routines.

As the night progresses teenagers will begin to dance, with all the boys congregating just on the edge of the shadows and dancing in groups. The young women often run out into the middle of the dance floor, perform their small routine which involve various gyrating movements, then just as quickly run back to the fringes into the arms of their laughing girl friends and relatives. Some adults, who have a love for dancing, will be actively participating throughout the night. However, it is during the last one or two songs of the evening that the larger percentage take to the dance floor. Disco nights are joyous occasions with children playing until they cannot play anymore, eventually falling asleep on the laps of adult relatives.

There is also a tuckshop open in the precinct where you can purchase cold drinks, ice-poles, ice-creams and packets of chips. There are also often a number of Aboriginal entrepreneurs at these events selling individual cigarettes, lollies, drinks or chips. As with most public areas in the community, there are also many dogs present. Attempts are made by people working as Recreation Officers on the night to hunt them away with the use of long sticks. The disco usually continues until approximately 1am in the morning. But if a fight erupts, which is not uncommon, everybody will be asked to leave and the shed doors pulled down for the night.
The pool precinct includes three baby pools and one large (25m) pool. During the hotter months they are used extensively by children to swim and cool off. Other than mothers, fathers or relatives watching babies, the pools themselves are hardly ever utilized by adults. The grassed area around the pools is also the locale for night time entertainment, such as performances by local bands. Local bands often play for the community and everybody enjoys the dancing, listening and socialising. The local bands include: Yugal Band; Lonely Boys; T-Lynx; and Tribal-Vision. An entry fee is often charged at these events in order to raise money for the local football team, basketball teams or other community initiatives.

The football oval is beside the pool precinct and during my first few field visits was used for football training once or twice a week and sometimes for a game on the weekends. Ngukurr has one football team, the Ngukurr Bulldogs, and they are one of the most competitive teams within the Katherine region, winning the 2007 grand final.

Other community areas include the (Liabala) church area, which is located beside the Council buildings. This is used for Christian hymn singing, an activity that can go late into the night. There is also an old stone church in which services are held every Sunday. It is also the venue for other church related activities. The community also has a childcare centre, art centre and a library, though the latter is rarely open. In addition there are a number of other buildings that function as workshops for mechanical work or infrastructure maintenance.

**Daily Life**

The above section of this chapter has described the physical environment of the Ngukurr Township. This section focuses on the social and cultural environment of Ngukurr in order to provide a basic understanding of life in this community before the following chapters focus attention towards notions of work, its value, meaning and purpose.
When I lived in the Ngukurr community, it was obvious that every individual Aboriginal person had a place in the kinship framework, that everybody is related to everybody, and that all people have extensive knowledge about their own and others particular and specific relatedness. It was very common for people to call each other by kinship terms and to feel the need to explain to newcomers how they are specifically related to each other. The way they are connected to those around them is fundamental to Aboriginal people’s identity in Ngukurr. Consequently a lot of people’s time is taken up with the complex activity of having to continually reaffirm, maintain and negotiate their relationship with others.

In contrast to mainstream Australian society, Aboriginal people not only have a different relationship, understanding and connection with people around them but also a different relationship with their land or physical environment (Berndt and Berndt 1969). Just as personal relationships involve displays of intimacy, so too do relationships with country. People can give directions around a country that is completely absent of sign posts, along tracks which are nearly impossible for the untrained eye of outsiders to see. The pride people have in their country is expressed through their conversational orientation towards it - both older and younger people discuss country on a regular and daily basis. They explain to strangers how they are connected to each other and just as importantly express their connections to country. This emphasises the fundamental place country has in constructions of Aboriginal identity in Ngukurr.

The kinship structures that underlie all activity in Ngukurr, and the social norms associated with such a framework, are important in shaping the day to day life of community residents. Daily activities embedded within this context of connectedness will be discussed in more detail later in this thesis. Suffice to say here, the tempo of the day often begins with, for example, parents walking their children to school; people going about doing their daily shopping; playing cards; attending meetings; looking after their own or others children; meeting up with relatives or generally keeping themselves busy with day to day activities. When
night falls and the temperature cools, outside camp fires are lit and people sit around chatting, eating and socialising. Human traffic does not decrease and people continue to visit each other, strolling along sparsely lit streets. It would occasion no surprise to see a mother and her friend or partner pushing a stroller complete with wide awake baby along one of these dark streets, either going to visit someone or in an attempt to quieten or entertain the child in the early hours of the morning. Houses at night are continual thoroughfares of people, particularly those houses which are hosting a card game.

Within the community at any given time, there are also those from other communities, outstations or elsewhere who are passing through and visiting family. Aboriginal people in Ngukurr are also often on the move, not just within their own community, but also beyond. They may have just arrived in Ngukurr or are just on their way to another Aboriginal community, outstation or regional centre. This mobility is associated with the desire and need to visit relatives in other communities, to visit particular country, or with cultural protocols around the importance of attending funerals and ceremonies. Travelling is a way of reaffirming, maintaining and caring for relationships with people and places. However the lack of transport available often means that people cannot plan when or how they would get there or get back and would have to wait till an opportunity arose. Due to this need to be mobile, cars are the most highly prized material possession for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. They are in great demand and are the centre of a great deal of complex kinship negotiations. Other material possessions that are highly valued are televisions, DVD and CD players, mobile phones, Discmans, and more recently MP3 players and IPods. These items also are exchanged through the hands of many people as relationships are continually being reaffirmed.

Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have a distinct style of fashion. The older women in Ngukurr predominantly wear long dresses or skirts usually in bright colours, most often they will have more than one skirt on at a time. Younger women also wear
these particular designs of skirt or dress but also may wear long baggy shorts, and loose-fitting T-shirts with a singlet top underneath. It is common for men to wear jeans and if they are working to have work boots on. They also wear shorts, tight singlets and T-shirts but will often go topless. Most people do not wear shoes and if they do they are thongs or slip on sandals.

The history of Ngukurr, from its beginnings as a Mission established to “protect” Aboriginal people to its present political situation under the Federal intervention, reveals a community negotiating with cultural, social and economic change in a framework where the idea of ‘self-determination’ must be reconceptualised to have meaning. The observations of Ngukurr today give the perception of a busy and vibrant community with a unique sense of identity but struggling with the disadvantages of isolation, political uncertainty and insufficient infrastructure.

The following chapter discusses the methodology I used to explore the meanings and values of ‘work’ in Ngukurr. It documents the ethnographic approach used and the specific nature of the three separate periods of fieldwork. The following chapter also discusses the chosen structure of this thesis which reflects my personal journey of discovery through the concept of ‘work’.
CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY - ETHNOGRAPHY

Introduction

This research was undertaken from within the discipline of Anthropology and therefore applies a methodological approach that requires the researcher to gain an insight into the culture of the chosen study site. The discipline of anthropology arose around the concept of culture (Geertz 1973) and therefore it is important to briefly discuss what is meant by culture in the context of this research. Brislin (1980) emphasises that it would be naive to think that there was one definitive definition of culture; researchers should combine their own intuitive feelings of what ‘culture is’ with those formal definitions most helpful for their purpose.

Culture is defined in the Macquarie Dictionary (2005) as ‘the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is transmitted from one generation to another’. However, a more useful definition is provided by Geertz (1973: 5), who states that ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun’ and that culture can be understood as those webs. This is a more bounded concept than the suggestion that culture is the whole of ‘ways of living’. Geertz’s (1973) definition suggests that to analyse culture is not to search for laws through experimental science but rather an interpretative journey in search of meaning. He states that, ‘culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be casually attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly - that is thickly - described’ (Geertz 1973:14). To understand culture is therefore to attempt to understand the context in which people exist in all its complexity. This definition of culture has been
adopted as a functional definition for this thesis in which I focus on exploring how
culture influences the meanings, values and ideologies of work.

Research Approach

Anthropological methodologies, theories and methods of analysis are particularly
suited to exploring the subtleties of issues that arise as societies adapt to the
complexities of contemporary life (Glasser and Bridgman 1999). Ethnography is
the method used by anthropologists to study culture. Ethnography is both a
research approach and a research outcome (Clifford, 1988). LeCompte and
Schensul (1999:1) describe ethnography as:

…learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions
and other settings that: is scientific; is investigative; uses the researcher
as the primary tool of data collection; uses rigorous research methods
and data collection techniques to avoid bias and to ensure accuracy of
data; emphasises and builds on the perspectives of the people in the
research setting; is inductive, building local theories for testing and
adapting them for use both locally and elsewhere.

Ethnography involves observing, detailing, describing, and analysing the way
people live in their familiar environment, in order to understand cultural patterns
(Leininger 1985: 35). As a research outcome, ethnography provides
documentation of both the process and the findings of the research, in this case in
the form of this thesis. Ethnography is a written form of cultural interpretation or
some aspects of a culture (Van Maanen 1990). Within the context of this research,
where I am exploring the purpose, structure and value of work in a specific remote
Aboriginal community, ethnography facilitates a depth of understanding that could
not be gained from alternative approaches. As a mixed method approach, it
enables the researcher to use multiple methods within a legitimate framework of
reflectivity.

This thesis has used a number of research techniques within the ethnographic
framework. This research approach was chosen in order to obtain the richness of
understanding required to sufficiently describe the cultural context around the
development of ideologies of work. The techniques used in this research included
a review of literature on ideologies, history and experiences of work. It also
included the gathering of secondary data specific to the study site, from archival
and other documents; the primary data was gathered through participant
observation.

Participant observation is the principle research technique used in ethnographies
and is a powerful method of inquiry. It is a rigorous technique which builds on the
perspective of individuals and groups and gives prominence to their social and
cultural experience. It involves developing rapport and trust between the
researcher and participants. It is about the researcher participating in the daily
lives of the subjects of the research. It is well recognised that participant
observation is a difficult technique to use and to analyse. However, as May (1995:
132) argues of its critics… ‘it is a systematic and disciplined study which, if
performed well, greatly assists in understanding human actions and brings with it
new ways of viewing the social world’. As a participant it is important to make a
conscious effort to withhold judgements. However, as Whyte (1993) has
recognised, there is an unavoidable link between the community under study and
the personal life of the researcher. Marcus (2002: 196) argues that ethnography
and the technique of participant observation

...in its essence means moving within the life worlds and textured sense
of experience among its subjects, but to do so now more than ever
requires crossing fields of representation and models of systematic
discourse produced by knowledge practices overlapping with the
anthropologist’s own.

Fieldwork necessarily comprises intense periods of participant observation. These
periods, combined with the researcher’s lived experience, provide the insight that
informs the process of data analysis and the themes that emerge throughout the
investigation. The ethnographic research approach becomes ‘a continual process
of reflection and alteration of the focus of observations in accordance with
theoretical developments’ (May 1995: 132). Whyte (1993) suggested that research
ideas grow continually through immersion in the data, with much of the analytical process occurring at an unconscious level. In this research I acknowledge that this process occurred throughout the study period. Participant observation is a personal experience in addition to a research technique.

Ethics and Participant Observation

According to Agar (1980), the matter of consent around participant observation is a risk-benefit judgement and studies, such as this one, do not generally expose participants to unnecessary risk. Full ethical approval for the study was granted by the Charles Darwin University’s Human Research Ethics Committee. This process also involved seeking approval and support from the Ngukurr community and this was achieved through the authority of the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council.

Participant observation should require a level of transparency, meaning that the purpose of the research should be made known to those being researched. Agar (1980) suggested that a useful strategy in addressing informed and voluntary consent during participant observation was to devote time to discussing (i) how you will inform participants who you are and (ii) what you intend to do. He suggested evidence of the success of this strategy is when participants began to say things like, ‘yeah, we know who you are’. As such, the introductory method outlined above, combined with maintaining participants’ anonymity, was adopted as part of the ethical protocol informing practice around consent during participant observation.

However it is important to recognise here that there are sometimes difficulties in fully explaining the study focus in situations where there is a lack of understanding of the processes of western academic research. This is commonly the case in anthropological research in remote Aboriginal communities. A prominent researcher in this field, Gillian Cowlishaw, reflects on her experiences. She was pleased when first asked about her research project (a study on women’s control
over reproduction) but then explained that “the enormity and peculiarity of such an abstract and arrogant idea became apparent as I spoke; I blushed and hastily added that I was just writing a book” (Cowlishaw 1999: 23). Her experience reflects and resonates with my own when trying to explain the purpose of my research to many in the Ngukurr community. I found that by explaining my research as an investigation into ‘work’ ideologies, meanings and values lead many to assume that I was primarily interested in getting people into ‘employment’ and that I had the power to do this and the authority to potentially change or create “employment” opportunities in the community. In order to defuse the expectation associated with this perception I subsequently began to explain my position as that of “a student - interested in learning about life” in Ngukurr.

The difficulty in explaining my research and the misunderstandings that I encountered in this process drew my attention to my own history, the history of anthropology and that of the colonial past. The recognition of the power inherent in dominant discourses which are positioned firmly within the sphere of mainstream rather than Aboriginal culture, and my own position within this framework, brought with it a sense of shame and a greater acknowledgement of the influence of my own subjectivity. Cowlishaw (1999) also stated that her presence and the business of writing seemed vulnerable to ridicule. While I have attempted to manage my own subjectivity through self-reflection and to keep in mind the power dynamics inherent in the research process, it must be conceded that, to differing degrees, my interpretation and presentation of data will have been influenced by such constructs. The following section describes my fieldwork approach and the three periods of fieldwork that I conducted during this research.

Fieldwork in Ngukurr

My three phases of fieldwork were conducted during 2006 and 2007. A range of data collection tools were used during these periods of fieldwork. As in most ethnographic research, my principal form of data collection was through
participant observation. However, I also used semi-formal interviews on a regular basis, when I sought to explore particular themes or issues that emerged during the research process. Primary data was generally gathered through conversation and observation together with learning through interactive experiences. Over the course of my fieldwork I developed relationships with twenty-three core informants of varying age; gender; educational and employment status (see Table 1). My core informants also claimed membership to a number of different culturally and socially prescribed family groups. There were eleven representatives, of varying ages, from powerful, strong and often large families with significant influence in the spheres of community politics and general affairs, and twelve representatives from families that were sometimes auxiliaries to the more powerful, or were smaller and less influential for various reasons.

<table>
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<th>AGE</th>
<th>15-24</th>
<th>25-34</th>
<th>35-44</th>
<th>45&lt;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GENDER</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Periodic participation in formal education or training</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistently employed</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intermittently employed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistently unemployed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Core Informant Information

A large percentage of my core informants were women. This was influenced both by my position as a female researcher, and by the local social and cultural expectations and norms around appropriate relationship behaviour. A significant percentage of these women were also in younger age categories. This was influenced by my own age (twenty-four when beginning fieldwork), my somewhat
youthful appearance, and the fact that I had no children. In the context of Ngukurr I was often perceived of as a “young girl” and subsequently developing relationships with others in similar social categories was both acceptable and encouraged.

I found that being perceived in this way was beneficial to my research endeavour. Firstly, through their acceptance of me into their social, cultural and physical spheres of existence I was able to gain an insight into the lives of young women in the community. Concurrently, I found that being understood as a “young girl” helped with the development of my research role, being that of ‘learner’ or initiate. I found that when engaging with me, older people both male and female instinctively adopted a position of teacher or educator. This relationship dynamic was constructive, as they did not feel inhibited about pointing out my ‘youthful’ ignorance or challenging my many social and cultural assumptions.

The ongoing relationships I developed with my core informants enabled me to gain a depth of understanding that would not have been possible without such intimacy. I spent many hours in their company, engaged and conversed with them on many different levels, about many and not only ‘thesis related’ issues. They were and continue to be, not only my core informants, but my much loved and valued friends and family.

During my fieldwork I also communicated with and observed many other community members on a less regular, sustained or intimate basis. These more casual contacts spanned all age categories, children to the elderly, and included both males and females, with only a slight preference being to the latter. Conversations with these people would frequently occur through my own initiative and would often focus through prompting on themes directly related to my research.
I took detailed field notes on my observations and conversations on a daily basis during fieldwork. I would take notes on conversations either at the time of interaction or following, depending on what was deemed appropriate. For example, many elders had a desire for me to take notes while they spoke, to ensure the accuracy of their stories. Younger people often exhibited a level of discomfort or were distracted by the process of note-taking and preferred the uninterrupted informal approach of conversation. At the end of each day, I typed up a detailed set of notes, on the different activities and interactions I had observed and the various conversations in which I had engaged. I would then analyse the data and identify themes or issues with the aim of informing the next day’s lines of inquiry.

The majority of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were proficient in English, even though their day to day conversations with each other were predominantly conducted in Kriol. My understanding of Kriol was very limited at the commencement of fieldwork, but it improved over time to the point where I could understand most conversations and participate to varying degrees. This is reflected in many of the direct quotes collected. Some are almost entirely written in English, whereas some are in Kriol; but the majority contain both Kriol and English.

**Introductory fieldwork**

My fieldwork began with two preliminary week long trips in early 2006. These initial visits were introductory and I was introduced to the location and some members of the community. On these visits I was accompanied by two of my supervisors. Both of these supervisors had previous and long term research relationships with some community members. They introduced me to these people from within the context of their own research integrity. These introductions assisted in providing a level of credibility to my own role as researcher in the eyes of these community members. These preliminary visits to the community were of great value and provided an introduction to the context in which my research was to be located and my research question would be framed. It also provided me with
valuable connections with certain members of the community that proved important in the process of organising subsequent fieldwork periods.

Organising fieldwork trips to Ngukurr is complex due to a number of factors. Ngukurr is isolated, being more than seven hours by car from Darwin; it is often inaccessible by road and very expensive to travel to by air; it is consistently short of accommodation; and delays in gaining appropriate permits and approvals in document format are common. This situation means that planning for fieldwork was something that involved an amount of patience and a willingness to take opportunities as they arose. Setting specific timeframes for fieldwork was difficult to predetermine and, for example, I was on occasion unable to enter the field when originally scheduled, plan how long to stay in the field or when I wanted to return from the field. Planning fieldwork became a task that required continuing adjustment and negotiation and necessitated a readiness to adapt to changes in research strategies, timeframes and agendas.

While I planned to conduct three periods of fieldwork and was able to achieve this goal, the form and place of accommodation and the time and length of fieldwork periods were defined by the particular opportunities that arose within my research timeframe. In retrospect, however, the different forms of fieldwork engagement that these unplanned opportunities provided have created greater richness in the data collected and have increased the rigor and validity of the research.

**Fieldwork period one**

The first period of fieldwork was conducted from 19th June to 10th September, 2006. During this field trip I was provided with accommodation in a small demountable, normally occupied by non-Aboriginal visitors to the community including contractors and representatives of government and non-government agencies. It was apparent to me that there was an expectation that non-Aboriginal people would stay with other non-Aboriginal people or at least in close proximity to them. I was fortunate to be able to remain in this accommodation for
approximately three months as there were no other demands placed upon it during this time.

During this first fieldwork period there were a number of factors which influenced my engagement with Aboriginal residents of the community. The first was the type and location of my accommodation. Even though I was the sole occupant of a demountable, there was other accommodation in the compound that was temporarily occupied by non-Aboriginal contractors with dogs. This discouraged Aboriginal people from entering and engaging with me whilst I was living in this location owing to their fear of these contractors’ dogs. Once these contractors had departed a number of Aboriginal people began to visit. One of the reasons for the visits from community members was to explore opportunities of possibly gaining access to transport. My hired vehicle became an asset in facilitating engagement with Aboriginal residents in the community.

The lack of transport in the community and the desire of many to travel to favourite fishing and hunting locations, neighbouring communities or other places of interest, meant that I became in effect an unpaid taxi diver. This allowed me to develop relationships with a wide variety of people and engage in a multitude of diverse activities, for example, fishing, funerals and social activities. I was able to talk about my research and follow lines of inquiry during these interactive experiences. A limitation of such a relationship with people was that I spent a large part of my time driving and this affected the time I was able to spend observing and engaging in day to day activities. However, it is probable that without this experience of being a ‘taxi driver’, I would never have had the opportunity to later participate more fully in social endeavours.

The third factor influencing this period of fieldwork was my involvement in re-establishing the *Ngukurr News* (a community newspaper). This was a positive mechanism for community engagement for it allowed me to work alongside Aboriginal reporters, follow local stories and make more contacts. This experience
was profound as it marked the first instance when I truly recognised my puzzlement over the complexity of employment in an Aboriginal community context. It began my journey into an exploration into the meanings, values and purposes placed on the ubiquitous concept of ‘work’. This period of field exploration generated as many questions as it did answers. For example, I began to wonder about the notion of employment and whether western conceptions were a limiting factor in understanding what constituted meaningful activity or work in this community.

My experience of being involved in employment structures associated with the newspaper ended at the conclusion of my first phase of fieldwork. One reason for choosing to discontinue in this role in subsequent periods of fieldwork was connected to the confusion it created for Aboriginal people about my purpose and role in the community. Many people had believed that my primary role was to be the ‘boss’ of this paper rather than to be a participant observer undertaking research. This response from community members is no surprise given that most non-Aboriginal people in the community have a defined position of authority in all employment structures. In reality, the conception of me as ‘boss’ was more readily understood and accepted without question as it was aligned with the community norm. By contrast, being in the community as a researcher who wanted to engage fully in Aboriginal life and activities was not the norm.

By the end of this first phase of field investigation, it was clear to me that the benefits of being a ‘taxi driver’ and ‘boss’ in the newspaper, while of initial benefit, had exhausted their potential. I anticipated that to continue on in these roles would be a limiting factor in my longer-term engagement with community people. For example, while driving people from place to place most of my waking hours enabled me to build rapport with many people and discover what was happening on a daily basis in Ngukurr, it did not provide me any insight into why things happened in a particular way.
Similarly, being seen as a ‘boss’ became problematic because, rather than illuminating Aboriginal perceptions of work and employment, it served to emphasise my own cultural memory of employment ideology. By taking on a role in the context of employment, I was unable to observe the very cultural practices I set out to understand because of my own expectations of work and emotional involvement. In this way, my participation as boss obscured my view. This realisation was positive in that it highlighted two issues that needed to be considered before I re-entered the field. The first was the need for me to better understand the western employment ideology that permeates the institutional landscape of modern societies through an exploration of relevant literature. (This aspect of the research is investigated in chapter three). The second issue was that the benefits of being ‘boss’ had been exhausted and were exhausting.

The culmination of my learning through my first stage of fieldwork; the questions that it generated; and the theoretical investigations that followed, readied me for the second phase of fieldwork. The questions raised included: What is the nature of dominant or mainstream ‘work’ ideology and how has it evolved; how did this dominant ‘work’ ideology shape my own experiences in Ngukurr; and what influence did it have on the relationships between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people in my study setting?

**Fieldwork period two**

I entered this second period of fieldwork with an increased understanding of the structures of employment and its supporting ideology in mainstream Australian society. I had found that this ideology had played a significant role in shaping my own and other non-Aboriginal people’s experiences in Ngukurr. Through an extensive review of relevant literature, I was also now aware that contemporary meaning and values around employment were situated within complex power structures (see chapter three). Before entering the field for this second time I had also reviewed the literature on the historical circumstances of Aboriginal employment participation in Northern Australia and the Ngukurr region more
specifically. This literature revealed that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr had had a distinct employment history and that their experience had been one of struggle, resistance and acceptance, occurring simultaneously. This raised the questions; how did Aboriginal people in Ngukurr conceptualise this past, and ‘did this past influence contemporary ‘work’ ideology in the community? (The relevant literature and my findings around these questions are discussed in chapter four). Guided by these particular questions and with an aim to collect more specific and richer data on contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology at large, I recommenced field work on the 23rd February and remained in the field until the 28th March, 2007. This period of field work was during the tropical wet season.

Again, several factors influenced my engagement with the community and therefore my research findings. The first related to a changed accommodation arrangement. I was no longer accommodated in a demountable in the contractors’ compound. My various forms of accommodation during this fieldwork were significant in facilitating new relationships and exposed me to three distinct types of experiences.

The first of these experiences stemmed from staying overnight in a run-down demountable, which during the day was occupied by the Women Rangers. This building was located within a group of Aboriginal houses which provided a greater level of interaction for me with community members. The building remained a place where many young children would congregate to play as there was no longer any impediment to their access, unlike in the contractors’ compound. This experience gave me an insight into the prevalence of the large numbers of very active children in the community, as well as the challenges adult community members had in managing their behaviour, particularly as they often entered the employment environment of parents and family members.

This served to highlight the lack of delineation between different social spaces within Ngukurr and the inclusion of children in all spheres at all times (see chapter
eight for further discussion). In contrast, non-Aboriginal spheres generally have more defined times and spaces for children, such as playgrounds, day-care centres, schools and clinics. Children in mainstream Australian society are often only tolerated in adult spaces, such as places of employment, socialisation (such as pubs, clubs and restaurants) and even within sections of private housing (such as the master bedroom) rather than, as in Ngukurr, integral to them.

Within a week of my arrival in this second phase of field work, concerns were raised by non-Aboriginal staff in the community about the suitability of my demountable accommodation. The Chief Executive Office of the Council provided me with written notification that I was to secure more suitable accommodation or leave the community. In response, the non-Aboriginal Rangers staff offered me temporary accommodation in their house. While this temporarily distanced me from close associations with parts of the Aboriginal community, it provided me with a valuable insight into non-Aboriginal experiences of working with Aboriginal people.

Within a week, I had secured more permanent accommodation in a small, temporarily vacant, house owned by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education. This accommodation was located some distance from Aboriginal housing (in an educational precinct) and surrounded by non-Aboriginal housing. While I initially perceived this as a limitation in forging my new relationships, it was overcome by initiating social interactions with several young unmarried women. I invited them to visit me and they responded with enthusiasm. They often stayed with me overnight and through our relationship, they developed a sense of comfort and confidence, allowing them to invite other friends and family over. In this way, my house became a locus of social activity. Through this, I gained an intimate insight into the lives of these young women and their associates. I was able to explore their perceptions on the meanings and values of employment and ‘work’ in a particular socio-cultural and economic context. (The findings this experiences and subsequent others provided are discussed in chapter eight).
As previously indicated, during my second phase of fieldwork I placed an emphasis on the day to day activities of both those who were employed in the Western sense, and those who were not (i.e. were unemployed), in order to shed light on Aboriginal perceptions of work. It was at this point that I began to explore the notion of developing an informal time and motion study to better understand work patterns. This approach only became possible because of the established relationships that I had formed during this and the previous fieldwork period. This involved recording individuals’ daily activities and the amount of time spent on each. I followed and documented the daily routines of 5 women, ranging in age from 18 to 60, who were employed in a range of workplaces including the school, the childcare centre, the shop and as Rangers. I also followed the same process with 5 unemployed women. I was unable to undertake this with Aboriginal men because it would have been culturally inappropriate.

This research tool was found to have limited scope because of its simplistic approach to the categorisation of ‘work’ and or ‘non-work’ activities. The data gathered revealed that most activities integrated elements of both practices concurrently, regardless of how work was defined. This study did, however, highlight the complexity and interconnected nature of work and life for Aboriginal women in Ngukurr. I found that Aboriginal women in the unemployed category were as busy or as fully occupied as those in the employed category. This was an important finding that helped inform my subsequent field research because it prompted me to explore the idea of ‘meaningful activity’ as constituted by Aboriginal work ideology in this setting. (This field work and analysis is discussed in detail in chapter six, seven and eight).

On my return to Darwin I examined the literature on hunter gathers and work, Aboriginal kinship and work and the tensions between Western work ideology and Aboriginal life. This highlighted an anomaly in academic knowledge on this subject; this being that the majority of literature on the subject was generated from
within western knowledge systems. Work is such a central concept to Western culture and, as such, it is not surprising that the literature has a pre-occupation with defining work and in doing so making assumptions about its worth, value and meaning (Chapter seven discusses this literature and its relationship to my own fieldwork findings).

As a consequence of this exploration of the relevant literature, before re-entering the field for the final period of fieldwork investigation, I had a more in-depth understanding of the ambiguity within concepts of ‘work’. The multiple and even conflicting realities of everyday life in Ngukurr were what shaped Aboriginal work ideology in this setting. The guiding question that directed the final phase of field investigation was derived through this realisation and asked, ‘what are the dominant realities that influence peoples’ choices around work and employment?’.

**Fieldwork period three**

This final stage of fieldwork was undertaken between 3rd September to 11th October, 2007. As in previous fieldwork phases, my accommodation had a profound influence on the way in which I engaged with the community. When I arrived in Ngukurr, my planned accommodation in a non-Aboriginal house had become unavailable. Given my established relationships with a number of Aboriginal people and this accommodation situation, I was quickly invited to stay with an Aboriginal family and provided with my own room. This was despite their house already being overcrowded.

This phase of fieldwork was the most challenging and yet the most insightful. I believe I experienced a deep level of cultural immersion that I had not really imagined possible. During the previous periods of fieldwork I had always maintained an element of distance and personal space between myself and Aboriginal people, their culture and lifestyle. This final phase of fieldwork involved me becoming fully incorporated in the Aboriginal domain. A perceived limitation of this engagement may be that a significant quantity of data collected
during this time was gathered from the one family group, comprising approximately 25 adults ranging in age from 18-65. During this time, however, I did maintain relationships with numerous other people in the community from a diverse set of family groups.

This fieldwork experience gave me a great insight into living in a context of poverty, overcrowding and minimal household service provision. While I had, since the beginning of my research, been aware of Aboriginal economic disadvantage, it was not until I stayed with an Aboriginal family that the full impacts of poverty on all elements of life became profoundly apparent. I found that the experience of poverty was one that not only affected individuals’ health and living arrangements, but also their relationships with each other and with outsiders. I came to understand that poverty could not be understood as just a lack of economic resources and a profusion of physical ailments but was also associated with a particular way of seeing and engaging with the world. In past fieldwork trips I had cognitively recognised the impact of poverty on Aboriginal life in Ngukurr. But this final stage, provided me with the opportunity to personally “feel” poverty and gain an insight into how it can profoundly influence people’s actions, perceptions and the meanings of daily life.

Interpretation and Analysis of Data

As previously suggested, ethnography involves observing; detailing, describing, and analysing data to understand cultural patterns depicted by the way people live (Leininger 1985). The process of interpretation and analysis of the data collected during my field visits was continual and reflective. It involved preliminary data analysis at the end of each day of fieldwork. At the end of each fieldwork period the data collected was coded using QRS NVivo qualitative data analysis software into themes under major inquiry headings. Similar to grounded theory techniques I used open coding and constant comparison to explore relationships and themes in the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990).
This analysis of data and the identification of themes triggered additional secondary data collection to further explore particular themes. This process also helped inform and guide future lines of inquiry and methods of data collection used in subsequent fieldwork periods. On completion of all fieldwork the themes were reflected upon and reviewed and the data re-coded to encompass the complete data set. This repeated immersion in the data was done to reaffirm and consolidate the findings and to capture the richness and depth of data collected. It also validated the data by minimising the influence of the various limitations of the ethnographic process and fieldwork circumstances identified earlier in this chapter.

Conclusion

This ethnography on the ideology, meanings and values of work in a remote Aboriginal community, used participant observation as its principle data collection technique. This was deemed the most appropriate method of inquiry. The rigor in this research was achieved through maintaining objectivity by breaking up the fieldwork experience into three separate phases allowing for reflection on and adjustment of themes and methods. The validity of the findings were maximized by the corresponding continual analysis, reevaluation and coding of data assisted by the NVIVO software.

The limitation of researcher bias is recognized and was minimised in this study by continual reflection on my position as researcher and by attempts to withhold judgment during the course of fieldwork. In order to minimise other perceived limitations in the data I changed my approach when necessary. I was also fortunate through the circumstances of my fieldwork experiences to be able to engage with the community on a number of different levels and from different positions or relationships. I was able to connect with people from a number of different perspectives, as a useful resource (e.g. taxi driver), as a work supervisor, as a non-Aboriginal person with perceived knowledge of mainstream culture, and
as a family member and friend. This enabled me to meet and engage with a diverse range of people including; males and females; people of all ages; members of different families; employed and unemployed; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. I believe the richness of my experience has provided me with a unique insight and understanding of the culture surrounding ‘work’ in the Ngukurr community.

I have structured the remaining and major part of this thesis to reflect the journey of both my experiences and the literature that has informed and guided the research. The following chapter explores the concept of ‘work’ from the position of non-Aboriginal perceptions and the cultural context in which it has developed. This chapter explores the issues that emerged from my first period of fieldwork; the need for me to better understand western employment and the work ideology that permeates the institutional landscape of modern societies.
CHAPTER THREE
VALUES AND PERCEPTIONS OF NON-ABORIGINAL WORK CULTURE

Introduction

This chapter explores the work ideology of ‘paid employment’ through reflection on my personal experience of working in Ngukurr and the experience of other non-Aboriginal people employed in the community. This discussion exposes the dominant assumptions associated with the notion of ‘work’ within the non-Aboriginal sphere of community life and begins to raise questions about their possible historical, social and cultural foundations.

The word ‘work’ in non-Aboriginal dialogue can mean countless and sometimes even conflicting things. As Cuilla (2000: 28) states,

We do work and we go to a place called work. Work is something we have, something we own, and something we make. There are works of art, architecture, music, and literature. One can admire the work of a surgeon, an accountant, an auto mechanic, or a carpet salesman. We can work a room, a piece of wood, bread dough, or a stuck lock. We can work it out, work out, do good works, work someone over, or get worked up, and if we’re not careful, we can even become workaholics.

However it is exceedingly obvious that in capitalist societies the dominant use of the word ‘work’ in public and political discourse refers to the activity and structures of paid employment. Existing behind this specific understanding is a culturally and socially constructed ideology that places significance on this kind of work and attributes it with particular meanings and values (see Anthony 1977; Gamst 1984; Moorhouse 1987; Sayers 1988; Applebaum 1992; Meda 1996; White 1997; Sennett 1998; Beder 2000).
The latter part of this chapter reviews literature that documents the processes by which ‘work’ as paid employment has come to be associated with particular meanings, values and structures in western capitalist societies. It places my own and other non-Aboriginal people’s assumptions within an historical and cultural framework. The historical developments of work and its value are then juxtaposed against the associated discourse surrounding those who do not work (the unemployed). The final section of this chapter highlights the strength of western work ideology and questions its possible impact on cross-cultural relationships between Aboriginal people and mainstream society.

My Experience as ‘Boss’

My personal experience of supervising Aboriginal workers provided me with an insight into the experiences of other non-Aboriginal people employed in Ngukurr. I became acutely aware that very few Aboriginal people interacted with non-Aboriginal employed people other than during ‘work hours’. During these work-based interactions, non-Aboriginal people were nearly always in a position of relative power when compared with Aboriginal people. This occurred when Aboriginal people were interacting with their white supervisor or manager or, for example, when they were visiting the clinic, school or Council and engaging with the nurse, teacher or the Chief Executive Officer.

I observed this power dynamic throughout my entire fieldwork. A consequence of this dynamic was that Aboriginal people perceived, and often referred to, non-Aboriginal people as ‘bosses’. Because the only interaction many non-Aboriginal people had with Aborigines was during work hours, their dominant perceptions of Aboriginal people and their culture was shaped in a work environment. While non-Aboriginal people may have been seen as ‘bosses’, Aboriginal people were regarded as ‘workers’. During each of my fieldwork periods, I observed numerous
social interactions which confirmed that non-Aboriginal people perceived Aboriginal work values as being in conflict with their own. The ideas that Aboriginal ‘workers’ were: lacking a sufficient ‘work ethic’; frustrating and demanding; not trustworthy; with limited motivation; often manipulative; and as having different understandings around the nature of relationships and associated behaviours, was evident in everyday life.

My role as supervisor of the *Ngukurr News* was not my own initiative. I had agreed to be involved in the project for I believed it would provide an avenue for engagement with the community and a platform from which to establish relationships during my first phase of fieldwork. I had not envisaged that I would become the ‘boss’ of this project. When first talking with Aboriginal people interested in working on the paper, I explained that, ‘I’ll just be there to help out with things’, and ‘you can make all the decisions and just tell me what to do’. I was, without consciously realising it, attempting to position myself at the bottom of the Western workplace hierarchy due to a belief that they would want to, or should want to hold the position of authority; a position I regarded as being afforded more respect and importance. Not only did I believe I was ‘empowering’ the locals, but I also counteracted this by arrogantly assuming a position which said, ‘I can give you the right to make a decision if you want to’.

Yet, as mentioned, the norm in Ngukurr was for non-Aboriginal people to be positioned in the higher echelons of the workplace hierarchy. The Aboriginal people I was to work with, despite my feeble protests, positioned me in the role of ‘boss’. This was expressed through their deferral to me for the thrust of workplace direction, what stories to cover, when and how to cover them and what form and organisational structures the newspaper should adopt. From very early on they also began introducing me to other community members as their ‘boss’ or the ‘boss’ of the newspaper. This situation was the first of many that became a catalyst for questioning my own assumptions with regard to the meanings, values and structures of work. It revealed to me that the Aboriginal people I was working
with were not interested in holding the position of authority I had so patronisingly bestowed upon them. This led me to question why it was that I had assumed they would take up this opportunity with enthusiasm and possibly even thank me for putting them there. Reflecting on this, with more understanding I am amused at the absurdity of my assumptions.

During this period I also became aware that many non-Aboriginal people in the community also assumed that I would fulfil the role of ‘boss’ or in their case ‘supervisor’ of Aboriginal workers. Without any discussion with me, the non-Aboriginal CDEP coordinator gave me a handful of time-sheets. I was then expected to fill out these time-sheets for the Aboriginal workers now deemed ‘under’ my control. This led me to contemplate why it was that non-Aboriginal people in this community were placed in positions of authority by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and what was the reasoning behind this particular phenomenon. However, more importantly, I also began to question why it was that I had, without much protest, firstly let myself be put in this position and, secondly, had felt obligated to fulfil the responsibilities I perceived to be associated with the position.

My own ideas and beliefs around work were again challenged when I found that the Aboriginal people I was supervising had little regard for the regimented clock-time I assumed to be an important and integral part of the work experience. Although the newspaper workers would often come to work, the time they would arrive could vary greatly, as would the time they stayed. I felt this strange need to try and enforce a regimented working day and only on reflection did I realise I was perplexed by this seeming lack of discipline because of my own assumptions about the nature of ‘work’.

Another example of a challenge to my own unconscious understanding of work routines was highlighted when, despite my subversive efforts, the newspaper did not come out on the same day every fortnight. This made me very uncomfortable
because for it to come out ‘on time’, I would have to be a pushy boss or just do it all myself – which I was not about to do because of my stance on empowerment. In addition to this, I suspected that the non-Aboriginal people in the community would judge me on my lack of a sufficient ‘work ethic’ and my lax attitude to being a ‘boss’. This unease was exacerbated by my observations of and conversations with other non-Aboriginal staff. It was not uncommon for one staff member to make judgements on another’s ‘work ethic’ or perceived lack there of; [they] “never do anything” or [they] “can’t do their job”. The expectations placed on non-Aboriginal people by other non-Aboriginal staff, and the constant surveillance by staff of each other, created an environment where individuals, including myself, felt they were constantly being judged by their non-Aboriginal peers.

After reflecting on this situation, I began to think critically about why I felt such pressure to conform to the cultural expectations of achieving deadlines and completing objectives in the workplace. My Aboriginal workers were unconcerned about whether the paper came out today, tomorrow, or even next week; the Aboriginal community at large also seemed unconcerned. Yet, I was thinking that my ‘performance’ at work would affect how others in the community (Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) viewed me and this was important to me. It brought to the fore, the fact that ‘work’ is a structuring component of my social identity; if I did not do my work well, people would not think well of me and I would be unhappy and would need to better my own performance.

This concern was also reflected in the experience of other non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. I observed that they would become anxious at work, particularly when their Aboriginal workers did not wait until a scheduled break and went off to the shop during ‘work time’. Their main concern was that ‘their’ workers might be seen by other non-Aboriginal people, thus reflecting poorly on their own work performance. This led to a situation of bosses attempting to conceal or hide their workers from prying eyes, in particular those eyes of the administrators in the
community. By judging their own and others status as supervisors or managers, non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr exhibited an assumption that what work you did, and how you did it, was an expression of your worth as an individual.

The expectations and value judgements around work made by outside bodies, such as funding providers and government departments, also had a profound influence in shaping my own and other non-Aboriginal people’s experience. The difference between the expectations of such bodies, with their focus on measured outcomes, and the actual experience of working with Aboriginal people on the ground underpinned many of the dilemmas about ‘work’ experienced by myself and other non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. My own experience of being a CDEP supervisor highlighted this tension, as I was legislatively bound by the Department of Education and Workplace Relations to only pay people for the hours they did work. Concurrently, I felt morally bound to my news reporters, who may well have worked harder had I been a better ‘boss’, and who, if I did not put hours down, would get no money which, in the context of their poverty, seemed an unthinkable outcome.

My compulsion towards particular ‘work’ behaviours and work expectations was further emphasised in my final phase of fieldwork. While staying within an Aboriginal household my bedroom was often used as a night time gathering point for a number of ‘unemployed’ Aboriginal people. I distinctly remember that on one occasion when they thought I was asleep one young woman queried with perplexity why it was that I was sleeping rather than engaging in the obviously more enticing social interaction that was occurring. Another explained with sympathy “poorbella [having sympathy for] im [she] think im [she] got to get up and go la [to] work”. This person believed that I was possessed by white people’s work behaviours. They did not interpret my studying them at “camp” as work.
Non-Aboriginal Work Attitudes and Interactions

During my fieldwork experiences at Ngukurr, I consistently observed a diversity of attitudes and beliefs held by non-Aboriginal people about Aboriginal workers and their culture, society and identity. These different attitudes and beliefs were expressed in a number of ways; as rivalry between non-Aboriginal staff over their ability to succeed in their work endeavours, through degrees of empathy for Aboriginal circumstance, and as unacceptable and anti-social beliefs and behaviours.

A diversity in attitudes and beliefs often led to contention between non-Aboriginal staff in the community about work expectations. I was witness to many heated arguments; frequent complaints; expressions of anxiety; general irritation; and apparent ‘burn out’. The isolation of working in Ngukurr, combined with the profoundly different cultural environment, exacerbated the tension between non-Aboriginal employees. These reasons were strong contributors to individuals only staying in their job for a relatively short period, such as one or two years. Cowlishaw (1999) refers to this as ‘nomadism’ of white staff and proposes that this transitory nature is legitimised through discourse around career paths and the value of professional development and personal experience.

The changing social dynamics and ‘dramas’ within the non-Aboriginal domain were intense. They often affected the employment environment of all people in the community, regardless of their race. These tensions largely centred on issues like, ‘what is best for the Aboriginal people’, ‘what is best for the community’ and ‘what is the righteous or moral thing to do’, coupled with self interest and gain. The answers to these questions were generally expressed through individuals’ unique experience of the world and their own sense of being.
As discussed earlier, most non-Aboriginal people did not interact with Aboriginal people outside of work hours. Evidence from Bern (1974) suggests that this bounded interaction is not a new phenomenon. He stated in his thesis that “most contact between staff and village people takes place in the work situation. This is invariably a relationship of inequality in which the European is in the super-ordinate position…” (Bern 1974: 98-99). I found that primarily, non-Aboriginals ‘worked’ with Aboriginal people rather than socialised or spent leisure time with them. While individuals would probably proffer multiple ideas about what work meant, if asked, in a social context work was invariably understood by most non-Aboriginal people as: being structured by time and space; associated with discrete periods (for example 9am to 5pm); and as paid employment.

Endeavouring to confine relationships with Aboriginal people within the work sphere was an attempt to protect their valued private or leisure time. This pointed to a dichotomy between work and leisure in their understandings of daily life. Frustration often emerged because it was realised that Aboriginal people did not always ‘respect’ these distinct spheres of public work time and private leisure time. Choosing not to socialise with Aboriginal people outside of work was viewed as an essential mechanism to protect themselves from the anticipated demands and expectations associated with more intimate relationships. It was obvious that non-Aboriginal people viewed Aboriginal people as operating under different social and cultural norms. Yet on many occasions, I became aware that Aboriginal people did indeed acknowledge these distinctions non-Aboriginal people made about time and respected that their relationships with these people were principally to be played out during ‘work hours’.

Layered over this time issue, was the fact that non-Aboriginal people often expressed frustration over what they understood was their job role and the interpretations and expectations Aboriginal people shared about their role in the community. One non-Aboriginal staff member commented:
At the end of the day I just want to escape to my house and relax, get away from it all. It’s just so hard to get anything done, what I’m supposed to do you know, because people are always coming up asking for this and that, getting upset because I haven’t done this or that, even if it’s not my job. I am always busy doing other people’s work, its crazy. Things coming up all the time, people coming to see me; I just have so much work. It’s demanding and at the end of the day I just need my own space.

Given the social and cultural background of the non-Aboriginal people in my research, it was an expected response that they would actively reinforce the work/leisure dualism as an important coping mechanism in a context where their own work ideology was being challenged on a daily basis. If non-Aboriginal people did not instinctively set up these frameworks for living in this community, they would either burn out within months or cross over and immerse themselves fully into the Aboriginal domain. The consequence of the latter outcome would probably mean that the individual had surrendered their attachment to career ambition and professional development.

The notion that Aboriginal people do not demarcate or respect the distinct spheres of work-time and private-time valued by non-Aboriginal people was only one of the perceived cultural tensions in Ngukurr. I found that some non-Aboriginal people believed their workers lacked a sufficient ‘work ethic’ relative to their own and other non-Aboriginal people’s. One staff member commented, “staffing here is like a revolving door”. I also often heard complaints from non-Aboriginal staff about workers not turning up or leaving before they were supposed to, as captured by statements like: “most workers are just unreliable” or “Nobody is at work today, just one up here and only two showed up at the oval, it is just a disgrace” or “yet again, the problem we have is people not going to work”.

Not showing up for work was viewed as confronting by many non-Aboriginal staff because of their own understandings of and values towards employment. They placed significant importance on an individual’s commitment to their employment and employer and believed that, relative to their own dedication Aboriginal people
were deficient in this regard. Concerns about individuals not turning up for work were also associated with their own understandings of their employment role. Many saw their role as encouraging Aboriginal people to conform to their ‘perceived’ work behaviours as well as to conform to the ‘real’ work behaviours expected by the statutory employment framework in the community.

The majority of non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr often engaged with each other in socially ‘accepted’ discourse around Aboriginal people and their ‘problems’. Most of these people acknowledged the colonial and post-colonial processes of dispossession and disempowerment to which Aboriginal people had been subjected. Consequently, they felt empathy for their struggle and admiration for Aboriginal resilience. With regard to employment, this sector of the non-Aboriginal population attempted to understand and have respect for the way Aboriginal people negotiated the sphere of ‘employment’. Essentially, this understanding was gained through reflection and articulation of their own cultural assumptions around the structures and meanings of work and life. I found that these non-Aboriginal people had a willingness to recognise the possibility of there being historical, cultural and social factors that lead to difficulties with, and tensions around, engaging, understanding and valuing employment.

As with my own experience of being a ‘boss’, even when there is such a recognition and a willingness to try and make accommodations in the work environment, the experience can still be exasperating. I observed many non-Aboriginal people becoming extremely frustrated by the incessant demands and difficulties of trying to minimise the tensions between the rules and regulation of employment programs; the associated expectations placed on them as non-Aboriginal staff members; and the multiple and sometimes conflicting work ideologies of Aboriginal people, other non-Aboriginal staff and themselves. They often felt torn between the expectations of funding bodies, their own and others expectations around how work should or should not be done and what these
expectations said about them as individuals, their motivations and place in the world.

I also found that a popular belief amongst non-Aboriginal staff was that Aboriginal people should be ‘more disciplined’. This was continually reinforced through discussions, for example: “Aboriginal people need to take more responsibility, they don’t take any responsibility. Nothing gets done; people just lose interest in things”. A small, but significant sector of the non-Aboriginal people found it difficult to comprehend why people did not come, stay, or adequately participate in employment. I found that this group consistently associated this behaviour with notions of laziness, lack of responsibility or discipline, ignorance and ‘bludging’. The idea of being ‘unemployed’ or unwilling to work in prescribed ways was associated with negative attributes such as idleness, irresponsibility and deficient understandings around the supposed universal value and meaning of ‘work’.

These non-Aboriginal people’s views were firmly positioned within notions of paternalism. Aboriginal people were seen as needing to be taught ‘work values’ and that, by lacking these, they were deficient in some profoundly significant way. Musharbash (2001) also found, in her Yuendumu case study, that non-Aboriginal staff saw Aboriginal workers from such a position. She suggested that they felt the need to teach and nurture particular understandings of the value and meaning of work to Aboriginal people, who were believed to have not been adequately exposed to the employment requirements of mainstream society. Examples of this view are illustrated by the following comments that were shared with me:

…you know what they are like
…they’re so hopeless
…They’re like little kids, you have to encourage them
… tell them ‘you have done a good job’ and I might let them go an hour early as a reward

….They don’t bloody understand the principles of work; the poor blokes have no fucking idea. I came out here to help them. When they come to work I give them encouragement, tell them I’m happy to see them and the sort, try and impart some of my skills onto them.
This small section of the population of Ngukurr, I would suggest, saw Aboriginal people as ‘whitefellas in waiting’ at least, and at the most saw them as empty vessels waiting to be filled with the ‘proper’ and ‘right’ work behaviours and associated values. This paternalistic and assimilationist attitude was affronting to my own sensibilities and on numerous occasions I felt it verged on blatant racism. I was confronted by the reality that people with such attitudes towards Aboriginal people, society and culture had chosen to work in an Aboriginal community. Despite my strong feelings, I was able to internalise these encounters and not openly express my views, thereby retaining my academic independence. My coping mechanism was that I acknowledged that these views stemmed from ignorance and that these people would most likely only remain in the community for a short time.

My research also revealed another small but distinct group of non-Aboriginal people who saw Aboriginal people as inferior in every way; as remnants of a lost past and primitive, dirty and uncivilised. These kinds of attitudes were shared with me in private discussions. Most alarmingly, they were often proffered to me in front of Aboriginal people. It was not uncommon for one of these particular non-Aboriginal people, with an air of authority, to tell me about the ‘problem of the Aborigine’, with the condescending and unconscious assumption, that they understood ‘Aborigines’ better than they understood themselves. I would feel quite embarrassed in these situations for I was regarded as the proper recipient of this information, while the Aboriginal people listening would be either ignored or patronizingly referred to with ‘isn’t that right’ or some similar comment.

I also participated in many discussions with non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr about Aboriginal behaviours, attitudes, culture, society and identity. Not all of these discussions of the ‘Aboriginal problem’ were conducted with disrespect. My thesis could also be viewed as an expression of my assumed authority on Aboriginal issues, which therefore scrutinises and makes judgements about
Aboriginals. Cowlishaw (1999) stresses that, particularly in the Northern Territory, communication about Aborigines by others can take place at any time, often even in their presence, and that these everyday utterances render Aborigines and their social world as objects of scrutiny. There is an assumption “that all white people can speak together with authority about ‘the natives’”. She questions where “all this common taken-for-granted knowledge of how to view and speak about Aborigines” has come from (Cowlishaw 1999: 46). This question is one that emerged through my own experience and, while not explored fully, this thesis does provide some insights into Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships within the context of the work situation.

The pressures experienced by non-Aboriginal people in the employment environment meant, that in addition to the work-leisure divide, many non-Aboriginal people developed a suite of coping mechanisms in the multifaceted and sometimes confronting social and cultural environment in which they found themselves. I found that these people would focus effort during ‘work-hours’ on attempting to satisfy the powers of authority, government departments and funding bodies, through encouraging Aboriginal people to conform to particular expectations. This endeavour was two-fold. First and foremost, if they did not satisfy these authorities they might lose their employment position and, secondly, by encouraging such conformity there was a possibility they could maintain or enhance the money and resources available to the community. The latter was viewed as a constructive aim in the context of poverty and helped to provide the individual with a feeling of achievement. By understanding their work as positive and purposeful, they were able to attribute meaning to the experience and subsequently maintain their own motivation in this difficult environment.

My field experience revealed that there were many different perspectives within the non-Aboriginal domain with regard to effective employment motivation strategies. One staff member believed that supervisors should be forceful, particularly in the beginning. They suggested it was a good and effective strategy
to go to the Aboriginal worker’s house before work started and if necessary drag them out of bed. This person stated that this forcefulness did not necessarily need to be ongoing, for “people would develop a sense of pride in what they were doing and would develop a work ethic”. However, when I asked for more specific examples or detail the supervisor became a little vague and admitted “it seems to work for a time, but then something else might come up and they stop coming”. Another approach used to motivate Aboriginal workers was that of ‘showing through doing’. The non-Aboriginal supervisor believed a successful strategy was proving that they could and would do the tasks they were asking of their workers: 

I have found that it is better to show them that you can work and will do all the kinds of jobs that you want them to do. It is no good being a bull at a gate and sitting in the office just giving orders. When they know that you would do it yourself but are busy with something else they are happy to do what you tell them.

I also found that a common perception among non-Aboriginal supervisors was that in order to motivate workers it was important to give direction. It was believed that if the Aboriginal workers were not given particular tasks to complete in the workplace they were unlikely to exercise initiative on their own, “they would just sit there, waiting for me to tell them to do something”. One insightful non-Aboriginal person questioned why this was the case. He suggested that possibly he had taken on the role of ‘boss’, without being consciously aware of it and now his workers expected it of him. He suggested that maybe the desire to control situations in a particular way and utilize ‘time’ effectively is built into western culture. He considered this to be so engrained that Western people inevitably take on the role of ‘boss’ in situations where the work environment is different in order to create a sense of familiarity and control. His postulation reflects, in part, my own experience of being ‘boss’, which led me to also question my cultural heritage and its possible influence on my understandings of the structures, meanings and values of work and my own behaviour in workplaces that are different.
I also found that a popular way of trying to motivate workers was through attempts at drawing them into the planning process, engaging them in discussions about what ‘work’ they wanted to do and what work activities were of priority to them. This process of consultation was associated with a belief in the importance of encouraging community control and empowerment. It was also related to the notion that if people were involved in defining and planning work activities they would have a greater commitment to the project and would more readily conform to the associated ‘work’ expectations. I witnessed many examples where this motivational strategy was used to greater effect than alternative strategies. Yet it did not always create the outcomes which the non-Aboriginal supervisor had hoped for. This is illustrated through the comments of one non-Aboriginal person who had great insight, commitment and empathy for Aboriginal people:

> It was so frustrating. I wanted to shout at some of the workers, ‘why are you here? You don’t want to work’. It’s like they work really hard trying to work as little as possible. I don’t mind when people don’t want to work and they tell me straight out, but I hate how people just talk bullshit and lie on their timesheets, and don’t respect you because they expect you to just swallow the bullshit. It is not my ideas about what projects to do, they are their ideas, but now they have the funding they don’t seem all that interested anymore.

This quote illustrates not only the personal frustration felt by this person, but also the sense that she did not feel that her empathy and respect was being reciprocated by Aboriginal people. This was felt at a very personal level and did not just impact on her work or public identity but also on her private persona.

I also became aware through my interactions with non-Aboriginal people, that the idea of bestowing responsibility on Aboriginal workers through trusting them was proposed as a possible and potentially successful motivational strategy. Yet I found that in reality non-Aboriginal people working in Ngukurr often struggled with particular situations that involved trusting Aboriginal workers. At the most extreme level they did not trust Aboriginal people’s ability to take any responsibility in the work place. Such comments as “they will steal everything”,
“they can’t be trusted to look after anything”, “you just can’t trust them”, are extreme examples of this stance.

In contrast, I found that even those who trusted Aboriginal people in the work environment to varying degrees often had their own stories or had heard stories about where this trust had been breached. For example, there was considerable discussion on the misuse of vehicles by Aboriginal workers. These stories usually began with the non-Aboriginal person asking an Aboriginal worker to drive somewhere to pick up something or someone. Behind this request would be the assumption or expectation that the worker would return directly after completing the prescribed ‘job’. Invariable this assumption was challenged and the expectation unfulfilled. I observed many such occasions when non-Aboriginal people would become quite frantic over the fact that a vehicle had not been returned and that reports were surfacing in the community that it was being used for purposes not approved of by the non-Aboriginal supervisor.

A further example that reinforced non-Aboriginal people’s perceptions of the untrustworthy nature of their workers was associated with a telephone that was ‘only’ to be used for ‘work related’ calls. This telephone had accumulated such an excessive phone bill that the non-Aboriginal person could only assume that it had been used for purposes that did not fit within her understanding of ‘work related’. While Aboriginal workers may have felt and in fact in this instance, argued that all calls had been ‘work related’ or otherwise ‘emergencies’, the supervisor found herself in a conflicted position. She did not know how to explain to the funding bodies, who were meant to pay the bill and to which she was accountable, that this excessive bill was somehow justifiable. The supervisor resolved this tension around what was and was not ‘work related’ by subsequently only allowing the telephone to receive in-coming calls.

I also observed another non-Aboriginal supervisor in a similar position of conflicting understandings about ‘work’ relating to notions of ‘work space’. The
supervisor found herself in a difficult and uncomfortable position when she had decided that it was not appropriate for one of her Aboriginal workers to have a key to the office. This worker with the key had been unable or unwilling to prevent children and other family members from using the building for activities perceived by both non-Aboriginal and also some Aboriginal people as unrelated to ‘work’. Damage had been caused in the office, things had been lost and complaints by other Aboriginal people about the situation had been raised with the non-Aboriginal supervisor. After much deliberation, she had decided that this person, who was a very influential Aboriginal elder, should relinquish her keys. The elder’s response of, “why do I have to ask munanga [white person] for la key, that make me shame”, made the supervisor feel anxious and uncomfortable.

**Challenging western work ideology**

My personal and observed experience in Ngukurr highlighted the many assumptions I had in regards to what was to be valued in the employment environment and how my and others behaviour in this environment was intimately linked to perceptions of identity. Never had I become so acutely aware of the multiple personas western people have in their lives, for instance, the workplace or public identity, the school or parent identity or even the Saturday night persona.

I had previously supposed Aboriginal people would value the hierarchical structure of western work and would wish to ‘climb the ladder’, as we often say, and have an interest in attaining more authority, power and prestige in the workplace. This notion was based on my assumption that there were particular directions and drives around establishing a ‘career’. Employment for me was more than just about financial rewards, it was also about social status and identity. I had seen this process as a logical one in the pathway to self-determination.

The importance that non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr placed on organising and achieving in the employment environment were not generally reflected in the attitudes or behaviour of Aboriginal people. Musharbash (2001) has similarly
highlighted in her study of the Warlpiri people of central Australia, that in many respects Indigenous work behaviours and attitudes contrasted starkly with non-Indigenous persons’ perceptions of their own work ethic. My experiences and those related by others (Cowlsihaw 1999; Musharbash 2001), became a catalyst in my questioning about where Western attitudes to employment and work had stemmed from and why there was a pervasive need to provide structure, complete designated tasks and attribute value to work and the importance of being purposefully employed. After my first phase of fieldwork I returned to Darwin and (as discussed in my methodology chapter) began to explore literature that focused on the phenomenon of ‘work’ or employment in Western society

The Dominance of a Western Work Ideology

My fieldwork confirmed the notion that non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, including myself, have a work ideology that is deeply embedded in Western capitalist society. Common threads of this ideology have been illustrated through the above discussion and include: work being principally understood as paid employment; as a time structured phenomenon; as pivotal to constructions of social identity; as a moral imperative; and as an accepted necessity of everyday life in the modern world. This kind of ‘work’ is fundamentally different from other activities referred to as work (e.g. house work or artistic work). Gorz (1989) has pointed out that it is the former that distinguishes industrial societies from earlier or other forms of society. It both revolves around it, and is its chief means and its ultimate goal. Gorz (1989) argues that ‘work’ in such a context is by far the most important factor of socialization, even for those who are seeking it, preparing for it, or who lack it. A consequence of this is that ‘work’ has become “so general and commonplace that we believe it to be a matter of common sense and general agreement; our assumptions about it are so basic that we do not even recognise them as assumptions” (Anthony 1977: 3).
Brief and Nord (1990) also suggest that such cultural and social assumptions about work are evident in the large majority of studies that purport to analyse the value and meaning of work. This has meant that the ‘particular’ has been mistaken for the ‘universal’, and that Western historical and social assumptions about ‘work’ have infiltrated dominant global understandings of employment. As Gamst (1984: 58) stated, “to a large extent we are trapped by our own cultural heritage when attempting to reflect upon the nature of work”. My research in Ngukurr is a testament to the way in which western work ideology dominates actions and expectations of non-Aboriginal workers employed in this Aboriginal community.

According to Weber (1930) and Applebaum (1992), in modern capitalist societies, in order to get people to work with some degree of effort, intelligence, skill and motivation, some type of ideology is necessary for people to justify to themselves that what they are doing is the right thing. As Beder (2000) argued, the acceptance of capitalist values by workers in such societies has not developed only through force and coercion, but by ensuring the existence of an ideology that sees work and wealth as a virtue. This ideology has not only infiltrated most social institutions in modern capitalist society but has also had a profound effect on members of that society. Beder (2000:263) stated, it is the social order that results from such values that has “come to be seen as natural, desirable, morally right and inevitable”.

Anthony (1977) points out that capitalist work ideology has been so successful in achieving its goals, that there is now near-universal agreement about the desirability of economic growth, the accumulation of wealth, efficiency and productivity, and that these are all based on hard work. He contends that perhaps there is no theoretical challenge to the system of values supported by an ideology of work because all alternative systems of values have virtually been destroyed. He suggests that at best, there are subordinate debates concerning its differential rewards. Work has become the dominant idea in our lives. Anthony’s (1977: 274) argument is that even institutions and political theories which, at first, appear to “offer radical challenges turn out, on closer examination to be, like trade unions,
essentially economic organisations or like communism, even more pure apostles of the theology of work”. This raised the question of how this ideology developed and its implications for contemporary work ideologies in Ngukurr.

**The transformation of work behaviours**

The literature on the concept of ‘work’ suggests that, for the ancient Greeks and Romans, the idea of work was perceived differently from contemporary conceptions and consequently had attributed to it different values and meanings. The extensive works of the primary philosophers of Ancient Greece, Plato and Aristotle, provide an accessible insight into the ‘work’ ideology of the time. These philosophers perceived work as something that distracted the individual from the more important and meaningful things in life. It was viewed as a waste of the citizen’s time and more significantly a hindrance to the pursuit of truth and virtue (Gorz 1989; Nord et al 1990; Applebaum 1992; Beder 2000). Likewise, for the Romans, work was not highly valued; it was the two activities of war and politics that marked the nobility and aristocracy in these times (Applebaum 1992).

The point here, however, is that an ideology that values work is redundant when the labour force can be conscripted and coerced at will, as in an economy founded on slavery (Anthony 1977). Yet when slavery begins to decline and a freer labour market evolves, the development of a positive and persuasive work ideology becomes essential. When people are no longer forced to work, labour must be recruited through developing a belief system that encourages people to place a specific value on the importance and meaning of work. This is essential if a society is to move beyond a subsistence economy to one that produces a surplus for market or taxation. For example, rulers’ taxes require surplus production and hence employment. The concept of work must then begin to be taken seriously and ideologies developed that can persuade the potential labour force that they themselves and the tasks they are to perform are necessary and meaningful. Such ideologies reflect the work environment of the historical period and are open to change and adaptation as work contexts have changed through the ages.
The literature suggests that in pre-industrial or medieval western societies, work and life were indistinguishable from each other (Applebaum 1992). The economic relationships at this time did not stress effort, zeal or initiative but rather just the simple performance of obligations (Keen 1969; Anthony 1977). Work in medieval times was not given an intrinsic value in and of itself but rather was still only a means to an end. In pre-industrial times most of an individual’s work was done in and for the household (Pahl 1988). The viability of the household was the crucial priority in life. It was to this end that people ‘worked’ and there was no natural assumption that wage labour was a superior form of employment (Pahl 1988).

Work as a distinct sphere of life only began to emerge when markets developed (Anthony 1977: 30). However, it is simplistic to suppose that the feudal system of the middle ages just gave way to the development of the market economy and subsequently capitalism. The changes in fact took over four hundred years and were the result of complex social forces, which are still the subject of considerable disagreement among specialists and historians today.

The introduction and subsequent internalisation of capitalist labour relations and values by the majority of the western populous was slow and often accompanied by oppression. Thompson (1963, 1967) has demonstrated that it was a long and difficult task to persuade, and at times to force, people to adapt to the new industrial framework, and that many forms of resistance were evident. It was common during this period for complaints to be aired by governments, employers and influential individuals about the apparent laziness and deficient work behaviours of the general or working population (Thompson 1963). By the ideological standards of this new industrial society, people with pre-capitalist ideology were seen as ‘unreliable’ and ‘lazy’, lacking ‘discipline’ and ‘energy’. Of interest here is that these same complaints are frequently expressed in contemporary times by Western employers in the developing world context, where the ‘natives’ are often represented as being ‘poor workers’ (Sayers 1988: 730).
The fact that some non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr also expressed similar complaints is just a continuation of such a tradition. This raises the question, is this social response of any surprise, when engaging Aboriginal workers within the capitalist world? If it is, what are the implications of this for Aboriginal self-determination, empowerment, liberation and resistance, economies and community development? The answer to these questions is something only time can tell. However, the evidence points to the likelihood of such processes of perception change taking longer than my life time. The social, cultural, physical and economic pressures that push and pull and shape perceptions and identity are complex and do not occur in a vacuum.

Sayers (1988) has argued that, in the emerging industrialised system, while the first factory workers bitterly resisted the new system, the system eventually prevailed as people internalised the new attitudes. Thompson (1967) suggested that, to some extent, this was achieved through seven key points; a growth in the division of labour; increasing supervision of labour; incorporating fines into the work place; the implementation of bells and clocks; money incentives; the suppression of fairs and sports; and an increase in ‘work ethic’ preaching and schooling. The dominant work ideology, which was actively enforced by social institutions during these times, encouraged the ‘worker’ to be satisfied with work that was based on discipline, control of time and product by others, and to willingly engage in a system of rational calculation of all activities directed towards the goals of profit. It also placed considerable value on the notion of a male breadwinner supporting his dependants (Wallman 1979; Brief and Nord 1990; Cuilla 2000). How this ideology has shaped Aboriginal labour relations in the Northern part of Australia and specifically in Ngukurr will be discussed in greater detail in the following two chapters of this thesis.

**Time, work, leisure and balance**

Most studies of ‘work’ usually assume that ‘work’ refers to the labour relations of capitalist societies; that ‘work’ equals paid employment (Aronowitz and DiFazio
The body of literature that investigates different kinds of work, such as that not renumerated, and often attempts to provide broader or cross-cultural definitions of ‘work’ will be discussed in chapter six. But it is paid employment that receives significantly more attention. The predominant focus of this literature is the structures and experiences of paid employment, work values and the optimisation of work effort. This literature firmly places the roots of contemporary work ideology and its development in the era of industrialisation. Pre-industrial culture is often perceived of (in these texts) as a time of more satisfying and meaningful work experiences; where work and life were indistinguishable (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848], Weber 1930 [1904], Tawney 1964; Sahlins 1972). Godelier (1980) has suggested that it was not until the emergence of political economy in the eighteenth century, that the notion of ‘work’, as separate from its specific form, became a key concept in discourse.

Ingold (2000: 328) stated that with industrial capitalism;

Labour becomes a commodity measured out in units of time; goods become commodities measured out in units of money; since labour produces goods, so much time yields so much money, and time spent in idleness is equivalent to so much money lost.

A result of this economic development was the introduction of an ideological separation between work, being time that yields money, and leisure, being time that uses up money, or alternatively time that enables the worker to rest so that they can be efficient and productive workers. The development of capitalism intrinsically linked the concepts of work and money and created a dichotomy between notions of work and leisure, or “time for working and time for living” (Gorz 1989: 22). This is evidenced by the above discussion, where it was argued that non-Aboriginal people employed in Ngukurr attempted to defend such a dichotomy through maintaining their relationships with Aboriginal people primarily during ‘work hours’.
This relatively recent preoccupation and understanding of there being separate and distinct spheres of time in one’s life has continued to pervade contemporary understandings of being (see Gell 1992). As Ciulla (2000: 173) has stated,

The economic notion of time dominates the way people experience life at work and sometimes at home. We do things with time – we spend time, waste time, save time, make time…Most of all, we live under the shadow of the idea that time is money.

However, more recently the literature on ‘work’ has began to focus on the balance between these two distinct spheres of work and life. At the most extreme end Fassel (1992: 2-3) argued that workaholism, a growing compulsiveness about work, is “a killer stalking our society…workaholics are no longer “showing up” for life”. The perceived problematic relationship between these two spheres of time is also reflected in the increasingly growing field of Work-Life Balance (WLB) or Work-Family Balance (WFB) discourse. These key phrases have infiltrated not only academic discussion but government and organisational policies (see Bunting 2004; Edgar 2005; MWLI 2006; Fleetwood 2007). In Australia the work-life balance “problem”, as Reed et al. (2005) refer to it, developed from a number of factors. They suggest that these are: an increase in female participation in the workforce since the 1960s; greater work intensification in the mid-1970s; an increase in alternative work schedules away from the standard working week and the growth of casual employment; and a de-differentiation of roles, which contributed to greater spill-over between work and other roles (Reed et al. 2005: 5). WLB discussions have also been driven by the growth of divorce rates, single parent households and juvenile delinquency. As Crompton (2002: 538) states “many have argued that there is a ‘crisis’ in the western family”. Even with the growing body of literature that challenges old stereotypes of the male manual worker and breadwinner and questions the meaning, value and structures of work in contemporary society, old concepts of ‘work’ and work ideology still have an unexpected currency. Pahl (1988) has suggested that this may be the case because many social institutions still firmly positioned in past ideology have, not as yet, been superseded. Building on the above discussion, I would suggest that
past work ideology still has a strong hold on many members of contemporary society.

There is a significant academic literature that attempts to challenge the dominant work ideology, some analysts even proposing the possibility of a future without ‘work’ or at least ‘work’ as we have come to know it (see Gorz 1989; Aronowitz 1994). But it must be recognised that it is in the interests of governments and economic institutions to maintain a willing workforce and consequently to reaffirm a particular work ideology that facilitates this. Crompton (2002) has suggested that one guise of WLB discourse is about developing flexible working arrangements. This is increasingly being presented by governments and businesses as a possible ‘win-win’ combination, as far as balancing employment and family life are concerned. On the other hand Fleetwood (2007) argues that flexible working needs to be understood as comprising two components, employee-friendly and employee-unfriendly. The former is associated with flexible work arrangements sought by, and benefiting, employees, and the latter are those directed at increasing employer profits. Fleetwood (2007: 396) has stated that;

The discourses of WLB have increased markedly because they have been useful in legitimizing the employment-unfriendly working practices central to neoliberalism: they have acted as a Trojan House...Employee-unfriendly flexible working practices remain, but are veiled by the mask of WLB discourses with their employee-friendly connotations.

Western work ideology must subsequently be understood as comprising two elements. The first is the capitalist need to place emphasis on the importance of work and consumerism in order to maintain economic stability and a willing workforce. The second is the individual workers’ internalisation of work values and their acceptance of the structures of the dominant structures of work. WLB discourse is an example of the way in which questioning the importance of work and at the same time also reinforcing its importance, is often interrelated in the construction of work ideologies. The situation and complexities of work-life balance in Ngukurr and their relationship to WLB or WFB discourse are discussed in chapter six of this thesis. WLB is increasingly becoming one of the key terms
or concepts in contemporary western work ideology. However, as the following section will highlight, the capitalist notion of a “work ethic” continues to remain firmly entrenched in this ideology.

**The “work ethic”**

There is substantial agreement about the role Protestant morality played in the internalisation of particular work values and behaviours (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]; Weber 1930 [1904]; Tawney 1964; Anthony 1977; Applebaum 1992; Sennett 1998; Beder 2000; Cuilla 2000). Sayers (1988) has cautioned, that the role of preaching and schooling in changing work behaviours can sometimes be over emphasised in literature that purports to analyse work ideology and that factors, such as technology and economic imperatives, must also be considered. It is this morality that is often argued to have been an essential ingredient in the subsequent development of capitalist economic relations. Max Weber’s thesis *‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’* (Weber 1930 [1904]) is the most influential analysis of this relationship. He argued that work became a religious *calling*, a way of worshipping God. Tawney (1964), another significant historian of western work behaviour and values, also makes a similar connection between religious and economic ideology in the West.

Karl Marx has influenced the literature that purports to study work and work ideology in Western society. He argued that man created his world, and therefore himself through work, and that through the process of industrialisation the worker became alienated from his work, from what he produces, and subsequently from meaning in life (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]). This theoretical position has had a profound influence on contemporary work ideology by positioning work not as a religious calling but as central to being human. The alienation of the worker from his work can be discussed only if work is first pre-supposed to be something very important and serious (Anthony 1977). The notion that, ‘work’ is central to life continues to dominate contemporary Western work ideology. As Ciulla (2000: 8) has suggested “the idea that humans need to work is so embedded in modern
Western economic and moral assumptions that it is difficult to understand cultures where people don’t share this need”. The personal feelings of perplexity that arose during my experience of being ‘boss’ of the Ngukurr News, as well as those shared by other non-Aboriginal people, is a telling example of such ideological internalisation.

As discussed above, western work ideology, has not remained static but rather has evolved to accommodate changes in labour relations. As worker-employer relationships have changed over time, the ‘work ethic’ ideology has also had to be modified. In the 19th Century the notion of the ‘alienated worker’ (Marx and Engels 1967 [1848]) gained currency. The worker, it was argued, had just become a means to an ends and as a consequence the ‘work’ experienced lacked meaning. A ‘new’ ideology was therefore needed to legitimise working conditions for both employers and employees and maintain the motivational power behind the ‘work ethic’ (Anthony 1977; Applebaum 1992; Sennett 1998; Beder 2000). The work of Samuel Smiles entitled ‘Self Help’ and published in 1859, is often argued to have been a prime example of the development of this ‘new’ ideology (Anthony 1977). Smiles argued that success depends on how hard you work and that success, in this sense, is open to all who try (Smiles and Sinnema 2002 [1859]). This same ideological stance can be found in more recent notions of the ‘American Dream’ (Beder 2000).

Beder (2000) has pointed out that a paradox exists within the historical development of western work ideology. For while work ideology had imbued work with such value - making it the centre of one’s life, both material and spiritual - work organisation under the guise of capitalism then proceeded to destroy the satisfying and meaningful activity of some kinds of work (e.g. factory work). Millions of people’s work experience had become fragmented and many jobs had been reduced to activities that were better suited to animals or machines. Beder (2000) suggested that because employers could no longer rely on the ‘work ethic’ of past ideology to motivate manual workers in such jobs, they began to
engage the services of engineers, psychologists, sociologists and others to find ways to increase productivity and motivate workers. It is during the 20th Century that we begin to see the development of the academic fields of human resource management, work motivation and organisation studies that continue to play a significant role in the construction, adjustment and maintenance of the dominant work ideology (see Baritz 1974; Gee et al. 1996).

These dominant strains of work studies have played an important part in constructing the activity of ‘work’ as not only about financial reward, but also as one that fulfils important ‘psychological’ functions. It is often argued in these fields of research that ‘work’ is a valued source of pride, fulfilment, social identity formation, and affirmation (see, Heavens 1980; Furnham 1984, 1990, 1993; Blau and Ryan 1997; Miller et al. 2002). These assumptions, embedded in studies on work, are a reflection of the strength of contemporary work ideology. Moorhouse (1987) has proposed that the dominance of such ideology in modern capitalist societies is evidenced by the dismissive use of terms like hobby, pastime, and amusement. He states that,

…such value judgements, concealed in commonsense concepts and taken for granted connections, reek of the power of the ‘work ethic’ which may, or may not, have penetrated the minds of most workers but is certainly lodged, as a moral ideal, in much of what purports to be the analysis of work and its meanings (Moorhouse 1987: 238).

Nord et al (1990) have pointed out that managers frequently respond to problems with workers by lamenting the decay of the work ethic. Yet, as Sayers (1988) has argued, it is seldom clear what is actually meant by this notion of a declining work ethic. The ideology that imbues work as a religious duty and virtue may have passed, if indeed it was ever widespread outside academic analysis. Sayers (1988) has suggested that it would be wrong to imagine that people are coming to deny the importance of work to their lives. He hypothesised “that people are in fact coming to regard work no longer as a duty but rather as a need which has become an essential part of human nature” (Sayers 1988: 738). Applebaum (1992) has suggested that even along side the many studies that reveal dissatisfaction in the
workplace, lack of meaningful work for the majority, and enjoyment of the fruits of work for only the minority, it is questionable whether the values of the work ethic are in decline. The embedded-ness of such cultural and social value judgements can be seen in both the historical and contemporary attempts by mainstream institutions and individuals to instil a ‘work ethic’ in Aboriginal people (this is discussed in more detail in chapters four and five).

It could easily be argued that the ideology of the importance of work in contemporary society is so strong that even in depressed labour markets or in exploitative work environments, people continue to espouse the values of the ‘work ethic’. Beder (2000) wondered why it is that people embrace a political and social system in which they ultimately are the losers. She suggests that because people now live such work-centred lives, many have become reduced by this work focus and now have difficulty envisaging other alternatives.

Most people spend almost all of their time working, resting from work, or spending the money they earned working. A life that is not fully taken up with work and consuming seems to offer not only boredom but also purposelessness (Beder 2000: 266)

Beder (2000) has proposed that within the context of the modern world, people are so busy working, that they do not have time to question the meaning of ‘work’.

**Education, training and the notion of ‘career’**

Educational institutions, both historically and today, have played a significant role in supporting the centrality of ‘work’ and encouraging particular ‘work’ behaviours (Anthony 1977; Beder 2000). In modern capitalist societies education has served “as an increasingly refined training and selection mechanism for the labour force” (Cohen and Lazerson 1973: 319). Getting individuals ready either for participation through developing competency in work-related skills, or broadening the skills of those already in the work-force, is the underlying aim of most educational and training programs in contemporary capitalist societies (Corson 1988; White 1997). Discourse around the notion of ‘career’ is often at the heart of such ‘work’ focused education and training initiatives (Headley 2002)
Historically ‘career’ was understood as “a succession of related jobs, arranged in a hierarchy of prestige, through which persons move in an ordered, predictable sequence” (Wilensky 1969: 127). Over the past two decades there has been a growing amount of literature concerned with the changing nature of work in western societies and the subsequent demise of the orderly, predictable progression associated with a ‘career’ (Arthur 1994; Cappelli 1999; Baruch 2004). Yet, beyond the confines of this critical literature, the embeddedness of the term ‘career’ in dominant or mainstream ‘work’ ideology has not diminished.

Today ‘career’ is often defined “as a continuous process of learning and development” inclusive of non-renumerated activities and life experiences (Australian State and Territory Governments 2007). Yet the centrality of ‘work’ to this life-long journey remains unquestioned. It is the notion of ‘employability’ that rests at the heart of contemporary understandings of ‘career’. “All life experiences, including paid work, sporting interests and managing a household should be drawn upon as evidence to a potential employer that you are the person for the job” (Australian State and Territory Governments 2007).

Further, the notion of ‘career’ while not, as in the past, mostly confined to ‘climbing the ladder’ of a particular profession, still “embraces notions of development and logical progression” (Adamson et al. 1998: 253). The term implies a particular and coherent ordering of education, training and work experiences over time. This is evidenced by the increasingly large number of government and non-government websites that connect education and training pathways with ‘career’ choices and employment prospects (for examples see: www.mycareer.edu.au; www.missionaustralia.com.au; www.jobseeker.org.au ). That I believed such a logical progression to be both a commonplace desire and inherent part of ‘career’ development was confirmed by my attempts to promote
Aboriginal people in the workplace and my perplexity over their absence of enthusiasm for such promotion.

In the western ‘work’ dominated cultural and social landscape, where increasing, maintaining, and encouraging labour force participation is the quintessential endeavour of training and education initiatives, it should be no surprise that the term ‘career’ has, for many, become synonymous with purpose and direction in life. My own experiences and those of other non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have revealed that ‘work’ is significant on both individual and societal levels. It delineates our time and structures our activities; it plays a part, even if to varying degrees, in how we see ourselves and others, and how we experience meaning and purpose in life. Work remains a central concept around which modern western life revolves.

The Unemployed

Dominant social institutions have for well over two centuries, defined and dignified employment and the worker. ‘Working’ is set up with enthusiastic contrast to idleness or purposelessness. Therefore it is difficult to avoid a situation where society holds contempt for those perceived as idle or disengaged from accepted work practices. Beder (2000) has suggested that the moral dimension to ideologies of work is most obviously manifest in the way in which unemployed people have been treated since the Protestant reformation.

She has argued that when work is perceived as natural, desirable, morally right and inevitable, then those that are poor deserve to be so because they lack the ‘work ethic’. Beder (2000) suggested that, after the Protestant Reformation, many people condemned the poor and were unwilling to recognise that many of those who were unemployed were in this situation because of circumstances beyond their control. The commitment to instilling a work ethic in the unemployed is not a new
phenomenon. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries work houses were set up for such a purpose. Thompson (1967: 68-71) has discussed these work houses and states that they were places where adults and children were sent to work ‘for their own good’, to learn how to fit into the labour market, to get ‘in the habit of industry’.

Anthony (1977) has suggested that in more recent times, due to an ideology that positions work as of primary importance to identity, there has developed a reluctance on the part of workers to confess that one’s work is tedious and disliked. This he suggested is because there is a general assumption, shared by questioner and questioned, that one’s value is determined by one’s work and therefore to admit to hating one’s job is to admit to hating one’s own life. Probert (1989) has suggested that for men in Western society to be without work is to be without a social identity and that, therefore, not having a job is something immoral and frightening in many people’s eyes. Anthony (1977) argued that it is of no surprise that many people today take work very seriously, because they have been taught by every means available that, if they do not, they are delinquent.

Beder (2000) has pointed out that an ideology that individualises the causes of poverty and unemployment actually serves several purposes. It causes people to work harder for fear of failing themselves, and consequently carrying the shame of not having enough character, diligence and skill to succeed. It also works to excuse poverty and counters arguments for institutional change. This work ideology perceives poverty as supposedly a temporary phenomenon, which can be escaped through education, hard work and character. The irony of this is that, while work ideology suggests that success is open to all who work hard, the reality is actually quite different. Governments preoccupied with productivity need to encourage a work ideology in order to make low-paid jobs preferable to unemployment. Beder (2000: 146) has argued that politicians and businesspeople have adjusted the work ethic to emphasise the morality of contributing to society through work. They have also ensured that welfare is more difficult to get, more
temporary, and more unpleasant, so as to encourage the fear of job loss in order to keep productivity high and reduce demands for welfare expenditure.

All contemporary industrial societies have accepted, for those who cannot work, the concept of a safety net in the form of unemployment benefits (Applebaum 1992). Today there is a strong focus on work-for-benefit or work-for-the-dole type programs in all industrialised nations. Beder (2000) has argued that these recent political expressions reek of the ‘work ethic’ and are aimed at its promotion.

Sennett (1998: 140) has pointed out that those who are dependant on the state are viewed as social parasites and that such a social parasitism critique is actually a powerful disciplinary tool in the workplace, for the worker wants to show he or she is not feeding off the labours of others. It must be recognised that labelling the unemployed or today’s unemployment benefit recipients as undeserving and actively supporting such an ideology has always been in the interests of governments and employers. The government would prefer individuals to be blamed for their own unemployment, rather than the effects of their policies on the labour market questioned. Beder (2000) has suggested that work ideology has contributed to legitimising inequalities in society.

Cole (2006) has discussed the numerous studies, dating back to the 1930s that have examined the effects of unemployment on wellbeing. This research predominantly, if not in its entirety, argues that unemployment negatively affects a person’s life. This research is evidence of the dominance of western work systems and ideology in contemporary society and the extent to which members of this society have internalised the meanings and values of such work. Being unemployed is perceived as a ‘problem’, affecting individuals as well as the general wellbeing of society; getting people into and engaged in employment is a way of solving this ‘problem’.
Conclusion

This chapter initially described my experiences of ‘work’ and those of other non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. The particular understandings of ‘work’ and associated behaviours exhibited within the non-Aboriginal domain, and the perplexity that arose for individuals, including myself, when they were confronted with an unfamiliar ‘work’ situation, went some way to exposing the cultural and social foundations of ‘work’ ideology. I had felt strangely compelled to impose ‘work’ behaviours and attitudes on Aboriginal people. On reflection it became clear to me that if I was to understand ‘work’ in Ngukurr I first needed to understand my own cultural assumptions about its meaning and purpose. This was expressed through the literature review section of this chapter, which touched on the issues of time, ‘work ethic’, ‘career’, and unemployment, further confirming the culturally constructed nature of ‘work’ and its ideologies.

This chapter has argued that members of industrialised western societies have inherited the notion that work is a central component of life. White (1997) suggested that the doctrine of work’s centrality in western countries has always been the dominant ideology of all political parties, from socialists through to free marketeers. It is no surprise then that (to differing degrees) such an ideology has infiltrated the minds of most members of these societies. My own experience of ‘working’ in Ngukurr and the associated challenges it provided me, was a catalyst for uncovering my partly unconscious mainstream middle class assumptions about the meaning, importance and behaviours of employment. Given that the experiences and behaviours of other non-Aboriginal people in Ngukurr reflected my own, and were often fraught with conflicting demands and expectations, is a further confirmation of the dominance of these particular doctrines of ‘employment’.

Like myself, even when the non-Aboriginal staff were conscious of their assumptions around ‘work’ or complained about their ‘work’, they could not deny
that ‘work’ was a significant component in how they lived their lives. It shaped their personal and public/social identities and influenced how they engaged in the world. As Cuilla (2000: 8) has noted,

It is easy to see why – aside from the income it provides – having a job is so desirable in our culture. Work works for us. It offers instant discipline, identity, and worth. It structures our time and imposes a rhythm on our lives. It gets us organised into various communities and social groups. And perhaps most importantly, work tells us what to do everyday. Even with education, income, peace, and security the free choice not to work is difficult in a culture where paid work is so central to life.

The dominance of ‘work’ ideology in contemporary mainstream society is powerful and pervasive. This is so even when this cultural belief system is challenged on an individual or personal level and alternative ways of engaging in the world are expounded. This chapter concludes that there must be an acknowledgement of the supremacy of the systems that support dominant doctrines of ‘work’ and their existence in multiple facets of the modern capitalist world. For example, the powerful ‘work ethic’ that I have discussed in this chapter, and the discourse that perpetuates it, exists not just in literature, society and policies explicitly related to employment, but can be seen as the assumptions that give strength to many other ideological positions. One such example is home ownership and the social status that this ownership implies. The point here is that material wealth accumulation, is valued in its own right yet is directly linked to one’s employment success and so is synergistic to western ‘work’ ideology.

The following chapter investigates the way in which this dominant ideology has, since the beginning of colonisation, framed and shaped relationships between white Australians and their Aboriginal counterparts. It concentrates on labour relations within the northern part of Australia and discusses fieldwork findings around older Aboriginal people’s memories of ‘work’.
CHAPTER FOUR
LABOUR RELATIONS IN NORTHERN AUSTRALIA AND ABORIGINAL MEMORIES OF WORK

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the dominant work ideology of western industrial nations and through an analysis of my own and other non-Aboriginal people’s experiences highlighted how such values have to a large extent been internalised by members of these societies. It also drew attention to the fact that to understand the meaning of work one must recognise its culturally constructed nature and the kinds of mechanisms used to ensure the dominance of particular kinds of work ideologies.

Within the economic perspective of western capitalist society, human labour is conceived as a commodity to be put to productive use. However, in colonial Australia, this form of labour was also seen to be an instructive stage in Aborigines’ evolutionary road towards inclusion in civilised society, encouraging discipline and particular social practices in exchange for entry into mainstream society (Povinelli 1993; Cowlishaw 1999). This was both implicit and explicit in the aims and writings of missionaries and governments. The attitude that the ‘work ethic’ could be taught was also an assumption of both missionaries and governments, who saw training Aborigines in industrial and agricultural skills as a fundamental part of ‘civilising’ and developing northern Australia (Powell 1982).

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an historical framework to understand the employment of Aboriginal labour in the northern part of Australia prior to the
1980s. Its purpose is to draw attention to how the dominant ‘work’ ideologies shaped encounters between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal people throughout this historical period. It will also discuss my own fieldwork findings about older Aboriginal people’s memories of ‘work’ and describe how their remembering suggests something about the construction of their own ‘work’ ideologies and how these influence contemporary understandings of ‘work’ in Ngukurr.

An Exploited Labour Force

In the northern part of Australia, as well as in Australia more generally, there was a period when Aboriginal people were viewed as a hindrance to economic development and were often hunted down and killed (Hardy 1968; Powell 1982; Harris 1990). That, such atrocities happened in the Ngukurr region has been mentioned above (see chapter one). It was not long, however, before Aborigines’ potential as a labour force was realised, especially in the more remote areas of Australia where non-Aboriginal labour was in scarce supply (Stone 1974; Reynolds 1981; Powell 1982; Reid 1990; Markus 1990; Austin 1992; Trigger 1992; Rowse 1998). Early attempts to chase Aborigines away from settled areas were usually followed by ‘letting in’, encouraging them to return to the fringes by providing food rations, because their labour was deemed useful (Rowse 1998).

Stone (1974) posits that within remote Australia labour was difficult to employ and retain, especially after convict transportation ceased and the gold rushes began. She suggests that for colonists attempting to establish themselves in remote parts of Australia there were advantages in quickly reducing the local Aboriginal people to a semi-starved and dependent state. This strategy, he suggests, was designed to supply the colonists with a labour force that would work for a minimum amount of the poorest food. Providing rations to Aboriginal people in payment for their labour was the dominant structure of labour relations in the Northern part of Australia until 1968, on pastoral stations as well as in towns and on Aboriginal missions. The rationing system was influenced by the dominant western work
ideology of the time and subsequently its practical application was often structured around the assumption of a male breadwinner supporting dependants (Rowse 1998).

McGrath (1980) argued that Aboriginal people were harshly exploited for their labour and oppressed by the interaction of racism and the economic imperatives of colonialism. The colonists were interested in making the best use of local Aboriginal people without allowing them to become a nuisance. Reynolds (1981) pointed out that most settlers considered exploiting Aboriginal labour for their own gains as completely acceptable and even expected. As Berndt and Berndt (1987:4) stated, “it was the Aborigines’ economic potentiality that mattered”. There is substantial evidence to support the fact that Aboriginal labour all over Australia was often recruited by force and retained through violence (Reynolds 1981; Stevens 1981; Powell 1982; Attwood 1989; Broome 2001).

Reynolds (1981:117) has pointed out that the historical record “bristles with colonists’ complaints about their problems in trying to get Aborigines to behave as voluntary labour”. Evans (1984:202) argues that in the 1800s and early 1900s Aboriginal workers were seen to be ‘like animals’, as ‘sub-human’, ‘with less capacity to feel pain’ and more than likely to repay any ‘kindness’ shown towards them with ‘treachery’. Such attitudes were frequently documented in the public media of this period. Markus (1990) also suggests that the early pastoralists in north Australia (as well as those of more recent times) believed that Aborigines counted for nothing, and that the dominant view of their time was of the pioneer as hero. He argues that settlers believed that Aborigines had no understanding of money and did not know how to behave rationally and therefore did not have the same needs as white employees.

McGrath (1980) has argued that little attention has been paid to Aboriginal women in the labour force. She claims that within the Northern Territory the exploitation of women was pervasive and that this exploitation was predominantly one of
sexual labour, “Aboriginal women were considered the ideal exploitable flesh” (McGrath 1980: 250). A contributing factor was that there were a very limited number of European women in the Northern Territory during these times. Reynolds (1981: 140) discussed the way in which Aboriginal women were often beaten, raped, or forced into concubinage by non-Aboriginal employers and states that “the evidence of this is overwhelming”. Domestic work for Aboriginal women usually went hand in hand with sexual services. There are countless accounts of instances where Aboriginal women were sexually abused, locked up in ‘studs’ or ‘gin houses’ for the pleasure of non-Aboriginal men, and where they were forced to eat salt, beaten, whipped, humiliated, and encouraged to become addicted to alcohol and other available drugs (Evans et al. 1975; Roberts 1978; Powell 1982). McGrath (1980) has also documented the way in which Aboriginal women were often used as incentives to attract European workers to remote areas. However, it has also been claimed that, within this context, Aboriginal women - in comparison with Aboriginal men - were afforded greater opportunities to enhance their status. They were more likely to be allowed into the European spheres of life and may have been able to have some influence on their non-Aboriginal employer through the intimacy of their relationship (Berndt and Berndt 1984).

Aboriginal child labour was also widely used in the Top End of Australia and in the second half of the nineteenth century a special interest developed in Aboriginal children of mixed decent. They were often taken from their families and placed in homes which functioned as labour pools for local employers. The children were often apprenticed out, as domestics, servants, laundresses or labourers. They were often over worked, underpaid (if at all), were given no education, were not provided with basic necessities of life. They were also often exposed to physical, sexual and emotional abuse (Robinson 2002, 2003).

The attitude that Aborigines were inferior to the colonisers is evidenced by the many examples of male Aboriginal employees not being allowed to enter the house of their European employer, not allowed to sleep or eat in the same place as a European, and often given separate water containers to drink out of in stock camps.
A non-Aboriginal station manager who spent considerable time working on stations in the Roper region in the early and mid 1900s spoke about working with Aboriginal people and stated,

we never made mates of them – we never spoke to them – and I would never speak to them like I am talking to you – only tell them what to do – but anyone who made mates of them never did any good with them – that’s the funny thing (NTRS266-TS241).

Markus (1990) argues that Aborigines were the subject of frequent humiliation, which was believed to be important in reminding them of their lesser status. It was deemed acceptable and somewhat expected that Europeans showed Aborigines open expressions of contempt. The attitude of the European employers, that Aboriginal people were below them, is captured effectively in the way in which adult Aboriginal males were referred to as ‘boys’ and women as ‘girls’ or ‘gins’ (McGrath 1980; Powell 1982; Markus 1990; Brock 1993).

Aboriginal workers were seen as needing firm and strict supervision and that too much kindness ‘spoilt’ them and made them lazy (McGrath 1980; Austin 1992). The European employers believed that it was necessary to establish who was boss, often through violence, and that there could be no tolerance of insubordination (Markus 1990; Austin 1992). Many employers of Aboriginal people were convinced that tribal considerations prevented one Aboriginal taking primacy over another and consequently the employers did not try to develop any leadership potential in their Aboriginal workers (Berndt and Berndt 1987). Stevens (1974) pointed out that few Aboriginal workers achieved positions in the higher echelons of the work environment due to the perception that they were lacking in responsibility and the necessary skills.

Rowse (1998) and McGrath (1995) argued that the writings of north Australian pastoralists (for example, see Durack 1959) had profound effects on the imagination of white Australians. They suggested that to some extent the wider Australian attitude to Aboriginal people was shaped by these writings for they appeared on school reading lists for many years. McGrath (1995: 39) stated:
Benign images of Australian Aboriginal work relations were effectively marketed and their representation and ‘fit’ into palatable imperial discourses made them convincing. Like children with strange ways, Aborigines were unreliable but cute. Their employers were not capitalists trying to make a profit but benefactors doing the primitives a favour.

Yet while Aboriginal workers were portrayed as inferior workers, often lazy and irresponsible or retarded by their cultural background, Aboriginal people were the backbone of the north Australian economy. As Austin (1992: 42) stated, “there could be no doubt about the utter reliance of the [pastoral] industry on supposedly ineffective Aboriginal labour”. McGrath (1980) emphasised that records of this period of exploitation reveal that Aboriginal workers performed tasks requiring prolonged physical exertion, sometimes high levels of skill and often completed under little or no supervision. Austin (1992) has also claimed that Aboriginal stockmen had a capacity to work for long hours and had an unmatched knowledge of bushcraft and land.

In reality, many Aboriginal people were ‘earning’ their rations on cattle stations and in towns by selling their labour. However Rowse (1998: 41) states that in the discourse of lay and professional non-Aboriginal people “It was possible to see even paid or rationed employment as a state of disgrace, for indigenous Australians were suspected of intrinsic deficiency in the moral attributes of the ‘independent labourer’”. Anthropologists in the early part of the twentieth century often deferred to the rhetoric of ‘pauperism’ and ‘parasitism’ when discussing Aboriginal people (see Spencer 1914, 1926; Stanner 1979, Elkin 1951; Tatz 1964). This is reminiscent of the historical stigmatisation of the unemployed in dominant work ideology. There was a deeply seated concern that rations were not eliciting and reinforcing the desired ethical relationship between effort and reward so desired by both pastoralists and governments (Rowse 1998).

**The slavery debate**

Aboriginal labour relations, existing under the framework of ‘managed consumption’ (see Rowse 1998), were often referred to by particular sectors of the
population as constituting something like ‘slavery’. The term ‘slave’ was regularly applied to discussions of Aboriginal labour in the Northern Territory and elsewhere until the 1970s, when it unaccountably disappeared from the discourse (Gray 2006). The 19th Century anti-slavery movement, determined to have slavery abolished in all British colonies, drew attention to the exploitation of Aboriginal labour in the Australian colonies. In 1891 A.J. Vogan published an article in the British Anti-slavery Reporter on the ‘spectacular injustices’ of Aboriginal employment which contained a ‘slave map of modern Australia’ (see Evans 1984: 183; Austin 1992: 42; Holland 1995: 52-3).

The feminist movement of this time also drew attention to Aboriginal working conditions in the Australian colonies. Many of these early feminists were members of the Australian branch of the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society, a body formed in Britain in 1909, and whose very title “enabled a conflation of the issues of slavery and Aboriginal protection” (see Holland 1995: 55). The 1920s also saw unionists using the rhetoric of slavery and in 1932 the North Australia Workers Union characterised Aborigines as ‘slaves without the advantage of slavery’ (see McGrath 1995: 41).

Evans (1984) in his analysis of Aboriginal labour in colonial Queensland, investigated whether the use of the term ‘slave’ was appropriate in this context. He drew his definition of ‘slavery’ from the work of Patterson (1979: 40) who stated that slavery is “the permanent, violent domination of naturally alienated and generally dishonoured persons”. Evans (1984) concluded that the use of the phrase ‘Aboriginal slavery’ can be defended with academic precision and rigour. He states:

…the striking parallels across time and space between the conditions of the slave and the unfree Aboriginal worker are starkly revealed; and the cry of isolated, nineteenth century humanitarians over ‘rampant demon of…slavery’ stalking Australia seems to be vindicated (Evans 1984: 203).

Huggins (1995: 195), in her account of Aboriginal women in the labour force, suggested that “the word ‘slave’ is synonymous with domestic service
testimonies”. She argues that non-Aboriginal settlers were enveloped in a racist mythology which claimed that Aboriginal people were inferior and that this ideology needed to be held up at all times.

However, some academics analysing Aboriginal labour in contemporary times have questioned the use of the term ‘slavery’ to describe Aborigines’ exploitation. Curthoys and Moore (1995) pointed out that while it might be the most appropriate term in English, it is ambiguous in its meaning and open to misinterpretation. Reynolds (1981) argues that to depict Aboriginal workers as slaves denies them their agency and is therefore only part of the story. Curthoys and Moore (1995) also suggested that Aboriginal workers were never slaves in the strictest sense, but that they were also not free. Evans and Scott (1995) maintained that while the term slave may not be completely appropriate, the use of Aboriginal labour itself was ‘slave-like’.

Frank Stevens (1974:3) also avoided the ambiguous term slave and instead characterised the labour relationship between Aborigines and the pastoral industry as “a form of peonage”, meaning compulsory labour in payment of a perceived debt. Rowse (1998) proposed that many pastoralists, arguing from the specific position in which Aborigines became visible to them as recipients of rations and occasional workers, saw themselves as doing Aboriginal people a favour by letting them stay on their land. They perceived their relationship in non-economic terms and rather as associated with “the mutual pleasures of work and the moral onus to employ traditional land owners” (Rowse 1998: 126). Yet whether Aboriginal labour relations in the Northern Territory can be described as ‘slavery’, a position not held by the pastoralists of that era, is in a sense a semantic argument. What can be concluded is that work conditions for Aboriginal people were distinct from those of non-Aboriginal people in Australia during the same period. Aborigines were often engaged and maintained through violence and force; they were conceived of as deficient workers and often inferior human beings; they were seen as needing to be ‘taught’ and as undeserving of financial remuneration for their
efforts; and in some profound sense as owing gratitude to those who perceived themselves as their benevolent benefactors.

Legislative and Political Framework (pre-1968)

Labour relations for Aboriginal people were first regulated in the Northern Territory with the introduction of the 1911 Aboriginal Ordinance (Powell 1982). It was in this year that the Northern Territory came under Commonwealth control being excised from the South Australian colony. This Ordinance established two categories of Aborigines, those described as ‘Aboriginal’ and those described as ‘half-castes’. While people deemed to be part of one or the other categories were subject to different regimes of “protection and control”, the legal distinctions between the categories remained problematic and subsequently debateable.

For example, in the 1911 Ordinance an ‘Aboriginal’ included, “an aboriginal native of Australia; or a half-caste who lives with such aboriginal native or lives or associates with them; or a half-caste child up to the 16 years old”. A ‘half-caste’ referred to “the offspring of an aboriginal mother and other than an aboriginal father, unless such a person was deemed to be aboriginal”. In 1918 the Commonwealth passed a new and more detailed Ordinance and the definitions were altered to include as ‘Aboriginal’ a “half-caste male child whose age does not apparently exceed eighteen years” as well as “a female half-caste not legally married to a person who is substantially of European origin or descent and living with her husband”. Povinelli (1993) suggested that behind such legislation was a perception that Aboriginal women, relative to white women during this time, had a degree of independence in sexual and marriage practices. This independence was further confirmed in the minds of European men by the women’s long walks across the northern part of Australia. She stated that “irrespective of how Aborigines viewed their own marriage practices, in the 1900s the Euro-Australian
welfare system was established to control women’s, sexuality and its “products” (Povinelli 1993: 101).

Under the Ordinance Aboriginal people needed permits to leave an area or move from the Territory; they were prohibited from drinking alcohol; interracial sex and marriage was illegal; and Aborigines were not allowed to vote or receive social service or welfare benefits. The Ordinance also included strict legal processes for the employment of Aboriginal people. Employers were obliged to apply for permits to enable them to employ Aboriginal people.

The Ordinance stated that permits were only to be granted to “persons of fit and proper character”. The law recognised that pastoralists had different labour needs from town employers, and specific conditions were developed in the Ordinance for miners, drovers, and pastoralists who wished to employ Aboriginal people. Permits specified whether “male aboriginals only”, or “female aboriginals only”, or “male and female aboriginals” could be employed. The ‘Native worker’ became a distinct legal category. The kind of shelter that was to be provided for Aboriginal workers was specified, the amount of food and other supplies they were eligible for was also documented. Employers were expected to keep a record of all the Aboriginal labour they employed and the wages they paid. This record was to be open for inspection by the Protector of Aborigines at any time. They were not allowed to employ any children under the age of twelve and were to set aside a portion of land to be occupied as a native camp and supply shelter, as well as prescribed resources for those Aboriginals employed.

Employers of Aboriginal labour were to pay wages at the rate of five shillings per week, of which two shillings was to be paid to the Chief Protector to be kept in trust. However amendments to the Ordinance in 1933 gave the Chief Protector power to exempt employers from the “payment of wages” to an Aboriginal person if the employer fed and maintained people deemed “relatives and dependants” of the employee. Anthony (2006), however, argued that governments and pastoralists
breached these regulations by incorrectly classifying Aboriginal people on stations as ‘dependants’ when in fact many of them were also workers.

In 1947 a conference was held between government representatives and pastoralists and the regulation allowing pastoralists not to pay Aboriginal employees if they were maintaining their relatives or dependants was reconsidered. Yet an equivalent loophole was provided in which employers where not obliged to pay the employee the regulated rate if they were deemed “not sufficiently competent”. Therefore employers could evade paying wages altogether by having an Aboriginal worker classified as incompetent or ‘slow’ (Berndt and Berndt 1987).

The development of the Ordinance and the amendments to its regulations was, in some sense, a governmental attempt to protect Aboriginal people and to limit employment injustices. But, as Markus (1990) has highlighted, there was often a huge gulf between government rhetoric and the reality of life in the Northern Territory. While the Ordinance was concerned with the benevolent protection of Aboriginal people, funds were inadequate to enforce or police the law. Because of this lack of proper inspection and policing, breaches of the regulations were difficult to detect and even more difficult to prove (Berndt and Berndt 1987: 12-13). There is ample evidence to suggest that many employers of Aboriginal people completely disregarded the regulations of the Aboriginal Ordinance (see Stevens 1974, 1981; Powell 1982; Berndt and Berndt 1987; Reid 1990; Markus 1990).

In 1951, at the third Commonwealth-State Native Welfare Conference, the Federal Government formally adopted the policy of ‘assimilation’ in regards to Aboriginal Australians. The 1953 Northern Territory Welfare Ordinance and its complementary legislation the Wards Employment Ordinance 1953 were legislative expressions of this new policy. The Ordinances assiduously avoided any reference to race and therefore supposedly were applicable to anyone. However, as no person eligible to vote could be declared a ward, and as ‘aboriginal
natives’ were not in 1953 eligible to vote, in reality only Aboriginal people could be declared wards (Markus 1990).

The Director of Welfare was given the power of ‘guardian’ of a ward and the ward’s estate “as if that ward were an infant”. He could order that a person be taken into his custody, removed to a reserve or institution, or moved within or outside the Territory. No person was permitted to “habitually live with a ward” unless they were “a ward or a relation of the ward” and the list of controls and restrictions on the lives of wards goes on. In fact, the powers of the Director over wards were as broad, if not broader, than those exercised by the former Native Affairs Branch over persons defined as “aborigines” under the Aboriginal Ordinance 1918.

Similar to the Aboriginal Ordinance’s regulation of Aboriginal employment, the Wards Employment Ordinance was supposed to regulate the employment of ‘wards’. A licence was still needed to employ Aboriginal people and this licence had to specify whether the employer was eligible to employ female or male wards. The licensee was not permitted to employ a ward except in accordance with the prescribed conditions of employment and at the prescribed wage for the employment of the ward. In September 1959 the Northern Territory Government Gazette printed a table of wages applicable to the employment of wards. Males in agricultural work were entitled to two pounds weekly, females to one pound; drovers with plant and stock - ten pounds, with plant only – five pounds; miners on the surface to two pounds; underground miners were entitled to six pounds weekly.

To put this in perspective, Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry were paid one-fifth of the prescribed non-Aboriginal rate and, where allocated rations, at a rate less then thirty-five percent of the minimum requirements for non-Aboriginal workers (see Parliament of Australia, Senate 2006). As with the Aboriginal Ordinance, the licensee was permitted to pay a slow, aged or infirm ward less then the prescribed wage. This exemption was often used by employers of wards for as
Rowley (1970: 300) stated: “there was no safeguarding cross-reference to definitions of the ‘slow worker’.”

Aboriginal Missions and Reserves in the Northern Territory were also covered by the Wards Employment Ordinance. However many of those in charge of these institutions saw the provisions of the Ordinance as guidelines rather than legal requirements. Neither the Welfare Branch of the Government nor the Missions felt constrained to abide by its provisions. The Welfare branch maintained it was not bound by the legislation, unless the legislation specifically mentioned welfare. The missions claimed that they could not comply due to the fact that they did not have the financial resources necessary to fulfil the conditions of the legislation (Cole 1979).

Yet Missions and Reserves were seen as ‘focal points’ and ‘key instruments’ for the policy of assimilation. The purpose of Reserves and Missions in the process of assimilation was conceived of as comprising three stages. During the first stage, nomadic Aborigines would be encouraged to live in settled communities, where they would have their first introduction to white civilisation. In the second stage they would periodically move out of the community within a circumscribed white environment for employment training. In the third phase Aborigines would move freely into the white community as fully trained ‘workers’, albeit ones in the lower classes of society.

The role of Missions and Reserves under assimilation policy and legislation was to ‘introduce to all members of the group the general concept of work as a worthwhile aim in life’ (Cole 1979: 197), in effect the adoption of the western work ethic. Although not having to provide the prescribed wages legislated through the Wards Employment Ordinance, the Welfare Branch aimed to promote new forms of redistribution of goods and money from earners to non-earners. They wanted to encourage the formation of the self-supporting household based on
the notion of a nuclear family, with a male breadwinner supporting his immediate family of wife and children.

Despite this, Rowse (1998) pointed out that missions and settlements were instruments of assimilation with contradictory objectives. For example, in order to instil a ‘work ethic’ in able bodied people rations needed to be withheld from those who were not engaged in employment. On the other hand, in order to encourage parents to send their children to school or engage with health services it was advisable to ration the parents, whether they were employed or not. Mission and settlement authorities tried to encourage the development of nuclear families, of which cooking and eating together was seen as a defining feature. This ‘family-time’ was often supplanted by communal feeding regimes aimed at differing objectives such as child nutrition, economy, lessons in table manners, and the policing of sharing (Rowse 1998). This latter issue, the Aboriginal propensity to share with kin, was perceived by professionals, government and mission authorities as one of the most significant barriers to effectively teaching Aboriginal people to internalise ‘work values’ and conform to particular work structures and meanings (Rowse 1998). F.W Albrecht, a well known missionary employed for a substantial amount of time at Hermannsburg in Central Australia, reflected on this experience by stating the redistribution of goods from working to non-working adults was “the problem we never solved” (Cited in Rowse 1998: 89).

In 1962 the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended to give the vote to all people of Aboriginal descent in Federal elections. As the Northern Territory was a Federal Territory, this meant that no more Aboriginal people could be added to the Register of Wards. In 1965 the exploitation of Aboriginal labour in the pastoral industry also came under increased scrutiny (Stevens 1981). As a consequence of this increased political attention, the discriminatory clauses in award wage legislation relating to Aboriginal employment were removed. However the
legislation maintained a provision for ‘slow workers’. Despite the alleged effectiveness of the Wards Employment Ordinance, many Aboriginal people during this period continued to work at rates considerably less than the basic wage. The implementation of the Arbitration Court’s 1965 Equal Wages decision was also deferred till 1968.

The Pastoral Industry

Until 1968 the pastoral industry was by far the largest employer of Aboriginals in northern Australia (Markus 1990). Towards the end of the 19th Century the potential opportunities for profitable grazing in the Northern Territory began to be recognised by European colonists. Settlers began to move into these ‘undeveloped’ areas in growing numbers (Cowlishaw 1999). Aboriginal people were coerced into this labour force often by force, as the 1898 comments of the Northern Territory Inspector of Police confirm: “in many instances boys who assist in station work were and perhaps still, obtained by what is termed “running them down” and forcibly taking them from tribes to stations some distances from the tribe” (cited in May 1994: 43). They were also pressed or encouraged to join the pastoral work force through the creation of relationships of dependency. At a time when Aboriginal people’s traditional land was either unsafe or inaccessible due to invading settlers and degradation of their land and food resources, the provision of rations by pastoralists and the subsequent debt of labour was a choice for survival for many Aboriginal people (Powell 1982).

Aboriginal men and women held diverse positions in the pastoral industry. These included: head stockman; leading hand; stockman; garage mechanic offsider; bore mechanic; bore mechanic offsider; driver; gardener; pumper; butcher and cook; yard builder; fencers offsider and boundary rider and domestic. Children under fourteen would also often ‘help out’ (Stevens 1974). As discussed earlier in this chapter, the conditions under which Aboriginal people lived on stations in the
Northern Territory varied greatly, stretching from extreme poverty, deprivation of freedom and abuse of basic human rights to an amount of cultural and social freedom. The Berndts were commissioned to do a systematic survey of labour relations on a number of Northern Territory cattle stations between 1944 and 1945 (see Berndt and Berndt 1987). They were encouraged to conduct this survey by pastoral property owners who where concerned about the declining number of Aboriginal people due to low birth rates and hence a threatened shrinking of the labour pool.

Berndt and Berndt (1987) had been encouraged by the interest shown by the property managers and had associated it with a growing recognition of the need to improve the lives and situation of Aboriginal people engaged in the pastoral industry. Their survey found that the terrible living conditions, the inadequate food, and the general employment situation on these properties were contributing to the low birth rates among Aborigines. They found that Aboriginal people in some cases did not want to have children because they did not want to bring a child into such terrible conditions. The pastoralists, rather than having compassion as Berndt and Berndt anticipated, continued after these findings to contribute to the demise of their labour force through being unwilling to modify their behaviour.

There is a substantial corpus of evidence that documents the often inhumane treatment of Aboriginal people on cattle stations in the Northern part of Australia. They were often beaten, whipped, humiliated, raped, locked or chained up (Hardy 1968; Stevens 1974, 1981; Stone 1974; Evans 1975, 1984; Markus 1978, 1990; McGrath 1980, 1995; Powell 1982; Berndt and Berndt 1987; Reid 1990; Crough 1993; Francis et al. 1994; Brock 1995; Curthoys and Moore 1995; Saunders 1995; Smith 2000; Hannah 2002). Aborigines suffered high rates of death and disease; suffered a deficient diet and often a complete lack of water and toilet facilities and accommodation (Stevens 1974, 1981; Berndt and Berndt 1987; Powell 1982; Markus 1990). Markus (1990: 62) stated, “In addition to suffering mental and physical abuse, many Aborigines were left to starve or live their lives
The extent and prevalence of such abuse and poor living conditions on cattle stations, evidenced in the available literature, can not be underestimated. It is confronting and extremely disturbing.

The literature on Aboriginal labour in the pastoral industry, however, also highlights that Aboriginal people employed on stations often had more freedom to continue their own social and cultural practice relative to their counterparts resident on missions, reserves or in Aboriginal homes. Coombs (1972: 14) suggested that pastoralists did not restrict Aboriginal social and cultural activity and argued that, in the early stages the ‘Aborigines’ basic independence’ was not threatened. Unlike the situation on many missions, Aboriginal people on stations were able to often reside on their ‘country’, continue to speak their own languages, adhere to traditional marriage and social relationships, and attend and organise religious ceremonies (see also Powell 1982; Brock 1995; Smith 2000). Due to the seasonal nature of pastoral work there were often times that they were able to, or more precisely required (because of a withdrawal of rations) to return to their hunter-gatherer lifestyle (Rowley 1970; Doolan 1977). Povinelli (1993) suggested that such economic strategies relied on Aborigines as a cheap source of labour and Aboriginal foraging as a supplemental economy.

Berndt and Berndt (1987) pointed out that, unless cultural practices interfered with work, employers let Aboriginal people have cultural freedom. Trigger (1992:43) stated that non-Aboriginal station workers, who were often itinerant workers themselves, “were not particularly concerned with changing such areas of Aboriginal life. Their major concern, and indeed the critical focus of social relations, was obtaining Aboriginal labour”. Bell (1978: 61) in relation to pastoral stations in Central Australia, commented that while employment conditions were far from ideal, ‘Aboriginal workers’ reluctance to leave a station or to agitate for improvement in conditions must be understood in terms of their religious beliefs and duties’ associated with cultural practices and connections to ‘country’. 
The impact of the pastoral industry on Aboriginal societies and culture was still profound, for example affecting and changing traditional ceremony patterns (see Meggitt 1962; Rose 1991; Trigger 1992; Merlan 1998; Cowlishaw 1999). While there was great hardship for those Aboriginals employed in the pastoral sector, there was a degree of freedom associated with that employment. As Aboriginal pastoral workers become increasingly aware of labour conditions and the legislative framework under which they worked, a degree of empowerment began to emerge on some stations.

**A shift in labour relations: the Union debate**

In the 1960s, Aboriginal workers on pastoral stations began to express considerable dissatisfaction with government legislation (Markus 1978: 156). Aboriginal workers on a number of stations in the Northern Territory began to strike. The most well known of these strikes was the ‘Wave Hill walk-off’. A number of key individuals from Ngukurr (or as it was then, Roper River Mission) played key supportive roles in this strike and its eventual outcomes. Dexter Daniels is the most well known of these individuals and was the first Aboriginal organiser with the North Australia Workers Union (NAWU) (Hardy 1968). Daniels was also heavily involved in the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR) established in 1962. Two other influential individuals from the Ngukurr region, Davis Daniels and Phillip Roberts, also played significant roles in reviving the NTCAR and using it as a mechanism to support the ‘walk-offs’ (NMOA 2008a, 2008b). The families of these important individuals still reside in Ngukurr today and their legacy of political activism is well remembered.

The following brief discussion of the ‘Wave Hill walk-off’ demonstrates the emerging tension between pastoralists and Aboriginal workers, and to some extent the overturning of the assumptions that Aboriginal people had few if any rights. The Australian Congress of Trade Unions (ACTU) and the Northern Australian Workers Union (NAWU) became involved in the fight for equal wages for
Aborigines during this time (see Hardy 1968; Stevens 1974, 1981; Berndt and Berndt 1987; Markus 1990; McGrath 1995; Riddett 1997).

Interpretations of the reasons behind these strikes vary considerably. The unionists saw themselves as supporting the poor exploited Aboriginal workers against a multi-national pastoral company (Vesteys), and assumed that Aboriginal people were primarily protesting against the inadequate pay and poor living conditions on the company’s properties. Riddett (1997) pointed out that when the Aboriginal strikers changed the basis of the struggle into a fight to remove Vesteys from Aboriginal land, they in fact challenged the cultural and industrial assumptions of the unionists. Stevens (1974) argued that the NAWU’s arguments for equal pay for Aboriginals were marked by paternalism and also elements of duplicity and that they were unprepared for this change in the strike’s direction. As Riddett (1997: 63) stated, when Aboriginals “changed a strike into a land rights movement, they changed the course of Australian settler history”. I would argue that this challenge to the union’s ideological assumptions about the meaning, value and conditions of ‘working’, ‘work’ and ‘workers’ raises interesting questions around the nature and construction of Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies.

McGrath (1995) argued from a very different perspective and suggests that one of the reasons for the “walk off” was to do with the unfair monopolisation of Aboriginal women by white men. Hardy (1968) pointed out that the strike camp was even raided by white men with grog and guns, looking for women. McGrath (1995: 47) argued that,

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Work was conceptualised by white men as a man’s sphere, the walk-off a male affair. A primitivism and masculinist vision shared by white capital and labour transcended the class conflict which became the public reading of this event, obscuring the vital significance of gender and colonialism.
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After much controversy and debate, in 1968 Aboriginal people were brought under the Northern Territory Cattle Award wage. The main argument advanced by cattle station employers against the introduction of this Award was that Aborigines
should not be paid an equal wage because of their cultural difference, which was viewed as associated with a lack of understanding about the meanings, values and structures of western work (Stevens 1974). However the Commission found that equal wages should be paid and this resulted in many Aboriginal people losing their employment as the pastoralists saw it as unviable to continue employing them. The shift toward capital intensive rather than labour intensive operations within the industry also contributed to this situation (Coombs 1972). Many Aboriginal people not only lost their employment but also their place of residence as they were moved off the cattle stations after the introduction of award wages.

The above discussion has highlighted the point that labour relations were the dominate sphere in which the colonisers engaged with and constructed understandings of Aboriginal people, their culture and society. The literature has also made it clear that within western understandings of employment, Aboriginal labour was fully exploited and work conditions where overwhelmingly appalling. This critique of the literature has also brought to the fore the fact that, while the use of Aboriginal labour and the nature of this use, is touched on in many historical texts, it has rarely been the focus of critical analysis and its impacts on contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology are largely ignored. As Curthoys and Moore (1995: 1) point out,

Too often the very existence of a history of Aboriginal labour is quite unknown, even to many Aborigines…it is abundantly clear that historians have been markedly unsuccessful in informing Australians, indigenous and non-indigenous, of the history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander labour.

Following on from this historical account of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal labour relations in the Northern Australian pastoral setting there are a number of conclusions to be drawn that are of particular relevance to my thesis. The first is an acknowledgment of the poor conditions under which Aboriginal people were employed. I would suggest that while mainstream society may be willing to acknowledge to differing degrees this shameful past, there is still a tendency to relegate it or compartmentalise it within some distant or foreign era with little
relevance to the Aboriginal employment situation today. The second point of relevance to my thesis is that within the pastoral industry Aboriginal people had relatively more cultural and social freedom and that this allowed them to maintain connections to country. The union debate has highlighted that for Aboriginal workers it was not only equality in working conditions but also land rights that were of principle importance.

The following sections in this chapter discusses the remembered past of older Aboriginal people in my study setting and the memories that they have chosen to share. It attempts to illuminate some of the elements that may influence and shape contemporary Aboriginal work ideologies in Ngukurr as well as providing an insight into the history of employment opportunities in the community.

**Aboriginal memories of pastoral work**

A number of Aboriginal elders in Ngukurr remember working on various European run pastoral stations around the Northern Territory prior to 1968. These individuals are now in their sixties and while there may have been many more Aboriginal people from the Roper Region employed on cattle stations, they no longer survive to share their memories. The Census statistics reflect this fact with only 6.1 percent of the population being over the age of 55 (ABS 2006c). I was privileged enough to have the opportunity to hear these recollections while driving through the landscape, sitting at a favourite fishing spot or under the cool of a shady tree. They were often told in narrative form in front of an attentive audience of younger relatives.

My fieldwork discussions with the small number of men who had participated in the pastoral industry were insightful. Their narratives revealed to me that they acknowledged the exploitative nature of this past employment. As one old man explained "I bin slave like my dad before me" and another emphasised "white man bin real hard on us them times". This exploitation was firmly associated in their minds with the lack of financial rewards they had received from their employment:
…we made them stations and what did we get for it, nothing!
…I never saw any money
…it went to the station store that money
…I don’t know where that money went maybe the government mobs still got it

Yet it became clear, that this way of interpreting the exploitation of their labour, was a perception that had been significantly influenced by the ‘Wave-Hill walk off’ and the continuing public and political discourse around ‘equal wages’.

Within the narratives of women who had been involved in this industry I found there was a different kind of remembering. Recollection of this time involved the subtle acknowledgement of personal experiences of trauma. One lady explained quietly to me how she would be left at the station to work in the homestead while her husband would be gone for weeks on mustering jobs;

I bin lost two babies there, im shame for me. It makes me real sorry. Nobody bin care for me there, nobody bin coming to support me, my husband bin la stock working…I bin always brightened [frightened] taking tea langa [down to the] men’s camp misel [by myself].

I also listened to the story of another woman who spoke of a time when she was with her husband and three small children working on a fence in a remote area when one of her children became very sick. She told of how she had to run through the bush for three days in an attempt to find help; “I bin so frightened all that way I bin crying I never stopped I bin praying to god for her to live”. As a consequence of this illness her child never fully recovered and remained severely intellectually challenged and the responsibility of her mother throughout adulthood. Both of these women also lost their husbands at an early age and returned to the Mission to live.

What surprised me with these older people’s narratives of pastoral work was that, while acknowledging hardship and exploitation, they did not structure their memories around or focus their stories on these presumed negative experiences. At first I wondered why this was the case; didn’t they feel the need to lament the
exploitation of their labour and the associated inequality it entailed; didn’t they want these atrocities to be brought out from the dark and into the light; didn’t they want justice and respect for their hard labour and contribution to the economy? They may in fact have wanted such things. However, it was not this kind of diatribe that they choose to share with their families, and with myself in my role as researcher. They wanted rather to talk about the skills and knowledge they had acquired during this part of their lives. As Coombs (1972) and McGrath (1995) pointed out, it can not go unrecognised that many Aboriginal employees took pride in the work they did and the skills they attained through their involvement in the pastoral industry. It was their memories of gaining knowledge and acquiring skills, or their recollection of the knowledge and skills of their husbands, fathers, mothers or relatives that I found to be the common thread throughout these narratives of pastoral life.

I heard these male pastoral workers reminisce about how hard they worked and share stories about: breaking horses; mustering trips; catching ‘bullocky’; bull riding; building yards and fencing; fixing diverse pastoral machinery; and other aptitudes related to success in the industry. On the other hand the women would narrate stories usually centred around the activities of male relatives or of their own experience working in homesteads and looking after children, either their own or those of relatives, or those of their non-Aboriginal employers. I found that frequently the stories of both these men and women were shaped around amusing incidents aimed at producing laughs from their quiet and mostly attentive audience comprising numerous relatives of all ages. These included things like the consequence of someone’s mistake or the outcome of someone’s attempt at a joke. Sometimes they were about the effect of the subversive actions of an Aboriginal worker on a non-Aboriginal boss; or the misunderstandings that occurred between a non-Aboriginal boss and his worker.

These stories, I came to realise were deeply embedded in narratives of ‘country’, and it was this component of the telling for which the audience showed the most
reverence. For example, these pastoral workers would describe where the event took place, who was there and where they were in relation to each other and other physical surroundings. They would explain how they were related to this country, how others where related to it, and its association with dreaming paths (the routes travelled by dreaming spirits). Often they would discuss what food could be found there, what physical and spiritual dangers may be there, and its cultural and social association with the particular people who might be listening. It was of significant importance to these narrators, that the recipients of these stories understood where the events were located and the nature of the ‘country’ they occurred in. It became clear to me that remembering and distributing knowledge of ‘country’ was of far greater significance to these older people than talking about the exploitative experience of ‘work’ or the inequality within pastoral labour relations.

These narrative forms, where describing physical locations and multiple layers of relatedness to ‘country’ were given prominence not only within the stories of these older pastoral workers; but I began to realise that they shaped and gave meaning to many people’s stories. At first I was impatient with these narrative forms, and wondered why such energy and time was being wasted on seemingly superfluous information, rather than just getting to the point. Then one day it dawned on me ‘that information was the point’. This realisation made me question the way daily stories and life narratives are shaped within my own culture. I had assumed that Aboriginal narratives would reflect those from my own culture and revolve around constructs of ‘work’. For westerners our lives are shaped by ‘work’ and as such our life narratives and daily conversations often reflect this. For example, we talk about our past and present jobs and those of others (e.g. What do you do?), we talk about liking or disliking work, of getting away from work or not being able to get away from it, of retiring or not wanting to retire.

Through listening closely to the stories people chose to share with each other and how they structured their narratives I belatedly, or rather again, was reminded that life for some may not revolve around or be structured by ‘employment’ and its
ideologies. For these Aboriginal people it seemed instead to involve complex interactions and engagement with this unfamiliar phenomenon of ‘country’. It would seem from these narratives that, for these older pastoral workers, it was not principally the experience of ‘pastoral work’ that was valued but rather the opportunity this employment provided to ‘work’ with and engage in ‘country’ (this is further discussed in Chapter six and seven).

Another and more recent experience many people in Ngukurr have had with the pastoral industry was when they themselves became involved in establishing and operating an Aboriginal owned pastoral company.

**The establishment of the Yugul Cattle Company (YCC)**

That ‘employment’ and associated economic imperatives are often assumed to be central to life by mainstream Australian society and institutions and that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have a distinctly different way of engaging in the world and prioritising what is important, is again effectively illustrated in the development of the Yugul Cattle Company. After the 1968 government takeover of the Roper River Mission and its re-organisation as the Aboriginal community of Ngukurr, Aboriginal interest in gaining land rights began to increase.

Bern (1974) has discussed the Ngukurr community strike of 1970 and argues that while it was influenced by the Government’s decision to ban cattle mustering in the area, its primary purpose was about gaining land rights in and around the community. The demands made by the Aboriginal strikers, covered issues such as self governance, improved housing, means to make money, and access to modern amenities and equipment. Bern (1976: 217), however, argued that the foremost demand was about obtaining a lease over the land “covering the area of the old mission lease (and may be) extending eastward to Rose River”. This 1970 strike ended with neither material concessions being made by the Government nor any immediate gains in community autonomy (Bern 1976). But Thiele (1982) suggests that it did get the Government’s attention and was interpreted by government
officers as a sign of community cohesion. He has argued that this recognition was a significant factor in the Government’s decision to acquiesce to some degree to the Ngukurr Aborigines’ demand for land rights. Consequently, in December 1971 Ngukurr became the first Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory to receive a pastoral lease.

This lease included restrictive governmental controls on its management and development. The Government retained important rights in the land (especially over minerals and timber), and was the final authority in deciding its use (Bern 1976). The Government offered the land solely as a basis for economic development and employment opportunities. Thiele (1982) pointed out that the fact that Aboriginal people primarily wanted land rights went substantially unrecognised by government and other stakeholders and their less important priority of developing a cattle enterprise was given prominence within the overarching ideology and discourse of community development.

The dominance of mainstream economic imperatives and ‘work’ ideology meant that Aboriginal people, in order to obtain the lease, needed to conform to government requirements of economic development and employment opportunities. It was this conformity that played a significant part in the establishment of the Yugul Cattle Company (YCC). In October 1972 the YCC received Federal Government funds and began operation in 1973. Thiele’s (1982) thesis documents the complex relationship within the YCC between this dominant ideology of economic development and employment and the understandings and behaviours of Aboriginal people involved in the enterprise.

In its first year of operation, Thiele (1982) has documented that many Aboriginal people residing in Ngukurr applied for positions in the company and twenty-five were employed on award wages, of whom only thirteen worked for more than six months. In mid 1975 he found that only thirteen men were employed, nine of whom had worked for less than two months and only one had been employed for
the whole of the preceding six months. By 1976, Thiele described the YCC as being in difficulty and as having reverted to a low key ‘hunting-style’ operation similar to that which had existed in the days of the Mission prior to 1968.

Thiele (1982) argued that the deemed failure of the YCC was twofold and due to both external and internal factors. He suggests that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr had a false belief in their abilities to run a cattle company, which stemmed from their perception that they had effectively done so under the Mission. He has argued that while Aboriginal people had the necessary skills for their positions in the company, they did not have the related western work authority systems. He states that Aboriginal people involved in this enterprise,

"neither understood, nor did they often even know about, the financial, organizational and cultural factors underlying the operations of a cattle enterprise within the western economic or market framework (Thiele 1982: 231)."

Thiele (1982) proposed that the inherent divisions and complexities in Aboriginal social relations (kinship systems) made organising tasks, delegating responsibilities, and sanctioning rule breakers difficult, not just in the context of the YCC employment and business sphere but also within general settlement affairs. Thiele (1982) has argued that Aboriginal culture and its associated social systems were in tension with Western work, business, administration, economic and systems of government. He emphasises that a profound consequence of this was that Aborigines in Ngukurr were “highly dependent on European initiative, co-ordination, and management” and were very vulnerable to “European insensitivity, narrow-mindedness, apathy, or prejudice” (Thiele 1982: 280).

My own fieldwork has found that Aboriginal people who were involved in the YCC do not remember it as a ‘failed venture’ but rather as one experience within a larger and continuing discourse about pastoral ‘work’. I found that when specifically asked why its existence was so short lived these Aboriginal people consistently positioned the ‘problem’ within the non-Aboriginal domain of
operation and expectations. They would briefly mention the possibility of non-Aboriginal mismanagement and then quickly return to narratives of pastoral experiences. It was not to the business or economic component of the YCC that primary significance was attributed, but rather the pastoral experiences that had occurred before, during and after its operation. This interest in pastoral ‘work’ has not completely dissipated within the Ngukurr community and some Aboriginal people have been consistently enthusiastic about establishing and engaging in cattle projects. For example in 1999 twenty people were employed in a “cattle project” under the umbrella of the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). Taylor et al. (2000) has suggested that this ‘work project’ was a vestige of the long-standing ties of Ngukurr people to the pastoral industry through their involvement on one of the many European-owned properties in the region or with the Aboriginal-owned YCC.

During my own field research, there were a number of older and influential Aboriginal people advocating the re-establishment of a cattle enterprise. When in early 2005 they were approached by the non-Aboriginal CDEP co-ordinator and asked about what kinds of training they thought would benefit the community they emphasised ‘stock and station’ training. The CDEP co-ordinator acted on this request and later that year an accredited trainer arrived in the community to provide ‘fencing’ training. While many younger people had enrolled in the course the CDEP co-ordinator explained to me after the event that “it had been a complete failure; all the men would just disappear”. According to the CDEP co-ordinator, this accredited trainer had not “given up” and had expressed a desire to return to the community with a different training approach. This new approach was based on the notion of taking the participants “out bush so that they couldn’t run away”.

Through many observations I began to get the strong impression that interest in ‘cattle projects’ was fostered by a small number of influential older men in the community who had long standing ties with the pastoral industry. There was, however, at least one younger man I was aware of who had followed in his father’s
footsteps and was employed on a cattle station in the region. He only returned sporadically to the community. In October 2006 one of these influential men, who had been involved with all the intermittent cattle projects in the community and had consistently kept pastoral work on the agenda, explained where he was presently at in this ‘on and off’ initiative. He proclaimed during a Council meeting with the Indigenous Business Association that a business plan had been developed for this project and that they were just waiting on funds, he stated:

We need money to upgrade the fences; cattle are outside the paddock…we have money for a chopper. We want to do it before the wet…we got the plan and everything, only funding wise…we have the five year plan we already did that.

This continuing interest in pastoral type ‘work’ I found was also reflected in the informal cattle work that people engaged in on a regular basis. This was often directed by the older people discussed above and involved finding or tracking down “killers” or “bullocky”. These relatively wild cattle owed their existence to previous cattle enterprises in the community extending right back to the Mission era. They would be hunted down and shot and then brought back to the community, where social and cultural protocols would shape the distribution of the meat. This “fresh beef”, bullocky that had been very recently killed and had not been cured or hung, meaning bled in an attempt to increase tenderness, was a local favourite. I became aware that on numerous occasions in the past attempts had been made to formalise this informal ‘work’ through the establishment of a community ‘butchery’ shaped around mainstream economic prerequisites and employment expectations. Through discussions with people during fieldwork I was unable to fully understand why such an enterprise was no longer functioning. The Aboriginal people I spoke with gave reasons such as: the mismanaging of funds by non-Aboriginal staff; tensions between particular Aboriginal families; and the lack of funding and equipment. While non-Aboriginal people I spoke with responded with suggestions such as: breaches of occupational health and safety regulations; Aboriginal mismanagement; and lack of community cohesion and
commitment. This is important and again demonstrates different perceptions around barriers to ‘progress’ or economic development.

In summary, the main body of literature on Aboriginal labour relations in the pastoral industry is firmly positioned within dominant employment ideology and as such focuses on appalling employment conditions. There is on the other hand only a limited amount of literature that analyses understandings of pastoral work from an Aboriginal perspective. My fieldwork findings have found that, even with this history of labour exploitation, some Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have shown sustained interest in the pastoral industry. They recollect their ‘work’ history as one of a valued personal experience, which provided the opportunity to acquire skills, gain knowledge and maintain relationships to ‘country’. I have argued that this interest in pastoral experiences has for some continued into the present. This is expressed through both the continued attempts to establish cattle projects within the frameworks of mainstream understandings of community or economic development and by continuing to engage in work activities deemed ‘informal’ within this ideological context.

This discussion has highlighted a tension between the value that these Aboriginal people place on their experiences of engagement in pastoral ‘work’ and those prescribed by the dominant economic and employment systems of western culture. Instead of concentrating on the perceived failure or unsuccessful nature of these businesses, Aboriginal people place emphasis on the way in which pastoral enterprises have facilitated, even if sporadically, opportunities to engage in ‘work’ activities that are valued in and of themselves. This finding is further supported by Povinelli (1993: 137) who has suggested that interacting with country, expressed in their conversational orientation towards it and their physical exploits in it, is the ‘work’ Belyuen Aborigines describe themselves doing for country. She has pointed out that while western understandings of ‘work’ are associated with transforming or detaching things from nature, Belyuen Aborigines view work or
labour action on objects as penetrating them. I have found in my own study, that it is not so much the outcomes or the end product of labour or ‘working’ that is most highly prized by Aboriginal pastoral workers and others, but instead the experience of ‘working’ in and being in, on and with ‘country’. It is the opportunities that pastoral employment can provide, or rather the way in which these activities can be incorporated into pastoral employment that is of value. I would argue that continued interest in pastoral work and pastoral enterprises in Ngukurr is representative of Aboriginal endeavours to negotiate meaningful experiences within and beneath the superimposed expectations of dominant western work systems and structures.

The next section of this chapter further explores the way in which Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have been negotiating and constructing their own meanings and values around ‘work’, while simultaneously engaging in and interacting with institutional environments profoundly shaped by dominant western ‘work’ ideologies. The section explores the significance of Mission institutions in shaping, influencing or changing Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies and attitudes to employment.

Aboriginal Labour and the Roper River Mission

The relevant literature about missions in Aboriginal communities clearly reveals that at the core of Christian Mission institutions lay a belief in the moral importance of particular kinds of physical labour to the pursuit of religious life (Cole 1969, 1979; Reynolds 1981; Attwood 1989; Harris 1990). The purpose of ‘working’ or the meaning of ‘work’ for missionaries was not primarily about financial gain but rather religious realisation. As such their beliefs reflected in part the religious doctrines that supported the development of a ‘work ethic’ (see chapter three). Teaching Aboriginal people about the moral importance of
particular kinds of and structures of labour was associated with notions of civilisation and later assimilation. As Coombs (1972: 15) stated, the programs of the Missions and Aboriginal Reserves were,

…the directed to teaching Aborigines to live by white standards, to acquire education in European forms, to work regularly, to manage money income, and to desire, accept and live by white Australian standards of housing, dress, hygiene and social behaviour generally.

The purpose of the Roper River Mission was captured in the comments of one of its early missionaries. He stated that this purpose was “the protecting and uplifting of the black race in Northern Australia” and the way in which this was to be achieved was “twofold: (1) the gospel of work (2) the gospel of love” (cited in Harris 1990: 703). Reynolds (1990: 240) has claimed that for Missionaries it was assumed that ‘work’, “would induce discipline, punctuality, acceptance of authority and a sedentary lifestyle, which would, in turn, facilitate religious instruction and eventual conversion to Christianity”. The Finke River Mission, established by the Lutheran Church in Central Australia, had similar aims of teaching Aboriginal people a respect for work and in particular imparting the skills of certain forms of manufacture (Rowse 1998: 80).

From its founding, the Christian Missionary Society (CMS) stipulated that the Roper River Mission should be industrial and agricultural, as well as education, medical and spiritual in its purpose. In 1913 two missionaries were given the following instructions:

…you are to give yourselves, at the outset at any rate to this branch [agriculture] of the Mission, which, we repeat must be specially developed…And we wish most earnestly to warn you against the fatal mistake of doing the work yourselves instead of training the Aborigines to do it. The Committee…is convinced of the absolute necessity of encouraging industrial work amongst members of child races such as the Aborigines of Australia (cited in Cole 1979: 106).

These ‘work’ goals were pursued on the Roper River Mission by controlling the greatest possible part of the lives of the Aboriginal residents. Children were separated from their parents and placed in sex-segregated dormitories, which were
under constant supervision by non-Aboriginal missionary staff. Elements of Aboriginal culture, such as infant betrothal, polygamy, traditional language and ritual were discouraged and acceptance into the congregation was dependant on abandonment of these practices (Taylor et al. 2000: 10). In order to legitimize the social and cultural foundations that shaped their own engagement in the world, it was of absolute importance to the missionaries that Aboriginal people learnt the ‘rightfulness’ of religious doctrines of ‘work’. By encouraging conformity to particular work behaviours, structures and ideologies it was believed that Aboriginal people would come to accept and conform to the western, civilised or ‘correct’ way of being-in-the-world and discovering meaning in life.

In an attempt to instil this kind of life, Mission institutions introduced and enforced particular regulation of Aborigines’ time. As the daily program documented by Rev. R.D Joynt (1918: 9) a missionary at Roper River from 1908-1918 highlights:

Rising bell rings about 5am.
Girls work in the kitchen, laundry, bakehouse, missionaries’ houses, dormitory, yard and attend to little ones. Some carry firewood to kitchen and laundry.
Boys – garden, milking, wood chopping, horses brought in, dormitory, yard building, stores and general work.
Breakfast at 7:15. Service from 8:15 to 8:45.
At 9, girls are given work suitable to them, and boys the same.
Morning school from 9. Dinner at 12 noon.
Afternoon school from 3 to 5. Those that attend school during morning hours go to gardening or sewing or raffia classes in the afternoon. Wednesday and Saturday afternoons are free for a walkabout.
Sunday only necessary work attended to.

Rowse (1998) has also pointed out, that on Aboriginal missions and settlements, it was often professed that the strict provision and distribution of rations could encourage particular ‘work values’ in their inmates. He has suggested however, that these institutions often had conflicting and competing objectives around who should be eligible for rations and why. This was further confounded by the fact
that, in reality, there was often not sufficient ‘work’ to keep all able-bodied people occupied and as a consequence missionaries had to be inventive in their definition of ‘work’ and what kinds of activities it could constitute. Attwood (1989) has also pointed out that for missionaries, seeking to impose a new work ethic (and sense of time), there were serious implications. The poor land on which most of these institutions were established and the lack of equipment and funding available meant that the missionaries’ different ‘work’ projects were repeatedly retarded or abandoned. In addition, Roper River Mission, like most of these institutions, often went through periods of staff shortages and as Rowse (1998: 167) has stated in such a context, “supervision of all employees over a full working week was practically impossible, so short weeks became normal”.

It was not until 1951 that the CMS began paying five shillings per week to Aboriginal workers at Roper River Mission (Cole 1979). Yet during this time there was no shop in which to spend this money. Therefore this introduction and transition into a cash economy was, in its early stages, only sustainable through the continued provision of an amount of rations. It was not till 1956 that a Mission shop was opened where money transactions could occur on a regular basis (Bern 1974).

**Aboriginal memories of mission work**

Kral and Falk (2004) have suggested that there is an entrenched European ‘work ethic’ among older Aboriginal residents of remote communities. My own research has found that for many older Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, ‘work’, its values and meanings, are predominantly positioned within their memory of the mission era. While some Aboriginal people in the Ngukurr region had experience of working within other employment industries, it became clear that the mission teachings and its institutional structure had had a profound influence on older Aboriginal peoples’ constructions about the meaning and value of work. I found that the older generation of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr would often speak about the ‘golden years’ of the mission. They often responded, when asked about work, how the
missionaries taught them about the moral necessity of a strong ‘work ethic’ and how they actively engaged with this ideology,

…not onebella [person] bin langa [been in their] camp, mela [we] all bin working

…ask the missionaries, we can work, the government say we can’t, but we bin work long time

I heard a number of people reminisce about how they had worked hard since they were children in the mission dormitories. They spoke about being given ‘chores’ by the missionaries before and after school and always being busy ‘working’.

We used to do a lot of work. We used to run down the river after breakfast for bogi [washing] then run back up la hill for church. Mela [we] never been late, taught the right way, discipline me had from the missionaries.

One woman described to me how in the morning they would have to clean the girls’ residence and help with the preparation of meals. In the afternoon she remembered having to clean either the houses and yards of the missionaries or the areas in and around the church. She also explained that during this time their were no toilets in Aboriginal houses and only a public ablution block for community use, and that cleaning this area was also a ‘chore’ for those living in the dormitories.

While most of these childhood reminiscences placed emphasis on ‘hard work’ I found that many of these narratives also included stories of subversive actions. One woman spoke about her time in the dormitory and their ‘chore’ of collecting fire wood. The children would be sent out to find wood for the cooking fires and when they brought it back the missionary would count each child’s pieces and write down the number on a black board. She humorously stated, ‘mela [we] would take them black boards and washem clean, then mela [we] would bring the same wood back to be counted over and over’. I also heard many other childhood
memories of mischief from these elders, such as stealing peanuts and other food stuffs from the mission garden or the private gardens of the missionaries.

By listening to these stories of ‘mission times’, I became aware that they were also often associated with satisfying and rewarding ‘work’ and contrasted with the perceived unsatisfactory work situation in Ngukurr today. This sentiment was expressed effectively by one man;

We used to go to work, because we could see it was benefiting us. Now nobody wants to work because im [it is] not benefiting us, people get down hearted and don’t care anymore.

Another community elder emphasised that, “the mission trained on site, gave us more responsibility, made us responsible for job”. Contrasted with the meanings and values they attached to the present day employment situation, one devout Christian woman explained to me:

…im different today before we had the rights we used to work like mad,_la garden, cattle, building houses with our hands, there were mechanics and people working the pumps, drivers and even more, everybody bin working…Then we work with the union mob for rights and we can then get paid, first time for us…I like to see all the people work, in the early days nobody bin stop la [in the] camp. CDEP not big mob working just a few, it should be like early days everybody have a job…Make im look good. Today we changed, we started off real good.

I find this quote interesting because it implies that before the introduction of wages everybody ‘worked’ in the community. In the mind of this woman this reciprocal relationship was more satisfactory then the present situation, where individuals are paid for work but there are limited employment positions. In this sense it could be inferred that, for this woman, the social equality provided by everybody ‘working’ was of higher value than being individually financially rewarded for such work.

By contrast, while I found that the older generation spoke principally about the amount of work they engaged in, occasionally they would retrospectively lament over not being rewarded sufficiently. One old woman described to me how she
used to work for the missionaries, doing laundry and looking after children, “it was good you know” she declared. She then moved on to reflect a little more on this time and stated,

…Poorbella! [unfortunate person] Me nomo sabi [I didn’t understand] money that time…we didn’t complain in those day …not even about the small amount of sugar you got for rations. It was all gone by sundown that same day.

I was also witness to a shared narrative of a different woman’s ‘working life’. She told me and other relatives how she had cared for people in the local hospital or clinic and about how, even when she was a young girl and had finished her usual mission chores, she would spend her “spare time working la [in the] hospital”. In her narrative she emphasised her love for this ‘nursing’ work and how she had wanted to learn from the missionaries about medicine and caring for people. She proudly explained that while many people came and went in her work environment, “Big mob bin go through there, I stick that job, I bin working all the time”. As this story telling drew to a close she reflected on this ‘working life’ and added as an after thought “I never bin paid back then, I bin just work for nothing! I never knew about that money”.

After listening to numerous discussions I began to realise that the narratives of these older people placed emphasis on trying to instil in younger people what they remembered as their own strong work ethic. I observed an older woman yelling at her granddaughter “don’t just bludge in camp, im shame job. I always bin working…I always come back in the morning”. I also witnessed an elderly gentleman talking to, and advising a group of young men. He exclaimed with an amount of anguish, “you got to learn to pick up shovel nomo [no] sitting la [in the] camp…you got to learn to work in the hot sun no sleeping all day”. Kral and Falk (2004) also found in their case study that older Aboriginal people who grew up during Mission times would often despair at the seeming lack of ‘work ethic’ in younger generations.
When I first began fieldwork I tended to explain my research as being about employment. This was commonly responded to by older community residents with statements of concern about the employment situation of younger people in the community. One woman pleadingly stated “olabat [they] need help…olabat nomo sabi [they don’t understand] work”. Because I had explained I was doing research on ‘employment’ she assumed, as did others, that I had the capacity to change or make decisions regarding the employment situation in Ngukurr. I therefore quickly learnt that, in order not to disappoint these community expectations, I had to begin to explain my research in a way that avoided such connotations. This was achieved through providing more detail and avoiding using terms like ‘employment’ and ‘work’ with particular emphasis.

Yet I could not deny that expressions of anxiety were common among older people when they spoke about the younger generations. They often seemed to believe that these people did not place the same value on ‘work’ as they remembered themselves doing during their own younger years. I found that this perceived difference in ‘work’ attitudes was often explained through reference to powers beyond their control “they get that lazy money, munanga [white people] give us that, now nobody working olabat [they] used to UB [unemployment benefit]”.

I began to realise that the emphasis older people placed on their positive memories of ‘work’ during Mission times indicated that these memories were significant in their personal conceptions of their own history and identity. It was this importance to identity that I believe led many older people to feel compelled to encourage the younger generation to ‘work’ like they remembered ‘working’. They saw the Mission ‘work’ they had done as giving substance and meaning to their memories and to the stories they told. Consequently they wished for the younger generation to have this familiar experience and way of expressing identity and meaning in life. Like older people in most societies, I found that they often perceived of their past in terms of the ‘good old days’ and viewed younger people as not adequately
reflecting their remembered values and behaviours; *remembered* in this case being the operative word.

Somewhat paradoxically, I found that these same people often simultaneously expressed a contradictory sentiment. I became aware that this parallel perspective was associated with recollections of how the Mission had oppressed Aboriginal identities and culture through the imposition of ‘work’ ideology and its structures. I often heard older people make such comments as “*the missionaries wrecked us, now only work for white man*”. The tyrannical nature of the Mission institution and its emphasis on ‘work’ is further captured in the following comments,

...the missionaries forced us to work, they would come and get us, might as well say demand us to work. When they used to come and argue with us, we never used to win. They had all their ruling and that sort of thing. They might beat you in front of everyone… You had to be very sick not to go to work.

...the missionaries made us work. We had no say bout that or anything really them times

...mela [we] bin bit like slaves to them missionaries

It became increasingly obvious to me that older people were acutely aware of and acknowledged the integral part imposed ‘work’ structures and ideologies had played in the oppression and general devastation of their people and culture. I found that this sentiment was often expressed through their portrayal to younger people of work as a ‘white’ way of being. During my fieldwork it gradually became clearer that within the narratives of older people there was a subtle message that work was a ‘*munanga*’ (white) preoccupation, and that to engage in or value western work structures and ideology would somehow lessen your Aboriginality. I found that this tension between work as a positive mechanism for identity creation and community development, on the one hand, and the negative aspect of ‘work’ being culturally oppressive on the other, was a powerful and pervasive part of contemporary Aboriginal work ideologies in Ngukurr.
This paradox of sentiment was often overcome by older people through their construction of “work” as a choice rather than as a necessity. I heard older people often make comments along the lines of:

…you can’t make people work its up to them
…I try to get my daughter to work but I don’t like being bossy
…if you want to work you can work here, but it’s up to you, nobody making you

My findings in this section have demonstrated that the Mission era significantly shaped older Aboriginal work ideologies in Ngukurr and through a flow-on affect those of the younger generation. The following section discusses the structures and experience of employment that developed after the Roper River Mission was superseded and became the government settlement of Ngukurr.


In 1968 the CMS handed over responsibility for the Roper River Mission to the Federal Government and the settlement then became known in most circles as Ngukurr. However, I found that many Aboriginal residents still refer to the settlement as Roper or Roper River in conversation. This hand over was prompted by the Wave-hill walk-off (discussed above) and other subsequent pastoral station walk-offs. These ‘worker strikes’ played a significant role in encouraging unemployed Aboriginal pastoral workers to begin to apply for unemployment benefits through the Department of Social Security (DSS).

While many of these applications could not be refused and were deemed successful, Aboriginal people residing on missions or reserves continued to be excluded from applying for such social benefits. Their ineligibility was enforced and justified through a number of Government strategies. Sanders (1985) suggested that the first of these was that Aborigines in remote areas were simply
deemed to be outside the workforce and hence beyond the scope of unemployment benefit eligibility. Secondly, Sanders (1985) argued, the government regarded the under award employment and training of Aboriginal people, both within and outside the welfare system, as suitable work. Therefore, if Aboriginal people refused to engage in this work they would be judged to have failed the DSS work test and could therefore be considered undeserving of benefits. Finally, Sanders (1985) has claimed that, even in the few cases where eligibility had been granted to Aboriginals in remote areas, it had been done in a way to minimise the possibility of eligibility spreading to other Aboriginal applicants. As such, successful cases were treated as exceptions rather than as creating general precedents for policy.

The inclusion of Aboriginal workers in the Northern Territory Pastoral Industry Award in 1968 placed considerable pressure on the Welfare Branch to similarly increase its rates of payments to Aboriginals working within welfare institutions. The previous cash-and-kind arrangement that had been operating on missions and reserves was replaced by a cash-only ‘training allowance’ scheme in 1969 (Sanders 1985). The prescribed rates of pay under this scheme were raised on a number of occasions, though they continued to remain well below the minimum mainstream award rates of pay, and only marginally above the rates of unemployment benefits. In Ngukurr per capita income during the early 1970s was between a fifth and a quarter of the national average (Bern 1977).

The Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory provided all employment in Ngukurr after the government take over of the Mission. However, as Sanders (1985) argued, by 1972 budgeting for the ‘employment’ of all Aborigines of working age in the Northern Territory’s settlements and missions on the ‘training allowance’ had become a major economic problem for the Welfare Branch. The Whitlam Labor Government won the election later that year and declared that Aboriginals should be paid award wages when in employment and should otherwise be eligible for the full range of social security payments, including unemployment benefits. Early in 1973 Cabinet stated that Aborigines living on
missions and settlements would no longer be regarded as beyond the scope of unemployment benefits. As a consequence of this, Aboriginal people in Ngukurr became eligible for unemployment benefits in April 1973 (Cole 1979). Those Aborigines employed in the community, as Bern (1977) has pointed out, continued to be paid a ‘training allowance’ rather than an award wage rate.

It did not take long for strong reactions in many circles to arise around this decision to grant Aboriginal people access to unemployment benefits. As a consequence the new Government’s plans were quickly called into question. It was suggested that the legislative inclusion of Aboriginal people in social security benefits would undermine Aboriginal community life, destabilise authority between young and old and destroy the Aboriginal ‘work ethic’ (see Harris and Turner 1976). Cass (2005) has argued that there was considerably more opposition to the introduction of unemployment benefits than there had been for the introduction of old age, invalid and widows pensions, or for supporting parents benefit, child endowment and family allowance payments. She suggested that during this time there “was a fear of benefits eroding incentives for paid work in Aboriginal communities” (Cass 2005: 99). Coombs (1972) believed that the payment of unemployment benefits to Aboriginal people living in remote communities would be detrimental and that a more ‘active’ approach was needed.

With the election of the Fraser Government in late 1975, discussions on the need to phase out the under-award-wage employment schemes in remote Aboriginal communities disappeared. Instead attention was focused on unemployment benefit entitlements under “less stringent conditions than those which apply to the general community” and of these benefits creating “unsatisfactory social problems” (DAA 1976: v). The payment of under-award wages to many Aboriginal workers continued throughout the later part of the 1970s and continues today in the guise of CDEP, which will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.
Thiele (1982: 168) described Ngukurr in the late 1970s as a place where residents were employed to do many of the same jobs that Europeans do in small towns, “there are teachers, and teachers’ aides, lay preachers and a minister, shop keepers, nurses’ aides, garbage collectors, plumbers, and Councillors” albeit often with significantly less financial rewards. He stated that during this time “many Aborigines regard a “nine-five” job as acceptable, even normal, and viewed those who do not work with (occasional) disdain” (Theile 1982: 142).

Through my discussions with older people in Ngukurr about their individual ‘work’ histories I have been able to gain a brief insight into this post-mission period between the 1970s and early 1980s. I found that many of those who had grown up on the Mission remembered this time as one of considerable cultural and social turmoil in the face of substantial community change. The stories of this era often made reference to the consumption of alcohol either as a social ‘problem’ or as a component of the recollections of the story teller’s youthful endeavours. One elder explained to me that “when the Welfare mob took over, nobody bin have no say. The community bin all messed up going every which way”. I then asked him whether he was employed during this time and he replied “I bin decide to go sit down la camp in protest from that mob”.

Yet in later discussions with this same elder about his ‘work’ history it became clear to me that he had not sustained this protest of unemployment. In the mid-1970s he had completed a mechanics apprenticeship and later worked for approximately six months for the BHP mining company on Groote Island as a heavy machinery operator. With the implementation of the government’s policy of self-determination he then became the first President of the Ngukurr Township Association a local Council comprised wholly of Aboriginal representatives. Thiele (1982), reflecting on his discussions with this same man, emphasised the difficulties he was encountering trying to negotiate between the expectations of community and relatives and the expectations of government. Thiele (1982) describes him as attempting to live two lives, one at ‘work’ and one at home, but
that this was an extremely difficult task in the social and cultural context of this newly and supposedly ‘self-governing’ community of Ngukurr.

Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the historical interface between Aboriginal people and the dominant work ideologies and frameworks that structured colonial relations. This discussion has provided the opportunity to draw a number of different conclusions relevant to the theme of understanding contemporary ‘work’ ideologies in Ngukurr. The first is that relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in the Northern part of Australia, since the beginnings of colonisation, have been firmly positioned within the sphere of Western economic labour relations. It can be concluded that getting Aboriginal people to ‘work’ was perceived by all colonial institutions as of primary importance and that this is a profound example of the strength of Western work ideology. Western work ideology and the social and cultural institutions that support and maintain it, have greatly influenced the way in which Aboriginal people and their culture have been, and continue to be understood and represented within mainstream Australian society.

Aboriginal labour potential was what mattered to the colonisers and encouraging dependency was seen as a way to reinforce and maintain these relationships of economic exploitation. Yet it needs to be acknowledged that this exploitation and oppression of Aborigines went far beyond their use as cheap labour, for they were also dispossessed of their land. It is my view that the impacts of this cultural, social and emotional trauma on Aboriginal people cannot be underestimated. It is not only the history and experience of exploitation as slave-like labour, but also the experiences associated with the exploitation of their land, women and social and cultural knowledge, that has had a significant affect on Aboriginal people and their relationship with western work and mainstream Australian society.
The second conclusion that can be drawn from my findings, confirms that there has been minimal academic interest in confronting and critically analysing the impacts of the past on contemporary Aboriginal understandings of employment. Rather, the emphasis has been on the historical perception of Aboriginal people as reluctant and unreliable participants in the Australian economy. The literature I have reviewed in this chapter may well have challenged these perceptions, but studies of Aboriginal understandings of employment and ‘work’, with the exception of this and other smaller studies, remain limited.

This conclusion is consistent with Cowlishaw (1999), who has maintained that the discourse of European pastoralists, which has played a significant role in shaping mainstream understandings of Aboriginal people and their culture respectively, has construed the exploitation and dependency of pastoral labour relations as a time of healthy hard work and independence. Reliance on government money is set up in sharp contrast to this and is associated with dependency, social inferiority and shame. Cowlishaw (1999) has argued that this is just one version of a standard mainstream discourse on welfare dependency and social disadvantage, authorised by certain scholarly work and circulated as an accepted diagnosis in media and public discussion. This has been demonstrated through my own findings, where the western imperative has been to maintain the discourse around the need and benefits of employment.

My third conclusion relates to the memories of Aboriginal pastoral workers. My findings confirmed that for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr who remember ‘working’ on pastoral stations, it was not so much ‘work conditions’ or the exploitation of their labour that was at the core of their narratives. Rather the focus was on the opportunities that were available within this restrictive paradigm for engagement in activities that were culturally, socially and personally meaningful. I have concluded that interacting with and experiencing events on ‘country’ is what shaped the memories of engagement for individuals involved in the pastoral
industry. The value Aboriginal people in Ngukurr placed on these experiences, and the potential for them to exist within a framework of employment, has meant that there was and continues to be a community interest in developing pastoral enterprises.

This chapter has further concluded that the dominant western work ideology profoundly shaped the structures and objectives of Mission institutions, including that of the Roper River Mission, and the ‘work’ ideologies of their inhabitants. This fourth conclusion is consistent with the findings of Rowley (1970: 96), who has gone so far as to suggest that Mission settlements, along with pastoral properties, resembled the “workhouses” of industrial England. My discussion in this chapter around older people’s memories of the mission era conclude that the ‘work values’ of the Roper River missionaries have had a significant influence on contemporary Aboriginal understandings of ‘work’. My findings have revealed that this older generation’s work ideology, primarily constructed through their personal experience of Mission ‘work’, was one of mixed messages. They both attributed positive values to work and placed importance on the notion of a ‘work ethic’, but also positioned work within a western context and associated it with oppression of Aboriginal culture and identity. These memories and understandings imbued community values around employment with conflicting elements, and consequently, made the meaning and value of employment ambiguous. Thus older Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have developed significantly different ‘work’ ideologies to those dominant in mainstream society.

Through the findings discussed in this chapter it has been made clear that governments and dominant institutions embedded in western cultural frameworks rarely acknowledge the culturally constructed assumptions around ‘work’ and ‘employment’. Throughout the history of Northern Australia there has been consistent pressure placed on Aboriginal people to conform to mainstream expectations about the meaning, values and organisation of ‘work’. The cultural ideologies and social fabric that support these dominant institutions, and in turn are
maintained and sustained through them, are powerful and pervasive. The next chapter, drawing on my fieldwork, therefore turns to a discussion on the contemporary employment situation in Ngukurr. It provides further insight into the interrelated but sometimes conflicting ‘work’ ideologies of Aboriginal people, mainstream society and its institutional environment.
CHAPTER FIVE
ABORIGINAL EMPLOYMENT TODAY
THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM
(CDEP)

Introduction

Ngukurr, like most remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, was established primarily as a means of administering Aboriginal welfare policies. Its development required no modern economic base and the settlement has subsequently not acquired one. At present Ngukurr is not economically sustainable beyond the provisions of the welfare state (Taylor et al. 2000). Consequently Aboriginal employment is primarily through government employment initiatives, such as the “Community Development Employment Program” (CDEP).

This chapter discusses the development and expansion of the CDEP scheme. It highlights a number of changes that have been made to its governance structure and funding allocations throughout its existence, with particular reference to its historical development in Ngukurr. The contemporary political playing field of CDEP in Ngukurr is then discussed and the role this program plays in the community explored. The second part of this chapter documents Aboriginal people’s experiences of being employed under CDEP in Ngukurr. Their perceptions have been classified into a number of key themes including: ‘not real
jobs”; pride and shame; trust and responsibility; and flexibility. The final part of this chapter draws together the literature on CDEP and the findings of this research and provides an insight into the complex political and participatory elements of employment in contemporary Ngukurr.

The CDEP scheme has, since its implementation, attracted wide academic and public attention. The question of whether the program should be considered welfare or work, negative or positive, has initiated considerable debate. As Hunter and Taylor (2000: 74) state “a perennial problem of defining Indigenous labour force status is whether to treat CDEP scheme jobs as work or welfare”. Sanders (1997) describes this situation as the welfare/work divide. Due to the program having links to both sides of the divide, it is always possible to argue that CDEP participants ought to be treated differently than they are.

On the welfare or negative side of the argument, CDEP is perceived as hindering Aboriginal engagement in mainstream unsubsidised employment and as a welfare or poverty trap for Aboriginal Australians and their communities (Pearson 2000; Langton 2002). Altman and Gray (2005) point out that since the 1970s discussion around the need for Aboriginal people to be employed in mainstream jobs has been common. In 2005 the Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister, Senator Vanstone suggested that Aboriginal people should migrate to where the ‘real’ jobs are (Vanstone 2005).

Yet within the context of remote Aboriginal communities, where employment options are extremely limited, Altman and Gray (2005) claim that the CDEP scheme has been very successful in generating positive economic and community development outcomes, at a minimal cost to the Commonwealth budget and the Australian tax payer. They state that:

It provides a form of Indigenous employment and income support in regions that are often distant from mainstream labour markets to participants that frequently have different aspirations, and very different life chances, from other Australians (Altman and Grey 2005: 402)
Recently, there has been considerable attention in academic circles, government platforms and public media on the supposed need to create ‘real’ employment in remote communities. However no government has been successful in directly generating anything but a tiny fraction of the mainstream jobs needed for such a policy direction (Altman and Grey 2005). Conversely, a significant amount of literature argues that, in the remote context, CDEP employment has positive effects on the wellbeing of Aboriginal participants; it improves the economic status of Aboriginal communities; and aids Aboriginal community development and autonomy (Smith 1994; Arthur and David-Petero 2000; Altman and Johnson 2000; Gray and Thacker 2000; Madden 2000; Arthur 2002; Misko 2004; Altman and Grey 2005).

The Development of CDEP

CDEP is a Commonwealth government scheme in which unemployed Aboriginal people forgo their welfare entitlements and instead work for a local Aboriginal community organisation. Under the CDEP scheme community organisations get an allocation of a similar magnitude to their collective unemployment benefit entitlement to undertake “community” defined “work”. CDEP participants must work 32 hours a fortnight in order to receive the full benefit. The scheme has undergone a number of expansionary phases. Yet upon the Howard Government’s election in 1996 the training and capital equipment components of CDEP funding were dramatically reduced. This program is currently the largest employer of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory (Atman and Grey 2005; Sanders 2006). It is also the principle employer for Aboriginal people residing in Ngukurr.

The CDEP scheme was developed by Government to avoid the problems that were believed might stem from making Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas with limited labour markets, eligible for unemployment benefits. The main argument against the introduction of unemployment benefit entitlements to
Aboriginal people living in remote communities was first articulated towards the end of the Whitlam Government (Sanders 1985). Unemployment benefits in mainstream Australia were received by a minority and were understood as a short-term measure to facilitate labour market transition and adjustment. But in the remote Aboriginal context they would be received by a majority of working age people, because of the otherwise extremely limited employment options. This outcome was seen as problematic by the Government for both economic and moral reasons. There was much talk over a possible ‘epidemic’ in which the majority of the working-age Aboriginal population in remote communities would end up on unemployment benefits (Sanders 1985).

In 1976 the Coalition Government established the Interdepartmental Working Party on Aboriginal Employment (IWPAE) with their aim being:

To consider the impact of the payment of unemployment benefits to Aboriginals living as communities; the extent to which payment of these benefits has created unsatisfactory social problems within those communities; and to recommend ways by which these situations can be remedied… (DAA 1976: v)

The IWPAE argued that the ‘only real long-term solution’ was the ‘creation of useful employment’ and that one way in which this could be achieved was by not paying individuals unemployment benefits but rather combining such money and providing it to Community Councils ‘to fund work projects’ (DAA 1976: 31-32). However, the IWPAE also recognised a number of drawbacks to their suggestion, the most substantial being that charges of discrimination could be made against them. The Department of Social Security (DSS) was uncomfortable with a specific group of people (Aborigines in remote areas) being treated differently from mainstream Australians and made to work for unemployment benefits (Sanders 2005). DSS felt unable to direct a policy which was outside its notions of equality. Therefore, when the CDEP scheme emerged, it was not administered by the Department of Social Security (DSS) but by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA) and later by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
(ATSIC). The training component of the program was provided by the Department of Employment.

CDEP began in remote Aboriginal communities from 1977 (Sanders 1985; Altman et al 2000). In the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs words, its first objective was to “provide employment opportunities...at a cost approximating unemployment benefits...thereby reducing the need for unemployment benefit for unemployed Aboriginals within the community” (Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, House of Representatives, 26 May 1977). The first CDEP scheme was established in the Aboriginal community of Barunga (then Bamyili). Due to the high numbers of participants in the program it ran into financial difficulty in its first year of operation. In order to rectify this problem DAA began to offer a set number of CDEP places in communities and to allow those who were unable to participate in CDEP, due to lack of positions, to be eligible for unemployment benefits (Sanders 2005).

Sanders (1988) observed that administrative and budgetary problems restricted the expansion of the CDEP program until the 1980s. The program, however, proved extremely popular and after the initial problems began to expand quickly in remote Aboriginal communities (Altman et al. 2000). The program was first introduced to the community of Ngukurr in 1981 and has continued, with amendments, up until the present.

In 1992, the CDEP scheme in Ngukurr was suspended for six months, allegedly for maladministration. ATSIC commissioned a review prior to closing down the program and the consultant brought in to carry out the review subsequently became the Council Clerk. She reported that “the message coming out of this was clear: they [meaning the community] did not want CDEP to go” (Mott 1997 cited in Edmunds 2001: 11). Edmunds (2001) has suggested that during this time there was dissatisfaction in the community over the way in which the Local Community Government Council was operating and its supposed involvement in the
subsequent suspension of CDEP. She stated that many people in the community believed that “if they could organise CDEP, and the Council, in a way that was similar to traditional organising social arrangements, things could work” (Edmunds 2001:11).

Consequently, a new Council system of government based on an administrative clan system (as discussed in chapter one) evolved. This also led to a restructuring of work groups and lines of responsibility to align them with the Yugul Mangi Clan Management System. While the CDEP clan system reflects the general principles of descent underlying people’s relationships to land and ceremony it is not an exact replica. Edmunds (2001: 17) used the analogy suggested by one Clan leader of an ‘association’ to explain the system, “individuals can chose to belong to their fathers Clan, to belong to a Clan other than their father’s, or not to be actively involved at all”. This restructuring provided the opportunity for CDEP activities to evolve towards clan based decisions about work priorities. This was a significant shift in employment organisation in Ngukurr and could be seen as an attempt by Aboriginal people to better accommodate or reflect their own ‘work’ ideologies within the overarching structures of community administration. Their emphasis on clan based work groups is on one level related to the concept of ‘working for kin’ discussed in the following chapter.

This administrative change meant the development of a new computer system to report the budgets to both ATSIC and to each Clan group. Each clan group was supposed to choose their own projects, have their own budgets and to operate these. Clan leaders were required to manage Clan programs and counter-sign all their own orders (Mott 1997 citied in Edmunds 200: 17). Further Clan leaders were to be responsible for signing off their participants ‘time-sheets’. These ‘time-sheets’ were to be records of the precise hours worked by each participant under the supervision of their Clan leader.
By the 1990s CDEP had become a nationwide Aboriginal employment program, now extending beyond remote and into regional and urban areas (Sanders 2005). Sanders (1993:13) stated in the early nineties that:

There is little doubt that persistent high unemployment, both among Aborigines and in the community generally, has been extremely important in recent years in explaining the continuing expansion of the CDEP scheme... There has, in the face of persistent high unemployment, simply seemed to be no alternative to the growth of the CDEP scheme.

In 1996 Aboriginal employment in the Ngukurr region was still dominated by CDEP. The Census of Housing and Population (1996) recorded 220 employed Aboriginal people in the community with only 18 (or eight percent) of those employed in positions independent of the CDEP scheme. Taylor et al. (2000) suggest that the community’s dependence on CDEP was even greater than the Census suggested, for not all those participating in the scheme were recorded as employed. CDEP work could often be intermittent and was generally only part-time. Therefore the Census question, which was directed at employment in the last week, failed to capture all participants in the scheme. A more precise representation of the number of people in the scheme in 1996 was recorded in the Yugul Mangi CDEP register. This reveals that there were 347 participants in the program in that year (Taylor et al. 2000: 35). During this same year the new Federal Government drastically cut the funding available to CDEP schemes throughout Australia. Infrastructure and equipment resources as well as the available training opportunities for CDEP participants were significantly reduced.

In 1997 an Independent Review into the CDEP scheme was conducted. This concluded that a major shortcoming of the program was that too often CDEP was becoming the final job destination rather than a pathway to other work, even where mainstream employment was accessible. The Review stressed that there needed to be a stronger push towards employment outcomes (Spicer 1997). ATSIC defended CDEP over the next few years and argued that it should not only be about
employment outcomes, but also community development and social support. ATSIC’s 2000-2001 Annual Report emphasised that:

While CDEP increasingly promotes the transition to mainstream employment, 65 per cent of CDEPs operate in remote Australia where labour market opportunities and Job Network coverage are limited and access to training providers and facilities is problematic (ATSIC 2001: 157)

In 1998 CDEP still remained the largest employer in Ngukurr, with administrative data recording 324 Aboriginal participants in the scheme. However in 1999 the SEALCRP household survey recorded only 200 Aboriginal participants in the program. This discrepancy between administrative data and Aboriginal responses is a reflection of the intermittent work provided by CDEP (Taylor et al. 2000). In 1999 the distribution of CDEP participants by activity type is documented by Taylor et al. (2000). They found that the largest numbers of participants (approximately 85) were employed under the umbrella of ‘cultural activities’. Precisely what this employment comprised was uncertain, Taylor et al. (2000) suggest that the existence of this community defined ‘work activity’ raises interesting questions about the nature and meaning of ‘work’ in an Aboriginal domain.

CDEP in Ngukurr in 2000 continued to be administered along Clan lines. Each of the twenty-one clans had its own budget to run their defined clan enterprise. In March 2000 there were 368 CDEP participants registered on the Community Government Council books. The clan enterprises in mid 2000 are listed by Edmunds (2001: 19) and consisted of: Clan 1 – cattle, butcher shop, second hand clothes; Clan 2 – cattle, tourism*; Clan 4 – television and video hire, landscaping supplies*; Clans 5, 13, 20 - Fish Farm**; Clans 6, 12 – Cattle, paint contractors; Clan 9 – Tyre bay (‘Clan 21’), mechanic workshop, laundry; Clan 10 – boat for tourism*; Clan 17 – kids’ centre; Clan 18 – Mobile food* [new or reactivated*, Inactive at that time**]. Arts and crafts, cultural activities, landscaping and the Women’s Centre programs were budgeted items for all Clans.
In 2001 the census data for Ngukurr did not distinguish between those employed by CDEP and those employed independently of the scheme. It also did not distinguish in its labour force statistics between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal employees. However it can be assumed that CDEP was still the principle employer of Aboriginal people in the community (see Edmunds 2001). The Census suggests that 221 people were employed in Ngukurr in 2001 and that out of the total population there were 86 non-Aboriginal people residing in the community.

If it is assumed that a large proportion (approximately 70%) of these 86 non-Aboriginal people were employed on a full-time basis in Ngukurr - as administrators, project managers, teachers and nurses - then it follows that the number of Aboriginal people employed during this period was approximately 161 individuals. The hypothesis that most Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were employed under CDEP is strengthened when the labour force statistics are assessed. The 2001 census suggest that significantly more than half (69.2%) of those employed in Ngukurr were employed on a part-time basis. Taking into account the suggested rate of non-Aboriginal employment, then approximately 98 percent of employed Aboriginal people were employed on a part-time basis. I would suggest that this reflects the prevalence of CDEP employment in the community.

The dismantling of ATSIC in 2004 meant that CDEP became separated from the Indigenous Affairs portfolio and was transferred to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). While there were concerns that DEWR would increase focus on employment outcomes and ignore community development or non-employment program outcomes, Sanders (2005) was more optimistic, arguing that things sounded positive with DEWR and that they were going to introduce changes gradually and build on the program’s success.
The Political Playing Field of CDEP

Community discourse about the CDEP scheme has consistently reflected the interface between the different and sometimes conflicting ‘work’ ideologies within Ngukurr. The Ngukurr News, a local newspaper, was first published and distributed in early 2000. The first Ngukurr News edition included as its headline story an article entitled “What’s the Future of CDEP?” This article had been written in response to the recent introduction of new CDEP rules regarding the amount of money people could earn outside of CDEP, what kinds of work came under the umbrella of CDEP, and the amount of hours people must work in order to comply with CDEP. Non-compliance with these rules was associated with the potential loss of the program in the community. The article, written by a local Aboriginal reporter, argued that losing CDEP should be taken seriously by the community and that adhering to the new rules was of importance. However the reporter also stated that “I feel that there are still a number of questions that have not been answered”. These questions were about the perceived ambiguity in the purpose and outcomes of the CDEP program and its potential role in supporting ‘community’ or Aboriginal initiatives rather than solely satisfying the expectations of authorities outside the community (Daniels 2000: 1).

The CDEP Coordinators and non-Aboriginal administration staff responded to Daniels (2000) by publishing their own article in the following edition of the Ngukurr News. Interestingly the title of this article was “What’s the Future without CDEP?” They stated that:

- The future for Ngukurr without CDEP would be very sad! All these programs would collapse. Unemployment benefits could not support any of the above programs.

- If you don't want the community to fall apart, then it is up to you, CDEP participants to do your job. We can only provide administration, support, equipment and materials. We can't do the work for you. The future of CDEP is in your hands.
In November 2000 another two articles concerned with CDEP were published in the *Ngukurr News*. The first article interviewed those who attended a national CDEP conference and stated that:

…the conference was really interesting. The conference showed that people can give one another a good idea…Also they have the same problems in all the communities around the country, especially because CDEP is being asked to do too many things in the community without enough funding or support (Ponto 2000: 4)

The issues raised at this conference were also published in another article by Mary Edmunds (a non-Aboriginal researcher with the SEALCRP) in the same edition of the *Ngukurr News*. She summarised the conference discussions as follows:

- CDEP has been in place since the late 1970s and has lasted longer than most other programs for Aboriginal communities
- The reasons why it has lasted so long is because of its flexibility, and because it allows communities to adapt it to their own needs
- All CDEPs are groaning under the weight of paperwork and more and more rules. They need much better support and resources.
- CDEPs could work more closely with other agencies, like Centrelink or Job Network or TAFEs, but shouldn’t be asked to do their work
- When CDEP started the emphasis was as much on community development as on employment. People want the focus to go back to community development, especially in places where there aren’t lots of other jobs anyway (Edmunds 2000).

In the later part of 2001 ATSIC conducted a review of CDEP in Ngukurr. An article by Daniels (2001) published in the *Ngukurr News* claimed that there was an amount of community concern regarding this review and that some felt it could lead to the abolition of CDEP in the community. Daniels attempted to quell these concerns by explaining that:

They were here to talk to CDEP participants about the scheme, so that they can provide advice about how to make CDEP more effective in the community. The ATSIC team said that it is important that all participants have a look at the rules about the CDEP and that the
community is involved in a review of these rules on a regular basis (Daniels 2001: 1).

A consequence of the ATSIC review was that in February 2002 ATSIC decided to have all CDEP funds allocated to Ngukurr managed by a grant controller outside of the community. This was because ATSIC believed that ATSIC funds were being mismanaged within the community. This arrangement was meant to be only a temporary solution till the problems with the administration of ATSIC funds had been rectified (see Ngukurr News 2002a). In April 2002 representatives from ATSIC again visited the community and informed Council that they believed there were still serious problems with the management of ATSIC funds and that the Grant Controller would continue to oversee all financial transactions that used ATSIC money (see Ngukurr News April 2002b).

In an attempt to overcome the supposed problems of CDEP administration of funds in Ngukurr ‘new’ time-sheets were introduced. In May 2002 an edition of the Ngukurr News included the following warning: “Clan leaders are responsible for recording the hours worked by each CDEP participant. If participants do not work the full amount of hours they will not get paid” (Ngukurr News 2002c). This discussion illustrates that even before my own fieldwork began in Ngukurr, CDEP was a contentious issue. The different expectations of the program from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community members, and outside funding bodies, meant that on many levels the meaning, purpose and organisational framework of Ngukurr’s CDEP remained ambiguous.

**Witnessing the game**

In June 2006 I arrived in Ngukurr for my first phase of fieldwork and I encountered a community under considerable stress. CDEP had been put on a three month trial by DWER and was threatened with being abolished in the community if certain procedures and rules were not adhered to. I quickly became aware that tensions were running very high and that there was intense community concern about the potential loss of CDEP. I observed the Council President and
other Council members, who held a degree of local governance authority, continually being approached by concerned individuals wishing to ease their uncertainties about the CDEP situation. One Council member explained to me, “that different mobs of people coming down la camp, we been having meetings through the night about CDEP”.

It could be assumed that the fear of losing CDEP was primarily associated with the loss of employment opportunities. However, it became clear to me that the reality was quite different. During fieldwork I learned that CDEP in Ngukurr played a critical function in sustaining basic living conditions. The program and its participants played a vital role in ensuring essential, albeit basic, environmental health and population health requirements. While CDEP in Ngukurr may not have organised economic growth, it sustained the community at a basic level by ensuring that the status quo of morbidity and mortality remained where it was. For example, CDEP was the vehicle by which basic garbage collection, aged care and child care services were provided to the community. I realised that the fear of losing CDEP, while associated with a concern over the loss of employment, was also associated with the fear of losing the most basic standards of living.

Comments I recorded that captured this anxiety include:

…if CDEP goes it will be terrible, what will we do?
…They are taking everything away from us, it really scares us.
…Once that CDEP is gone we are all gone
…I’m real worried about that government mob…they give us CDEP, only thing helping us and they langa [going to] take it away

I found young people in Ngukurr, like many others in the community, could not envisage a life without CDEP. Even with the many discussions circulating about the potential abolition of CDEP they seemed unable to conceptualise such a change. During this period, when I asked them what they wanted to do in the future, they would mostly reply that they would like to go on CDEP. They would not specify what work they wanted to do within the CDEP scheme, but just that they would like to be part of CDEP. Such comments revealed to me that CDEP
was not about specific or particular employment opportunities but was seen as an intrinsic part of engaging responsibly with community life. I found that this perception was also evident in the understandings of older people, “we use to that CDEP, long time im been with us”. Hunter’s (2003) research also reveals that the CDEP scheme is viewed by many participants as a desirable ‘career’ path and that those employed in the scheme may even see it as an end in itself. I would suggest that, in Ngukurr, CDEP was not so much seen as a desirable ‘career path’, but as a familiar and well established way of participating in and expressing connection to the cultural and social fabric of community life.

I became aware that one consequence of CDEP being associated with more than just employment opportunities was that it was difficult for Aboriginal people with knowledge of the government’s plans to explain to others why it was under threat of being closed. I witnessed one older woman trying to explain to a group of people,

This is a growing community, the government mob asking what we doing here. They want to look mela [us] working on little project...important munanga [white] people coming here to look us working. The see mela [us] sit la [at] camp they be angry and olabat [they] walk way with CDEP

During my first phase of fieldwork the procedures and rules that DWER were demanding be enforced, were encapsulated by the catch phrase decree: ‘no-work no-pay’. Its enforcement, I observed, involved the introduction of ‘new’ time sheets; emphasis on having to produce certificates from the health clinic if participants were sick; expectations around the practice of signing on and off everyday; and a requirement to start work at 9am sharp. I discussed above the introduction of ‘new’ timesheets and ‘no-work no-pay’ rules, so this was not a new phenomenon. This consistent emphasis on conforming to such ‘work rules’ - which attempt to delineate ‘work’ from other activities - and the Aboriginal CDEP participants subtle but consistent reluctance to conform ‘adequately’ to these rules - reveal the existence of divergent expectations, if not ideologies, around the value and structure of ‘work’ in the context of Ngukurr.
Before my experience in this study setting I would have thought that these ‘rules’ were simple and uncomplicated and that compliance would, or should, be easy. Instead, I found that, when the meaning and function of CDEP is one of sustaining and engaging in life, rather than just ‘doing work’ under prescribed conditions, the relevance of the ‘new’ rules was questionable. The disturbance caused by the active enforcement of these rules by non-Aboriginal administration staff was obvious. I witnessed many heated arguments and Aboriginal outbursts of anger and frustration, as the following quote demonstrates:

…you can’t make me a whitefella...one day or some day you got to listen to us, they not listening. They make all the rules, we got to govern our future. I know its munanga [white peoples] money but you trying to make us white people by ‘no work, no pay’.

In a discussion I had with the CDEP Co-ordinator during this period she explained to me how she wished to bring in the new rules gradually. She stated that the aim of these rules was to “introduce a work ethic slowly” for “if CDEP goes, which it will, people need to be able to follow work rules”. The perception of a limited future for CDEP held by the CDEP Co-ordinator was also reinforced by a representative of DWER who, during a visit to the community in July, assailed Councillors with the comments that while there were some positive stories coming out of Ngukurr about CDEP, there were still too many negative ones. He emphasised that it was these latter stories which would influence government’s decision regarding the program. In response to a question asked by a Councillor regarding the future of CDEP he stated that; “DEWR is still in your face” and went on to further propose that if the community as a whole and individual participants do not conform to the rules, “right now”, CDEP had no future in the community.

Throughout my fieldwork, I attended many Council meetings at the invitation of Councillors. At one such meeting in August 2006 a ‘governance’ training session was provided by a non-government organisation (Little Fish – Information with Integrity). This training session had been requested by one of the youngest
Councillors, who believed that gaining a greater understanding of governance issues would be beneficial for the Council and help facilitate more informed decisions and directives in community affairs. The NGO representatives began the training session by explaining that they wished to “help” the Council members work through any current community issues, and insinuated that this current issue was the potential loss of CDEP. The ‘trainers’ then spent a considerable amount of time enthusiastically jotting down on butchers’ paper a list of community programs supported by CDEP all the while eliciting slightly indifferent responses from the Councillors who I knew were well aware of the breadth of the CDEP scheme in their community. After this was completed one of the NGO representatives pointed to the list and explained how devastating it would be for the community to lose all these programs, “there would be no workers to look after kids in the child centre, rubbish wouldn’t be collected, people might even get sick”.

While I was aware of and had empathy for the difficult and possibly even confronting position these trainers found themselves in, I could not ignore their assumptions regarding the Councillors’ lack of understanding. I realised that they had felt they needed to explain to the Councillors that CDEP was a life-sustaining program, which was holding the community together. Further it became clear that they also believed that getting the community to conform to the rules imposed by DWER was their main priority. Council members responded to this discussion of DWER’s rules by trying to explain to these trainers that it was not going to be as easy as they were implying, “im not going to be easy to get mela [us] all lot working just to impress la government mob, olabat [they] don’t accept it, its going to take long time for olabat [them] to understand this thing”. The training providers became visibly anxious during this discussion and, unsure of how to respond, just resumed emphasising the importance of making DWER happy. Some of the Councillors became frustrated at this point, one asking in a raised voice, “why are you here, what’s all this rubbish for?” This Councillor felt that the trainers were not really listening to what was being said and were not acknowledging the difficulties and pressures inherent in the role DWER was
placing on the Councillors. The NGO representatives explained that “we came to talk to people and get people working together ‘two way’ so that the community can keep CDEP and the money”. But it was obvious to me that the Councillors did not feel that ‘two-way’ communication was occurring. While the trainers were attempting to ‘help’ they were perceived as just restating a situation that was already known and not acknowledging or really understanding where and how Councillors actually needed ‘help’.

In this particular Council meeting the discussion then moved on to Other Business. This ‘business’ included the position of the recently appointed Community Council CEO. This particular CEO, while recognising his relative inexperience in working in remote Aboriginal communities and dealing with Aboriginal people, was unaware that some of his actions since coming to the community had not been well received by the community and Council in particular. It was however acknowledged by Local Government departmental officers, non-Aboriginal staff members and the community at large that he had began at a difficult time, with the threat of losing CDEP hanging overhead. In my discussions with him I found that he believed that his foremost role in the community should be to ensure that Ngukurr did not lose CDEP. In this meeting the CEO stated to Councillors and staff “our main aim is to make DEWR happy and the government so we keep the money coming in”.

The Council President, a number of other Councillors and some community members were not impressed with the CEO’s attitude and the way he had chosen to deal with what he referred to as the ‘CDEP crises.’ In this particular meeting the Council President brought to the Council’s attention his personal feelings about the CEO:

I feel that he is threatening me in regards to losing CDEP. He doesn’t own CDEP. We gave him three months probation. We watched him through that three months and we have had many arguments with him. I cannot see him fitting into the community at all…I strongly think that he is not the person for that job. My recommendation to the Council is to make a resolution to get him to leave.
In response to this statement, the CEO, a representative from DEWR, and other non-Aboriginal administration staff explained that with CDEP being in such a precarious position, if the Community Council were to sack the CEO it was inevitable that they would also lose CDEP. Both groups agreed that the Council’s unwillingness to work with the CEO would be perceived by the government as uncooperative, and would create even more instability in the community, which would negatively affect their fight to keep CDEP. The Council resolved to keep the CEO in the community for the time being. However, he did leave the community a month or so after this meeting, at the behest of Council. His departure did not result in any loss of the program.

In February 2007, when I returned to Ngukurr for my second phase of fieldwork CDEP was still functioning. There was a new community CEO and Council President. DWER had continually extended the trial period and it was understood that CDEP would be continuing until June 2007. I found this situation quite disquieting. It seemed that the pressure placed on Community Council members during my previous fieldwork trip and the anxiety that had pervaded the community had been to a large extent unnecessary. I came to realise during my fieldwork that such states of uncertainty, revolving around expectations of change with little practical advice on what this change would involve or how to go about it, were a defining feature of life in Ngukurr. I found that the stress felt by CDEP participants and the community in general over the threat of losing CDEP had not entirely dissipated but was less pronounced during my second fieldwork trip. Between February and September 2007 the community was visited on a number of occasions by Mission Australia and a number of other Job Network agencies who wished to get Aboriginal people registered on their lists and attempt to match them to jobs (albeit non-existent ones, at least in Ngukurr).

A lot of information was duplicated during these job seeker audits. People attended numerous appointments and answered standard job seeker questions,
more relevant to those areas of Australia where conventional labour markets exist. I found that many Aboriginal people were at first encouraged by these visits and believed that the main purpose of these Job network agencies was to facilitate the creation of jobs in the community. However, it was not long before it became clear to me that community job creation was not their primary purpose and that it had much more to do with the impending Commonwealth Intervention into remote communities and the associated abolition of the CDEP program (whether the representatives of these agencies knew of this initiative in advance or were simply acting on direction from above was unclear). A community joke surfaced during this time where Mission Australia became known as “Mission Impossible”.

In September 2007 Ngukurr’s CDEP was still in existence but was again under threat of immediate abolition with the beginning of the Commonwealth Government Intervention into Aboriginal communities. Rumour in the community was that CDEP would be abolished in October 2007. The new Council CEO stated at a community meeting that: “There has been no consultation with us or the Council about much of this...being pushed and bulldozed has gone too far...the Council is trying but we have little say”. I found that during this last period of fieldwork tensions were again very high. Aboriginal CDEP participants and the community in general were extremely frightened about what was going to happen. The Council President, with frustration and an amount of despondency said that,

…all these plans are just placed on us, what we have in mind doesn’t matter, this has been going on a long time…it is very confusing how we are going to go after CDEP.

I became acutely aware during this time that nobody, including myself, really understood what the Intervention changes were going to involve and the Commonwealth Government representatives who flew in and out of the community seemed to be unable to answer the many questions the community posed. It felt like everything was up in the air – there was a huge amount of uncertainty and consequently community uneasiness. As one respected elder
shrewdly summarised in a conversation with me, “Blackfella like a mouse, the government like pussy cat trying to decide which way to make the mouse run and how they are going to catch him”.

On October the 5th the community was visited by the Federal government-appointed Business Manager for Ngukurr, who held a meeting with the Council, which I attended. He explained that the government wanted to dismantle CDEP because they could not sequester a proportion of CDEP wages and therefore could not impose the Intervention’s aim of creating a social security voucher system. The voucher system was directed at managing people’s income by restricting it to specific purchases from the local store. The first step of this Intervention he explained was the licensing of the store. He stated;

Managed income will be managed by the store manager and support staff will be sent to teach them how to do it…Centrelink will issue the voucher and then the Ngukurr store will have to pay Centrelink. CDEP wages money can not be managed. You will not lose CDEP until the store has been licensed…nothing is set in concrete…

He was unable to give a precise date or even a possible time line about how long this process would take. As one Councillor commented;

…it’s not fair not having a timetable. It’s too big for Aboriginal people. Maybe us here understand but many people out there don’t understand. Everybody has a different story for this CDEP, first we were on trial, whatever, all talk different way.

The Business manager apologised about the uncertainty and stated in regards to the issues and questions around when and how CDEP was to be abolished, “I will get back to you on that one”.

A further meeting of Council occurred on October the 8th, when the community was visited by officers from a para-statals organisation called the Indigenous Business Association (IBA). One of IBA’s representatives replied in response to a Councillor’s question about the abolition of CDEP that, “CDEP funding will not be cut off, there will be transitional funding for two years. It’s really just a re-naming exercise”. However, they also said that;
The reason we are here is to look at CDEP activities that can possibly become small businesses. We want to look at what we think can be done through doing feasibility studies, then business plans, then get them up and running.

The Councillors supported this initiative but found the whole process exasperating because it felt like “treading over the same old ground”. A number of Councillors explained that they had for years been discussing plans for such developments with various community CEOs, non-Aboriginal staff, government and non-government representatives and with each other. One woman effectively summed this up by stating “we have been developing plans since I was a little girl. Ten, twenty years developing plans and we didn’t get anywhere”. I found that their optimism about enterprise or community development initiatives was clouded by recognition of the tedious nature of planning processes and despondency over the potential outcomes.

On October 9th a large group of Centrelink and DWER representatives arrived in the community and held a public meeting. This meeting was highly attended and there was a community expectation that these people would have answers to questions regarding the Intervention and CDEP. Yet this proved not to be the case. The officials focused on informing the community that some individuals would need to fill out more Centrelink forms and attend more Centrelink appointments if they wished to continue to receive their benefits.

The community had interpreted this public meeting as a forum in which they could raise questions about the Intervention and CDEP. As a consequence many in attendance became agitated when questions were ignored or not adequately responded to by the visitors to the community. The officials’ inability to respond, I realised, was not initially their fault; they had been sent out with a specific purpose and were unqualified and insufficiently informed to satisfy community expectations. In an outburst of irritation one Aboriginal man aggressively accosted them with the question;
Is CDEP going to be phased out? When is it going to be phased out? I want to know the date, you should know. You are no good to us if you don’t know. If you can’t answer that, you should pack your vehicles and just go.

The Centrelink and DWER representatives became visibly anxious at that point and hastily closed the meeting with the comments that they would take no further questions. It was obvious to me that this public meeting had not lived up to community expectations. It had in no way clarified their uncertainties and merely contributed to feelings of frustration and even anger.

In November 2007 CDEP was still functioning in Ngukurr. With the advent to government by the Labor party, it is expected that CDEP will persist into the immediate future, albeit with review. Yet it is also apparent that it is a program highly susceptible to changes in political climate and subsequently will continue to be plagued with uncertainty.

My research has found that the significance of the role CDEP plays in the lives of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr cannot be underestimated. It is the primary form of employment and has been such for three generations. My findings have challenged the official perception that the principal function of CDEP is that of an employment program, or a program directed at ‘training’ people for entry into mainstream employment. I have argued that it should be understood as a life sustaining program and as a known and fundamental way of engaging in the cultural and social environment of Ngukurr. I have, however, also illustrated above that Aboriginal people have for well over ten years been living within a turbulent, stressful and confusing rollercoaster of uncertain employment opportunities, objectives and outcomes. Continual threats to the CDEP’s existence, with no comprehensive plan of what would come in its place, has been traumatic for Aboriginal residents.

The fear caused by such social, economic and cultural uncertainty extends far beyond the threat of losing CDEP and has infiltrated nearly all spheres of
community management. For example, during my fieldwork the imposed change from Local Government Councils to Wards and Shires also occurred. The Yugal Mangi Community Council was to be abolished and instead only one or two representatives from the Ngukurr region would sit on a Shire Board situated 350kms away in Katherine. This was another proposed big change, adding to the uncertainty of losing CDEP and the changes planned through the Federal Government Intervention. I found that these changes seemed to many Aboriginal people as a further examples of being disempowered and the limited avenues for local control being undermined. This continual change and the associated insecurity of Aboriginal ways of life in this remote community are captured in the following quotes:

…We don’t know where we are heading, nobody, the Council, the school the clinic, the church mob, even ceremony…the concern is with us but that concern is not in the politics

…We have sat here meeting after meeting with them telling us that it’s going to happen, nobody ever asks us

…We don’t want to be government people…one hour they come in on an aeroplane, then leave and they think they know everything about us, make decisions about us

…That law everyday them change im [it], just get used to one then olabat [they] change im [it]

…So many changes, you see it in the office, not even helping this community just benefit to the government. They basically running our lives, telling us how to live

I found throughout my fieldwork that a strong sense of disempowerment pervades Aboriginal life in Ngukurr. Many people felt that the government was unsupportive or even obstructive to their way of life. I heard many comments such as; “they want us to go forward but then they push us back”; the government just keep “undermining us”. I often heard people express sentiments around the perceived unfairness of expectations of change being solely positioned within their field of responsibility. Such attitudes are effectively captured in the following quotes:
...mela [we] try and learn munanga [white] way, what about the other way
...White man talk, we always be underfoot
...self-determination is being living under munanga [white] standards

I have argued that the political playing field of CDEP in Ngukurr is somewhat like a football match, dominated by non-Aboriginal parties with Aboriginal people being consistently placed on the bench, without a chance to demonstrate the complexity of their position and its historical, economic, social and cultural foundations. As one community elder summarised;

...the community is really trying, everybody is really trying to work proper way. We been going good everything looking good in this community, always people are working. But just some problems and everyone starts politic thinking im [its] not easy with blackbella way and munanga way together…

The thoughtful comments shared with me by another community member also capture this sentiment “not much choice in this modern world, all this trespassing into your culture. It’s gunna [going to] take time. Melobat [we] need time”.

The Aboriginal Experience of Participating in CDEP

As has been shown above, CDEP is the main source of employment in the Ngukurr region. Other than in CDEP positions there is an almost complete lack of employment opportunities for Aborigines in Ngukurr. CDEP is therefore the dominant framework within which contemporary western employment experiences in the community can be understood. The number of people employed by CDEP in Ngukurr, was approximately 217 during my periods of fieldwork. The number of participants was not contingent on the number of people who wished to work but was a figure set by the Department of Employment and Work Relations (DWER).
The majority of people of working age in my study setting were unemployed. I found that a considerable proportion of these people, at any one time, were not receiving any Centrelink benefit payments. Explanations for this state of affairs, revolved around perceptions of the complicated and tedious bureaucratic procedures involved in applying for benefits and maintaining them. A contributing factor to this state of affairs was also the nation-wide bureaucratic standard of making those who had previously been employed, in this case under CDEP, and who had left this employment, ineligible for unemployment benefits for a number of weeks. On countless occasions I observed people becoming frustrated with Centrelink processes and the associated paperwork. This was both because there was often a lack of understanding on the individual’s part, compounded by limited literacy levels, or was associated with just general discouragement with processes, procedures and paperwork itself. As one relatively educated woman, receiving no monetary income, explained to me “I found all those things [birth certificate, driver’s licence, bank statements etc], chased them up. I went to the meeting and then they lost those things and I have to start again. I give up now with that paperwork”.

Participants within CDEP were expected to work 16 hours per week or 32 hours per fortnight, usually four hours per day, and generally excluding Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The ‘work activities’ areas in the community included: garbage collection; community maintenance and cleaning; health assistants; childcare; aged care; supervising sport and recreation at the pool and basketball area; tuckshop; school cleaning; teacher assistants; rangers; and artists. CDEP participants were consistently visible in the community and throughout the day. I would see them walking to work in the morning and back to “camp” at lunch or the end of the day. It was common to observe groups of men picking up rubbish, fixing fences, mowing, watering and cleaning up community areas. Other participants I would see driving around delivering food to the elderly, picking up or dropping off children at the child care centre and generally busily engaging in their prescribed CDEP ‘work activity’. 
CDEP in Ngukurr also funded and supported Aboriginal participants enrolled in accredited training programs. These training programs were predominantly provided by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) and involved participants travelling to Batchelor, near Darwin, for workshops with an average duration of two weeks. During my fieldwork there was close to a complete absence of accredited training programs provided within the community, the exception being ‘Spoken and Written English Certificate One’ provided sporadically by BIITE.

Individuals in Ngukurr earned $426 per fortnight if they worked the full 32 hours. If participants missed hours, their pay was reduced accordingly and this was known as “short pay”. It became clear to me that for a significant proportion of CDEP participants this was a common occurrence. Many people I spoke with on this issue described earning around $200 per fortnight and often even less. I found that this “short pay” was often received by, though not confined to participants at the younger end of the working population. To put CDEP wages in perspective, the unemployment benefit for most individuals was around $406 per fortnight. This was not contingent on any work, but dependant on completing increasingly complex and ever changing Centrelink requirements.

In contrast, while a significant percentage of participants received ‘short pay’ or the standard amount, there were others who received what was commonly known as “top up”. Altman et al. (2005) have suggested that in remote areas a large percentage of participants work more than the prescribed 16 hours and that approximately 20 percent work the equivalent of full-time (35 hours). My own fieldwork findings support this estimate. I found that a significant number, particularly of older participants exceeded the prescribed 16 hours a week and earned in excess of $700 per fortnight. This was facilitated through the “top-up” system, which refers to money allocated to specific projects or gained through funding bodies and grants to pay workers for additional hours. These grant monies were what Aboriginal Council members would refer to as “tied-money”.
They explained that money could not be spent on a CDEP project of their or the community’s choice but must be spent on the purposes the funding body had prescribed. Being accountable to these funding bodies was essential and not conforming could put the community at risk of having to reimburse money or having possible future funding withdrawn. I found that the “top-up” system was understood as being largely defined in a context external to the community. During my three phases of fieldwork I never heard of any participant earning more than $1100 a fortnight from CDEP and “top up” (yet it is possible that this did occur). Altman et al (2005) have suggested that generally CDEP participants earn $100 per week more than the unemployed but $300 less than those in mainstream employment.

“Not real” jobs

When Aboriginal people discussed CDEP with myself and other non-Aboriginal people it was common for them to describe CDEP style employment as “not real” employment. I observed during my fieldwork that this was less common but not absent from discussions between Aboriginal people. This sentiment, I would suggest, in part stemmed from Aboriginal people’s constructions of what did and did not happen in mainstream society, or what they perceived ‘working’ to be like for the average non-Aboriginal person in Australian society. Its prevalence in discussions with non-Aboriginal people suggested to me that it was also linked in their minds with the dominant discourse circulating about CDEP at this time, and was associated, on one level, with conforming to the supposed expectations of the non-Aboriginal listener. On another level I would argue that the perceptions in Ngukurr regarding CDEP being ‘not real’ employment had been significantly influenced by contemporary public, political and academic discourse about the program. That CDEP work was during my fieldwork consistently referred to in these discussions as ‘not real’ employment was found to have affected participant and community perceptions about the program.
Pearson (2000), in his highly influential work “Our Right to Take Responsibility”, argued that Aboriginal people’s inclusion in the social welfare system has had a detrimental effect on their lives and their culture. Pearson suggested that the CDEP program hinders Aboriginal employment in the mainstream labour market or the “real economy” and contributes to the problems associated with “passive welfare”. He argued that Aboriginal people believe that it is “easier to not take up those full-time jobs, it’s easier to remain on the [CDEP] handout” (Pearson 2007).

Marcia Langton, another leading Aboriginal activist and academic, has also argued that the CDEP scheme is a poverty trap for Aboriginal families and communities because it does not lead to ‘real’ employment (Langton 2002). The public and political discourse about moving people off CDEP into ‘real’ employment, grew substantially throughout my fieldwork experience and contributed to CDEP employment becoming stigmatised as somehow ‘not real’ and of lesser value. At the extreme level an internalisation of this attitude led some Aboriginal people of working age to forgo working under CDEP because they felt they did not want to work in a second-rate work environment and consequently be perceived as a substandard worker. As one such man explained to me “it is not a real job it’s just wasting time”.

I found that interrelated to the discourse around CDEP being not ‘real’ employment was a common belief among Aboriginal people in Ngukurr that they were paid insufficient and/or demeaning wages. This attitude is effectively captured by the comments of two different participants who shared their concerns with me:

…mela [we] are not working because mela [we] don’t get paid enough. They understand they have to go to work to get paid, but the money is not enough.

…CDEP need more wages. Mela [we] need more than the four hours. Olabat [they] might have seven kids, raise up them wages. Mela [we] have little S.H.I.T money.

A further example of the belief that CDEP did not provide enough money was provided to me by a young mother. She spoke about how she had recently been
working at the childcare centre under CDEP but had decided to quit. She explained that the reason behind this decision had been that CDEP wages were insufficient; “I’ve got five kids I gotta feed and them wages just no good. I’ve gone back on that family money [family allowance payments] now and I am better off”. I found for some people social welfare or Centrelink payments were more enticing than CDEP wages. As one women explained to me “some people in Ngukurr are good [at] saving but when on CDEP they have nothing”.

I quickly realised that within the Aboriginal domain of CDEP work there was consistent and sustained confusion and frustration around individuals receiving “short pay”. Some of this confusion revolved around the Council’s system of deducting money from individuals in an attempt to enforce their obligations to cover the cost of rent, travel and meet loan repayments. Yet the most common complaints I heard around “short –pay” were associated with the actions and decisions of non-Aboriginal staff in the community. It was believed that they just sat in their offices all day and did not recognise or see the work that Aboriginal people were doing and therefore docked time-sheets unfairly.

…they never see mela [us], always in la [the] office talking on the telephone. Maybe they drive around at lunch time when everybody la [is at] camp. They never look them working all day in the hot sun.

One unemployed man explained to me that “I went on strike from CDEP because I was sick of always getting short-pay”. This frustration and confusion over the reasons behind ‘short pay’ was further illustrated to me by an older woman who exclaimed:

They [the workers] need top-up money, always short pay. We see them working all day working hard them boys all round the community. They get really upset from working you know la short pay…

I found that the CDEP workplace was also viewed as inferior to the perceived mainstream employment environment. When one community member was talking about the equipment I had been provided with by the university to conduct fieldwork he said, “you get this computer, pen, car, them CDEP got nothing”.
Another resident commented when we were sitting on the veranda watching CDEP participants working in wet weather “they should have rain coats, working in the rain poorbella, they should gibim [give them] rain coats”. At some later stage during this day an Aboriginal person approached a non-Aboriginal staff member and requested that the CDEP participants working outside be given rain coats. They were told that there was no money for such an expense because the budget was so tight.

I later witnessed this request being used as the butt of a joke between a number of non-Aboriginal staff, who were to shortly take a boat ride across the Roper River and head into the nearest regional centre for a drinking session. It was raining and one smirked “we need raincoats” and another replied humorously or not, “just put it under administration”. I observed non-Aboriginal staff often becoming frustrated by what they perceived as continual and illegitimate demands from CDEP participants for work equipment and clothing. Conversely I was also aware that Aboriginal people believed that such demands should be met, and that they would have been met in a non-CDEP work environment. In conversations with Aboriginal people I found that it was often insinuated that the reasons behind staff refusals to acquiesce to demands were that they were only looking out for themselves. Non-Aboriginal staff were often perceived by Aboriginal people in my study setting as ‘draining everything’ from the community, including CDEP financial and equipment resources.

I found that the ‘not real’ nature of CDEP work was reinforced by a perception that it’s defined ‘work activities’ were often meaningless. This view became more pronounced with the introduction of the ‘no-work no-pay’ rule, which involved strict protocols around ‘new’ timesheets. I found that these timesheets caused many Aboriginal people to feel both irritated and bewildered. They were perceived by many as extraneous to what CDEP participants were actually doing on the ground. For example, during my informal time and motion study I followed one young worker to her workplace. She arrived on time, was allocated her set
tasks and completed them in 15 minutes. She then returned to wait outside her supervisor’s office to say she had finished, waiting patienty for 15 minutes. When the supervisor saw her she explained that there were no more jobs to do but that if she wanted to get paid she would have to spend the remainder of her prescribed hours in the workplace. The CDEP participant spent another hour and a half sitting around and smoking cigarettes. Then it just got too much for her and she said to me “im [its] boring boring just sitting here doing nothing, nobody here, nothing, I’m going back la camp, you gummon [come on]”.

I found that this experience of purposelessness was common among a sector of CDEP participants. This was exacerbated by a paucity of tasks; high numbers of ‘unskilled’ individuals in the program; minimal amounts of equipment and infrastructure; the active enforcement of the ‘no-work no-pay’ rule (which in these instances was more ‘if you don’t stay in one place under supervision no-pay rule’). Augmenting my findings in regards to CDEP ‘work activities’ sometimes being pervaded by a sense of meaninglessness, was the situation of a number of women who resided on an outstation close to the community. They explained to me that they had been directed to clean up an area of ground that was to become a garden, by using shovels and pulling out weeds, “sweatgetup [sweating] la [in the] hot sun”. They emphasised that a tap was supposed to be installed so they could water the garden and seed and seedlings provided for them to plant. This second step however never came to fruition. Instead I observed the women lamenting over the fact, that they had had to clean up this area over three times as new weeds grew and cars drove over it, destroying their hard work. One of the women dolefully sighed “always cleaning it up and then nothing, just clean it up again”. That some participants and some ‘work activities’ were perceived of as having little purpose or as going nowhere is captured in the quote of one concerned community member, “people in jobs they hate, just doing nothing, then them failing, not going to work”.
I found that the fact that CDEP was often perceived as ‘not real’ employment with insufficient pay and limited meaning, led many older people to worry about the younger generation’s employment future. The following quotes are example of people expressing this concern:

…Young people come back from school and just shovelling, mowing lawns, there is nothing here for them.

…im [he] finished year twelve and now stuck on CDEP

…people go to waste on that CDEP

Already mentioned above was that many young people in Ngukurr could not envisage an employment future outside of CDEP and a consequence of this was that they did not place considerable value on completing their education. Austin-Broos (2005: 1) has similarly suggested that in a limited labour market, such as that in remote communities, the relevance of literate education becomes obscured and “as a consequence, both children and parents struggle to maintain education as a priority”. One mother explained to me that “most of the CDEP workers are drop outs. They get frustrated there is nothing there for them... Education doesn’t mean anything to them”.

I also often heard community members, particularly the older generations, lament the perceived lack of training provided under CDEP. When the program was under threat of abolition one women voiced her heartfelt concern at a public meeting, stating that “CDEP didn’t provide any certificates for anybody...why they going to take it away when no certificates”. During my fieldwork it was clear that, while a small percentage of people were involved in training programs usually involving them having to leave the community for workshops, there was very little consistent or meaningful training available on the ground. It might be concluded that a dominant Aboriginal perception of CDEP in Ngukurr during my fieldwork was that it was neither ‘real’ employment nor was it a ‘stepping stone to real employment’.

**Pride and shame**

Nonetheless it also became increasingly clear to me that many Aboriginal people took pride in the CDEP work in which they engaged. They enjoyed the experience of ‘working’ and as the CDEP scheme provided them with this opportunity, they saw it as a positive and effective community mechanism. As in the findings of Musharbash (2001), I discovered that often this sector of the population had relatively more autonomy over their work and were more likely to have some kind of accredited qualification. Yet these people were not immune to the dominant discourse about CDEP circulating in the community.

I found that the pride they took in their work was confronted when they believed they had not been sufficiently acknowledged or rewarded for their efforts. As one women explained to me “im [its] embarrassing to get short pay after you worked all week”. In further discussions with CDEP participants who claimed to enjoy their work it was revealed to me that this sense of shame, associated with lack of recognition or an absence of credit, was having adverse affects on their motivation in and beyond the work environs. A powerful example of this felt shame related to a conversation I overheard between women talking about their commitment to CDEP and their workplace. They had begun by congratulating one another on their achieved goals and then went on to discuss future directions. This led to a reflective moment when one woman lamented: “we want to work, we trying, we been going good. Those munanga [white people] in la office and la government mob, don’t see us, they never look, sit down with us”. The perception that non-Aboriginal people were unaware of the energy, sense of purpose and associated achievements of these women working under CDEP led to a further comment being made, “I just want to quit right now”.

Perceptions around the ‘not real’ or inferior nature of CDEP work existed within a more overarching community perception around notions of disempowerment. The sense of shame associated with feelings of hopelessness and lack of self esteem lead to some Aboriginal people in Ngukurr expressing concern over the ‘shyness’
exhibited by younger generations. One woman who was completing certificates in child care spoke about her experiences with the other women also enrolled. She said that:

they are all too shame to ask munanga [white person] anything, olabat [they] always make me do it, olabat [they] walk in the room, just put their head down and don’t look up.

**Trust and responsibility**

Adding to the feeling of hopelessness and lack of confidence I observed that many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr believed that workers were never trusted and had limited opportunities to take responsibility in CDEP work environments. Participants often remarked in conversations with me that “CDEP is no good to teach responsibility”. This common perception was supported through numerous observations of my own. For example, non-Aboriginal staff usually possessed car or door keys and were unwilling to give them to Aboriginal workers. If they did, I observed them in a state of worry, their minds running through all the possible consequences of such an action. Although I was aware that this lack of confidence in Aboriginal people often had some foundation, I also found that this culture of inherent distrust affected Aboriginal participation in CDEP and the ‘work’ experiences it provided.

In some cases I found that Aboriginal people preferred, for various reasons (discussed further in Chapter 6), not to be given responsibility in the CDEP workplace and chose not to take up the limited opportunities for such experiences in the community. Yet, issues of trust were often seen by Aboriginal people as causing problems within CDEP work environments. One example I witnessed, was the experience of the Aboriginal driver of the child care centre vehicle. Due to the appropriate non-Aboriginal staff member (who held the keys to the vehicle) being away in Darwin, and the car being locked up in the police yard, she was unable to pick up the children or drive them home. She stated, “I knew this was going to happen. They don’t trust us with the key”. This is illustrative of the way in which
a situation of mistrust can affect the workplace efficiency and satisfaction of Aboriginal CDEP participants.

The complexities of issues of trust in the CDEP work environment in Ngukurr were further highlighted to me in a discussion with another Aboriginal participant. She mentioned to me that she had no responsibility in her workplace and just did whatever activities the non-Aboriginal staff member instructed her to do. When I asked her why this was the case she stated that “miatbi [maybe] she think I’m dumb or something, she always does the ordering and checks the timesheets, think she’s big boss”. This quote, highlights the way in which a lack of trust can contribute to feelings of hopelessness or negatively affect positive notions of self within workplace environs.

The lack of trust within CDEP workplaces was not one sided; it was not only non-Aboriginal people who did not trust their Aboriginal workers. I became aware that it was common for Aboriginal people to be deeply suspicious of non-Aboriginal staff, their power and motives. One example that is illustrative of this was when a non-Aboriginal staff member decided to have a meeting with all the other non-Aboriginal staff. They met in an office and locked the door in order to not be interrupted. While this meeting may have been completely innocent, I became aware that many Aboriginal people in the community were very upset and suspicious about what had taken place in this meeting. This ‘secret meeting’, as it was referred to, created feelings of alarm and dread for many Aboriginal people. This suspicion was a legacy of past experiences, where non-Aboriginal Council staff had organised, participated and made decisions about community affairs in similar forums. I was conscious of the fact that the non-Aboriginal person who had organised this meeting was unaware of this legacy of distrust and had not considered the potentially negative affect this action could have on his relationship with the Aboriginal community in general.
Another important finding of my research was that relationships of trust between non-Aboriginal staff and their Aboriginal workers were also quite common. I found that such relationships usually rested upon the amount of time the non-Aboriginal person had spent in the community. This ‘time’ was perceived by Aboriginal people as an expression of sincere commitment to their workers and the community at large. One interesting example that represented the dominant type of interracial workplace relationship was between a non-Aboriginal linguist and his predominantly elderly CDEP participants. One of these participants felt a strong sense of obligation towards the linguist. He had recently thought of leaving the language centre and mentioned this to the linguist who had supported his decision. However, the CDEP participant felt that he just could not do it and would only retire when the linguist left the community. I realised that this Aboriginal man wanted to maintain his relationship with the linguist and in his mind this involved the reciprocal relationship developed in their shared work environment. Musharbash (2001) has also pointed out that while CDEP work may not in itself be satisfying, it is often not the ‘work’ as such that keeps participants working but rather their relationship with their supervisor or ‘boss’.

A significant group of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, particularly those with stronger educational backgrounds, believed that a fundamental mechanism to bringing about workplace change in their community related to the reciprocal generation of trust and the interconnected expression of relationship commitment. Reflecting the objectives and discourse of much contemporary western work ideology, a woman explained to me that in order to create an efficient and productive workplace, work satisfaction, communication and positive and reciprocal relationships were essential;

…you got to find a place where people are happy to work, where their boss looks after them, where they can communicate with people. Then they might say I’m happy with my working because I’m happy with them I’m working with.
I also became aware that Aboriginal workers considered that the lack of trust shown towards them by some non-Aboriginal staff, and by the structures of CDEP employment generally, hindered their endeavour to learn more about workplace responsibility and the skills needed to create a more satisfying employment experience: “this mob in the office need to give us a chance. They don’t give us a chance. They don’t trust us with anything, how we got to learn”.

Through my fieldwork experience I began to gain a greater insight into Aboriginal attitudes to trust, both within workplaces and beyond. I came to realise that underlying many Aboriginal attitudes towards non-Aboriginal people and mainstream society was a belief that these people and their culture did not want Aboriginal people to succeed. It was strongly felt by many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr that dominant or mainstream culture created systems which set them up to fail, and then revelled in the fact that they struggled to achieve the ‘right’ outcomes. As one man explained to me “it’s always blackfella’s fault. We might try hard, but when it doesn’t work we always get the blame. It’s always on our shoulders, the same old story over and over again”.

At first, I may have thought that such perceptions were not based on fact and were predominantly used as excuse mechanisms. Now I realise that, while the former may be true to some extent, it would be naive to assume that such perceptions have no grounding in fact. As this chapter has highlighted, the structure of CDEP in Ngukurr has evolved within a framework of minimal consultation involving minimal ‘genuine’ listening by government and non-government representatives. It would seem that institutions embedded in mainstream social and cultural assumptions find it difficult to acknowledge and accommodate the historical, social and cultural differences inherent in Aboriginal communities such as Ngukurr (this is further explored in Chapters six and seven). If such issues are not acknowledged there is a tendency for programs to be unsuccessful and for the evaluation process to place this ‘failure’ within the Aboriginal domain. This lack of adequate recognition contributed to a situation where Aboriginal people in
Ngukurr, felt they were being ‘set up to fail’ and consequently disempowered. When I asked a number of Aboriginal people to explain this situation, one replied “I nomo sabi [don’t know] why? Maitbi [maybe] they do not want us to succeed” and another that, “im might be the government is frightened of mela [we] olabat [they] don’t wont mela [us] to be good and stand up straight”.

Program flexibility and employment mobility

While I have discussed above many issues that could be interpreted as the negative attributes of the CDEP scheme, I would argue that, in ethos and practice, the program also holds considerable positive value for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. As Altman and Gray (2005: 402) have pointed out, CDEP is an innovative and important program that in places distant from mainstream labour markets has the potential to provide “flexible employment opportunities to people that frequently have different aspirations and life chances, to other Australians”.

My own findings, and those of Musharbash (2001), have demonstrated that there are some serious obstacles lying between program objectives and their successful realisation in the remote Aboriginal community context. I found that CDEP in Ngukurr was able, on a practical level, to accommodate a significant element of Aboriginal ‘work’ practice and culture, principally being the need and aspiration for employment mobility. CDEP had the capacity to incorporate Aboriginal people’s common life cycle behaviour of moving through and between different work and training activities within and outside of the community. It was this potential for movement within the CDEP environment that was most valued by Aboriginal participants, rather than the particular employment position they occupied at any one time.

I saw many Aboriginal people continually in the process of re-evaluating their role in CDEP and contemplating other roles and workplaces that they wished to learn about and experience. One example of this workplace mobility and constant re-evaluation was demonstrated in the employment history of a particular young
woman who had recently completed her schooling. I was aware that within the
timeframe of my fieldwork she had worked in the school as a cleaner, then at the
child care centre, gone back to the school and then taken a position at the local
shop. She explained to me that she was going to give up this position soon and
was thinking about joining NorForce.

Another example was an older woman, whose employment history included
becoming a qualified teacher and being a school principal for a short while,
running a lawn mower and video hire outlet under the CDEP program, and then
completing up to certificate four in business administration. When I first arrived in
the community she had been working in the Council office in an administrative
position. She then moved to a new CDEP ‘work activity’ known as the ‘ladies
area’. During my last phase of fieldwork she explained to me that she had chosen
to be unemployed for a while and was now engaging in more training and was
thinking about becoming a health worker.

I found that most men had similar assorted employment histories. One older man I
knew had been employed as a laboratory technician in a mining company; then
completed a Bachelor degree in education; worked in the local school on and off
for 15 years, for five of which he was the Principal; completed a graduate diploma
in linguistics; supervised numerous CDEP ‘work activities’; had been a Councillor;
and on top of this had been a member of a highly successful Aboriginal Band.
When I first arrived in Ngukurr he held a CDEP supervisor position in what was
known as the ‘blue shed’ or community maintenance ‘work activity’ area and was
also a member of Council. He then relinquished the CDEP supervisor position for
a short while and concentrated on Council business. Later he became the Council
President and was encouraged by the non-Aboriginal CEO of the time to also take
up the position of CDEP Co-ordinator, which he did somewhat reluctantly and
only for a short period.
The employment history of a young man I came to know is just a further example of this considerable mobility around employment positions and work activities. He had only recently completed year twelve in a Darwin college and during this time had finished numerous VET courses achieving automotive and horticulture qualifications. When he returned to Ngukurr he took up a CDEP position in the sports and recreation activity area; then decided to move to the school for a short while as a teacher’s aid. When I first arrived in Ngukurr he was working for Power and Water and was thinking of doing training relevant to this position. In a conversation with me however, he indicated that “I'm a bit sick of this job, maybe its time for me to do something else now”. When I asked him about what he would rather do, he mentioned wanting to be a musician; having his own workshop and inventing things; travelling to Broome; and doing more training “in anything really”.

The employment mobility of young Aboriginal people in Ngukurr may reflect, to a degree, the employment behaviours of their counterparts in mainstream Australian society (see ABS 2007). This employment mobility in Ngukurr extends well beyond this sector of the population and on remote Aboriginal settlements is not confined to CDEP participants. Through discussion it became clear that during the Mission era most men and women moved through and between employment opportunities and ‘work’ activity areas. I found that this was also the case for individuals who had been employed in the pastoral industry. It became clear that employment mobility in Ngukurr had an established heritage and the employment record of most Aboriginal people in Ngukurr reflected, in essence, the examples provided above. This kind of frequent employment mobility, does not reflect the general patterns of, and reasons behind, employment mobility in mainstream Australian society (see Watson et al. 2003).

Taylor et al (2000) similarly found that movement between institutions is characteristic of the Ngukurr employment environment. This movement through and between employment opportunities was found to be interspersed with
engagement in different kinds of ‘training’. Interestingly, the type of training individuals engaged in, was not contingent on the individual working in or wanting to work in that area for any length of time, or even at all. Their choice to engage in training was driven by an interest in the potentiality for new experience and the knowledge it could provide, rather than its specific relationship to employment outcomes. As a middle aged women explained, “I like training, learning all kinds. It’s nice to get out of the community sometimes and see something different”. The SEALCRP survey conducted in Ngukurr in 1999 found that almost half (49%) of their respondents had participated in some form of training. This survey also investigated whether individuals who were trained in a particular skill area were subsequently employed in a related occupation. Supporting my own hypothesis, they found that while a considerable percentage had at some stage worked within the area in which they were trained, only a small percentage were currently working in this area (Taylor et al. 2000).

Moving through and between different employment and training opportunities was the norm in Ngukurr. This occupational mobility for both young and old, male and female, also included periods of formal unemployment. The reasons for this transitory behaviour was sometimes explained by Aboriginal people as the ‘need’ to avoid and elevate workplace ‘problems’ or tensions arising out of broader family, kinship or individual relationships (this is further explored in Chapter six). For example, one older man explained to me that; “I can’t work with that mob when this trouble here, I need to give that job a rest for now”. One middle age women stated in a discussion with me, “I don’t like that Baba [sister] telling me what to do, my aunty im right, I go work with her”. CDEP in Ngukurr was found to be ‘just’ flexible enough in its design and management to enable this movement between different ‘work activity’ and areas of training. As it was explained to me by one community member; “im good being able to leave that job, might be trouble there or be stressing you out, move to another place, maybe do some training. CDEP im good that way”. 
Beyond the sphere of CDEP participation, however, it became clear that this movement through different spheres of employment and training, interspersed with periods of unemployment, was the behavioural manifestation of a fundamental element of contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology; the valuing and accumulation of diverse skills. From the perspective of mainstream ‘work’ ideology, however, this transitory cycling between different occupations, training and unemployment spheres could potentially be considered irrational. For it would seem to go against the notion of a ‘career’ with its inherent assumptions of coherent development and logical progression (see Chapter Three).

When a very respected community elder passed away, I heard on numerous occasions people referring to the multiple roles she had played in the community throughout her life and the different kinds of employment and training in which she had engaged. It was her participation in such a variety of roles and occupations that lead many community members to remember her as a “community leader”.

…that olgaman [old women] bin do all kinds of things for this community, worked in la [the] school, la [the] hospital, long time she been go courses
…she bin real skilled that old lady, real community leader
…she never bin stuck one place, helping all over the community

This propensity for people to value and aspire to mobility within and between employment and training is further captured in the following quotes:

…I got lots of skills. I like to move from job to job, do courses. Learn new things
…I like doing different jobs, not just same place,
…I’ve bin work everywhere in this community
…im good to move round, here, there, everywhere, do training sometimes

The CDEP work environment in Ngukurr, while riddled with political uncertainty and embedded with feelings of anxiety, disempowerment, and inequality, was
paradoxically also seen and experienced as an arena of choice, conducive to the development and accumulation of diverse skills.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explained how the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) was introduced to overcome the perceived ‘problems’ of Aboriginal unemployment in remote communities. In theory the scheme has the potential to incorporate ideas of Aboriginal control and the accommodation of Aboriginal ‘work’ values and behaviours (Altman and Grey 2005; Altman and Sanders 2008). In practice, it has been shown, that the flexibility inherent in the scheme had been demonstrated in Ngukurr. Despite this, however, I have concluded that Aboriginal people mostly felt they had limited power over and within this employment program. The findings in this chapter confirm that mainstream ‘work’ ideology is a pervasive and prevailing influence upon CDEP in Ngukurr. As Povinelli (1993: 105) has stated, “The role Euro-Australian social institutions play in Aborigines’ lives is no less coercive, even if it is less physically violent, than the forced engagement of the past”.

As noted above, CDEP was a familiar component of life for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. It both maintained basic standards of living and was an accepted way of participating in the social and cultural world of contemporary life. Notwithstanding this finding, I have concluded that there is enormous complexity surrounding CDEP. It should not simply be regarded as a policy ripe for reform on a politically motivated whim, but rather understood as central to the lives of this population and as such treated with respect.

Yet individual experiences of participating in CDEP were often permeated by apprehension. The perception that CDEP was ‘not real’ employment, an attitude supported by much CDEP discourse, has created a degree of employment disincentive and has influenced individual motivation, commitment and work satisfaction within the Ngukurr context. Conversely, this raises an interesting
question. If CDEP employment is ‘not real’, then what do we mean by ‘real’ employment? Is it primarily about financial rewards or meaningful activity? Is it about internalising dominant work ideology or does it raise questions about it? My research findings suggest that for many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr there was uncertainty about what ‘real’ employment might actually entail and what experiences it would facilitate. Many young people associated it with an idealistic view of the world where there was unlimited choice; a place where all people liked their jobs, where all were financially rewarded beyond imagining, and where the experience of employment was consistently enjoyable. Their imagined ‘real’ work was not situated within their everyday life world.

Beyond the construct and discourse of CDEP, this chapter has also illuminated a component of contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr. Whether this intergenerational Aboriginal preference for frequent occupational and training mobility has been encouraged by historical circumstances, including the CDEP scheme itself, or is a continuation of hunter-gatherer ‘work’ practices where specialisation was uncommon (Sahlins 1972), or is a combination of both, is a moot point. Instead this chapter points to the fact that in Ngukurr contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology places considerable value on task diversification and experience. This is in contrast to engaging in a ‘career’, or a sequence of work-related events viewed by mainstream ‘work’ ideology as a logical progression through the work environment.
CHAPTER SIX
ABORIGINAL WORK AND WESTERN WORK IN CONFLICT

Introduction

This thesis has explored the relationship between the dominant western work ideology and Aboriginal people in the Ngukurr region. It has been argued that labour relations have been the framework in which interactions between Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal people have occurred throughout Australian history and that this has continued into contemporary Ngukurr. That Aboriginal people have not adequately internalised western work ideology, its structures and meanings, has been a dominant theme in non-Aboriginal people’s perceptions of these cross-cultural labour relations. However, it has also been shown that in specific ways and to differing degrees, Aboriginal people have been exposed to, and engaged in, western work and its associated values.

This chapter takes a step back from western work systems and draws attention to the fact that a hunter-gatherer way of living, separate from any engagement with western work, is present in the living memory of some Ngukurr residents. Literature that discusses the notion of there being a particular hunter-gatherer work ideology is then reviewed. The notion of an Aboriginal work ideology, distinct from western conceptions, is then introduced through a discussion of Aboriginal cultural and social relations in Ngukurr. The interface between these systems and the expectations, structures and ideologies of employment in my study setting is then discussed.
The “Wild Ones”

I was surprised during fieldwork to find that there were a considerable number of Aboriginal people alive in Ngukurr today that remembered living a hunter-gatherer life, largely divorced from western culture and its institutions. That this lifestyle was still in living memory challenged my assumptions about it being a way of life positioned firmly in a distant and unknowable past. I conversed with a number of elders who had grown up in the bush with their families and had only become exposed to western institutions, systems and values around the age of 10 to 15. One of these elders told me the story of how she had come to reside at the Roper River Mission. She had been travelling through country with her family but then her father passed away suddenly along with a number of other male family members.

They [relative] wanted to bring mela [us] here coz family mob here…mela [we] travelled langa [towards] the Mission more people joined mela [us]. The men they travelled in canoes and the women and biganinni [children] walked long side the River. We came to the place of the old Mission…we saw nothing everything washed out big horrible flood…we camped long time at Piggy Piggy camp then my cousin im [he] come and collect us. I couldn’t speak English or Kriol and I never bin see so many people. No real houses them times just humpies down near the river and one big long shed near old ceremony ground…biggest mob young girls bin there…they gave me English name and I went to sleep la [in the] dormitory.

On a number of occasions I listened to shared stories of childhood told by people in their early thirties of those deemed “still wild”. One of these stories referred to an old woman who in the early to mid 1980s still lived out in the bush away from the township. She would leave signs on trees so that her son staying within the township could find her. These reminiscences involved much laughter about the way in which she would wear different coloured thongs and always have them on the wrong feet. Another character in these stories of the “wild ones” was also described as having very limited understandings of western institutions and practices. She was remembered as not understanding the purpose, meaning or social behaviours usually associated with the activity of shopping and would open,
smell and taste anything from the shelves. She could not read or write, or even speak Kriol as most people in Ngukurr did, and did not understand the construct of weekdays and weekends. She was affectionately remembered as coming into town on Saturdays and Sundays and patiently waiting for the shop to open, “she would just wait and wait poor bella [unfortunate person], nomo sabi [didn’t understand] that shop”.

The above examples illustrate that not all Aboriginal people in Ngukurr have had the same inter-generational experience of western culture, its ideologies and institutional structures. I have previously discussed the historical and contemporary relationships between Aboriginal people and western work structures and ideology (see Chapters four and five). It is important now to move beyond the dominant western notion of ‘work’ and review literature on what ‘work’ may have meant for Aboriginal people living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle and how this may have affected contemporary Aboriginal understandings of work in Ngukurr.

**Hunter-Gatherers and ‘Work’**

Applebaum (1984) has suggested that for hunter-gatherers or non-market societies the word ‘work’ has often no equivalent in their language. My own inexpert questioning about the traditional languages of the Ngukurr region seemed to support this claim. I did not encounter anybody that could provide me with a corresponding word for ‘work’ in their traditional language, although I must point out, that I am not a linguist, and am therefore hesitant to place too much weight on this finding. Both Sahlins (1972) and Thornton (1980) have argued that the concept of ‘work’ as something distinct and of itself is unknown in hunter-gatherer societies. It is this non-expectation of the separation of work from other ingredients of living that Thornton (1980) suggested is the defining feature of hunter-gatherer work consciousness.
Yet interestingly enough, even this wide academic recognition of the absence of the notion of ‘work’ in hunter-gatherer societies has not precluded the development of a body of literature, that attempts to bound and define, what is and is not work, within such societies. Historically hunter-gatherer societies were seen as being continually on the verge of starvation, as ‘working’ hard just to survive (see Clark 1953; Redfield 1953; Herskovits 1958; Hoebel 1958; White 1959). This interpretation posits that because ‘work’ took up all productive time hunter-gatherers were unable to develop a sophisticated culture. In this instance the nature of their ‘work’ was associated with explanations of the perceived ‘primitive’, ‘uncivilised’ or ‘savage’ nature of hunter-gatherer societies.

This once dominant perception was significantly challenged by the influential work of Sahlins (1972). He argued that hunter-gatherers were in fact what he termed ‘the original affluent societies’, and that the time taken up with subsistence activities was much less then previously believed. He stated that Arnhem Land Aborigines,

...do not work hard. The average length of time per person per day put into the appropriation and preparation of food was four or five hours. Moreover, they do not work continuously. The subsistence quest was highly intermittent. It would stop for the time being when people had procured enough for the time being, which left them plenty of spare time (Sahlins 1972: 35).

Sahlins’ (1972) work was influential in dispelling beliefs around the primitive nature of hunter-gatherer societies by arguing that rather than all their time being taken up with ‘working’ for subsistence, they in fact had considerable ‘leisure’ time in which to engage in and develop a sophisticated culture. In this sense he argued that the amount of time people have, separate from the time spent ‘working’ to survive, is an indication of their affluence. Hunter-gatherers, he proposed, did not have to ‘work’ as hard to survive as their counterparts in western society and were consequently more privileged.
Sahlins’ argument concerning the importance of measuring ‘work-time’ has continued to remain an important text within the field of anthropology. Bird-David (1992) suggested, that this may be because it, ‘intended to provoke as well as to document, the essay soared beyond conventional scientific discourse, appealing directly to Western fantasies about work, happiness, and freedom’ (Bird-David 1992: 25). It inherently challenged the dominance of western work ideology, its meanings, structures and values. After Sahlins many other scholars began to focus on the notion of hunter-gatherer ‘work-time’ and most questioned his ‘work’ parameters. Sahlins’ ‘work time’ was misleading, it was argued because it did not include time devoted to such activities as constructing tools, the preparation of food, child care, and informal exchange of information (see Lee 1979; Hayden 1981; Altman 1984; Hill et al 1985; Headland 1987).

The disagreement between scholars over what is and is not ‘work’ in hunter-gatherer societies, and what activities ‘should’ or ‘should not’ be included in such definitions, points to the fact that defining ‘work’ in this context is problematic. In some sense it becomes a semantic argument. If the first premise is accepted - that people within these cultures do not themselves distinguish between work and non-work - what in fact is the relevance of such debate? It could be suggested that such a focus has its roots in the western researchers’ own cultural perspective, which places substantial value on the concept and structures of ‘work’. The presumption of the importance of ‘work’ leads to attempts to bring to light and legitimise ‘work’ through processes of defining and thus legitimising the culture or society in which this ‘work’ is found.

I have to make clear here that my own thesis is itself caught up in the debate around the meaning of ‘work’ in non-western or hunter-gatherer societies. At its foundation my research, focusing on investigating notions of work in Ngukurr, has assumed that such a direction is valid and has subsequently imbued the concept of work with significant value. However, unlike many cross-cultural studies of work I do not want to create a definition of work, or to categorise what is and is not
work. Rather I wish to explore the ideology around everyday activities, in order to gain an understanding of the complexities surrounding the meanings, values and behaviours associated with contemporary ‘work’ ideologies in Ngukurr.

**Aboriginal Understandings of ‘Work’**

The informal time and motion study conducted during my second phase of fieldwork provided me with an insight into a very interesting phenomenon. I very quickly found that those individuals deemed unemployed (in a western sense) where not just sitting around doing nothing, passing time in a meaningless and purposeless fashion, but were in fact often very busy. In many ways this busyness did not reflect the behaviours of non-Aboriginal people employed in the community. As one Aboriginal man amusingly described them; “munanga [white people] like chooks with their heads cut off. Running round in circles, here, there, everywhere, playing at being busy”. This comment functioned as a catalyst for my investigations around the meanings, values and behaviours of ‘work’. I discerned that many Aboriginal people viewed non-Aboriginal staff in the community in a similar manner, as individuals obsessed with exhibiting particular forms of behaviour that seemed to have little inherent meaning in, and of, itself. This particular view grew in resonance, as my fieldwork progressed.

During my attempt at a time and motion study, I became aware that Aboriginal people’s time was taken up with numerous activities of a purposeful nature. These activities, however, were not always conducted within specific periods of time, say from nine to five. Nor were they always confined to particular areas, such as a workplace. They were instead embedded in, and given meaning through, the complex processes involved in engaging in the social and physical world of Ngukurr.

This acknowledgement led me to realise that compartmentalising ‘work’ would limit my research findings. Attempting to understand ‘life’ would provide me with
greater insight. I came to the conclusion that on one level, like their hunter-gatherer predecessors, Aboriginal people did not distinguish between the activities of work and the activity of living. The notion of ‘work’ as a distinct sphere of life, with its own unique patterns, behaviours and meanings that separated it from other spheres, was irrelevant when I did not exclusively focus on Aboriginal participation and understandings of employment. As a consequence, I began to think of ‘work’ as synonymous with the activities of living and relating to the world. The next section of this chapter takes up this direction and discusses the structures and nuances of Aboriginal engagement in their social and physical world. It suggests that in order to understand the complexities of contemporary ‘work’ ideologies in this community, it is essential that the nature of such engagement be considered.

**Kinship, relatedness and autonomy**

Kinship is the fundamental structure underlining society in Ngukurr. As one woman explained to me during fieldwork “we are like that tree, all the branches hanging down. When there is trouble I always look at that tree and think we are all connected”. My exposure to Aboriginal kinship in Ngukurr revealed that for those, like myself, not born into this socialisation process, it is an extremely complex and often confusing system. Traditionally, anthropologists have spent many hours compiling kinship charts that document the specific and complex connections between Aboriginal people (see Spencer 1914; Hiatt 1965; Berndt and Berndt 1969; Shapiro 1979). This thesis has not attempted such an ambitious objective. Yet, it is still important to briefly discuss the kinship system operating in Ngukurr today.

In Ngukurr everybody belongs to one of two moieties; Dhua or Jiridja. Children usually belong to the moiety of their father. However, this is not exclusively the case. The semi moieties are the most important classes for the organisation of cult activity. But today subsection affiliations are the most widely referred to in daily life. Subsection or “skin” affiliations are often used as a framework for describing
acceptable marriage arrangements. The table below illustrates these cultural social divisions;

Table 2: Moieties in Ngukurr

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patri moieties</th>
<th>Semi moieties</th>
<th>Subsections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mambali</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Feminine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gela</td>
<td>Wamudjan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Buralang)</td>
<td>Galidjan</td>
<td>(Buralangban)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandaiji</td>
<td>Wamudjan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Dua)</td>
<td>Galidjan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murongon</td>
<td>Gamain</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balang</td>
<td>Bilendjan</td>
<td>(Namudjulu)</td>
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<td>(Namudjulu)</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budal</td>
<td>Bangin</td>
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<tr>
<td>Naridj</td>
<td>Naridjan</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujal</td>
<td>Godjog</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulain</td>
<td>Godjan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandaridja</td>
<td>Bulaindjan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Jiridja)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


During fieldwork in Ngukurr, I observed daily expressions of kinship connections or relationships, which were synonymous with specific ways of behaving. Such behaviours involved things like avoiding physical contact with certain people; negotiating contact through the use of symbolic gestures; and showing respect by not walking directly past particular relatives but taking a wide berth. I also became acutely aware that these relationships involved specific kinds of obligations, and determined the specific way in which individuals communicated with one another. Berndt and Berndt (1970:154) have stated that kinship is ‘like a mesh or grid spread over the total content of activity, dividing it up in terms of interpersonal relations’. Poirier (2005) took this description one step further and explained the kinship system as a ‘personal configuration of belonging’ that each person is a
node within a dynamic and complex network of agencies, social (including territorial and ritual) relationships, and responsibilities.

I also very quickly became aware that Aboriginal people’s connections and relationships to ‘country’ were profoundly, sometimes even overwhelmingly, different from my own. It was nothing like the relationship between a farmer and his property (not to devalue the significance of such a connection); nor was it simply about harmoniously living with the environment; and it was definitely about considerably more than where to find food or water at certain times of year or how to get from point A to B. Even today, I find it exceedingly difficult to adequately put into words this different way of being-in-the-world.

Ingold (2000) has suggested that if hunter-gatherers relationship to ‘country’ is to be fully appreciated the notion that there is a dualism between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ must first be abandoned. It is commonly believed that there are two kinds of nature, that which is ‘really natural’, and that which is culturally constructed. I held such a position when first confronted with Aboriginal people and their relationship to country and as a consequence simply understood it as a culturally constructed phenomenon. Yet, after hours of observation and conversation with Aboriginal people I began to see that this assumption was inhibiting my ability to appreciate, to the best of my ability, the meanings and values of Aboriginal ways of being-in-the-world and their relationship to ‘country’. To use the words of Poirier (2005: 242-243);

To say that the ‘mythical landscape’ is a social construction imposed upon a unique and universal nature, or to reduce it to a system of mental representations, disempowers the land, the sentient places, and all the non-human agencies and discredits (or masks) the reality and value of exchanges between human and non-human agencies. In doing so, it denies the very reality and historicity of the Aborigines, and how they actually engage and interact with the different constituents of the world’.

On a less philosophical note, I also observed that like human-to-human relationships, Aboriginal people in Ngukurr had particular and specific obligations and associated modus operandi to the physical and spiritual environment. As Berndt and Berndt (1969) have highlighted, Aboriginal kinship systems extend beyond human to human
interactions and involve complex relationships between individuals and animals and individuals and specific and defined areas of land or country (Berndt and Berndt 1969). On every occasion when I drove individuals through ‘country’ they would explain to me how they or others were related to it; what dreaming paths went through it; what spiritual beings existed in it; and what historical events had occurred there. Through these shared narratives it also became clear that as Poirier (2005: 91) has observed;

…country is never conceived as a bounded area but as a set of places itself connected to another set of places…Named places and the networks they form are the ‘gardens’… shaped and transformed by both ancestral and human actions…like any garden, these sites must be tended, cared for, and, when, necessary transformed.

For Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, maintaining relationships between kin and country often involved extensive mobility, both outside of and within the community. It was common for people - male and female, young and old - to travel to other communities and outstations on a regular basis. It was usual for there to be one or more people absent from ‘camp’ at any one time and often individuals from elsewhere in residence. Movement around the community was also prevalent. I found that often individuals and family groups slept at a range of different ‘camps’ throughout the community and that this constant change of residence was the norm rather than the exception. Musharbash’s (2003) insightful investigation into the spatial and temporal dimensions of everyday life in a central Australian Aboriginal community reflects my own observations, and reveals that mobility is a highly desirable state of being for many Aboriginal people.

The large number of kin to which each person was attached, the relationships they had with different areas of country and the cultural and social expectations around attending funerals and ceremonies, combined to create an environment of high mobility. Cowlishaw (1999) has suggested that Aboriginal mobility, viewed from the perspective of non-Indigenous managers, pastoralists and bureaucrats, is often seen as capricious. She argues, however, that such movement:
…far from implying a lack of concern with place, confirmed such a concern... Moving across the land, and moving among groups of people, moving to take part in ceremonies form the pattern of life which reproduces relationships with the sentient country, with its mythic associations, and with kin (Cowlishaw 1999: 40)

Edge (1998) has suggested that Aboriginal culture can be understood as relational and that, within this system, people are defined through their relationship with others. I became acutely aware that this was the case in Ngukurr. A poignant example being daily conversations I had with individuals, who would time and time again proffer descriptions of their connection to others and to tracts of land. I found that getting me to understand these relationships was felt as very important and an essential component in the process of getting to know one another. Another expression of this way of being-in-the-world was the countless occasions where children asked me how I was related to others in the community. This illustrated to me that for these children the relational elements within their culture were so strong that in order for them to feel they ‘understood’ or ‘knew’ me they needed to be able to position me in relation to others. While a Western person, when meeting someone for the first time, will often ask, *what do you do*, in order to be able to position that person within their cultural structures of understanding, I found that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were more likely to ask something along the lines of, *how are you related to me*, in an attempt to place that person within their context of meaning.

Edge (1998) has emphasised that every individual is defined by a unique set of relationships and is therefore different from all other people and is expected to have a different perspective on the world and to be autonomous. An Aboriginal person’s autonomy therefore ‘*does not result from a universal capacity to reason and atomism (western notion of autonomy), but from one’s individuality and relationships*’ (Edge 1998: 38). According to Edge, Aborigines value autonomy and, at least conceptually, the notion of ‘individuality’ in a deeper sense than do Western individualists. I found that in Ngukurr this way of conceptualising being was expressed through people’s total acceptance of one another. This acceptance
encompassed the good and bad elements of personality and emphasised the individual’s right to direct their own activities. The two elements, relatedness and autonomy, are essential to Aboriginal culture and the tension between these elements underlies all social interaction and practice (see Sansom 1980; Liberman 1985; Myers 1986; Brady 1992; Martin 1993).

It must be mentioned here that, while I have discussed above the profound influence of kinship structures on the shaping of everyday life in Ngukurr, it would be naive to conclude that kinship is the only or even the principle element defining Aboriginal social relations. Similar to the findings of Musharbash (2003), I found that genealogical and classificatory kin ties, while meaningful, are not necessarily central in determining who lives with whom or who shares resources and time with whom. Such choices are as much dependant “on ‘friendships’ and animosity, on life-histories, on personalities and inclinations as on kinship” (Musharbash 2003: 252).

One of my most important realisations, was that social engagement in Ngukurr, was distinct from and significantly more intense than what I have experienced at other stages in my life. As Liberman (1985: 5) has pointed out “the practice of ‘enjoying each others presence’, though difficult to describe formally, is one of the essential activities of Aboriginals”. I found that it was exceedingly rare for Aboriginal people to spend time alone, and if and when they did, others perceived such behaviour as very concerning. I found that for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr engaging with others was a full-time occupation and involved ‘working’ on establishing, maintaining and negotiating relationships within a framework of interdependence.

**Demand-Sharing**

It was not long before I had to acknowledge that in Ngukurr the paradigm of kinship, and the social and cultural relations existing within and along side it, was often given expression through particular and specific practices involving sharing. The practice of sharing in Aboriginal social relations is not as simple as to each
according to his need, nor is it unaccounted reciprocity (Sansom 1988; Peterson 1993). It is a complex exercise with many protocols. This economic system has come to be referred to in the literature as demand-sharing (Peterson 1993; MacDonald 2000). The fourteen points MacDonald (2000: 99) has attributed to the sharing practices of the Wiradjuri from New South Wales reflect in part my own observations and insights into the context of sharing in Ngukurr. He states that:

1. Everybody has the right to ask of a certain range of others in their social environment.
2. There is an obligation to share what one has with those who ask legitimately. The moral responsibility is to give to the asker
3. The term ‘sharing’ does not imply generosity or altruism
4. The act of giving in direct response to a demand fulfils the social obligation
5. Spontaneous giving is rare and discouraged.
6. Demand sharing does not indicate an absence of personal ownership, nor a system of communal property
7. The onus is on a person to ask, not on the possessor of valued items to give
8. Bludging and bumming are not encouraged
9. The focus is always on the relationship
10. Autonomy is highly valued
11. Power, derived from prestige, is acquired and maintained through control of resources
12. Refusals to share, and resultant conflicts, are common
13. Non-Aboriginal people are recognized as not knowing the rules of sharing
14. Knowledge is not subject to the same rules of sharing

My experience in Ngukurr provided me with an insight into the way in which sharing with kin was a way of activating, validating and maintaining relationships.
Schwab (1995) has suggested that sharing is a social investment, it is an economic levelling mechanism, and a social transaction not just an economic one, ‘through sharing, the two parties transact and validate their relationship’ (Schwab 1995:10). Reflecting my own observations in Ngukurr, Musharbash (2003) has claimed, that it is not only the sharing of resources, but the sharing of time and the sharing of domestic space that are the foundation stones of Aboriginal relationships and it is through either engaging in or withdrawing from such sharing that individuals express their personal and continually evolving connections and feelings for others.

I found through engagement with Aboriginal people in Ngukurr that demand-sharing was associated in their minds with their distinctive and particular way of life. Sansom (1982) and MacDonald (2000) have also pointed out that ‘sharing’ is a common characteristic used by Aboriginal people to distinguish themselves from mainstream Australian society. Many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were acutely aware that this system was in conflict with some of the expectations of mainstream culture. It became exceedingly obvious, however, that the experience of participating in this system was one of entrenched social and moral prerogatives.

One woman (in full-time employment) explained to me that “while I see people relying on me, and I know I need to just look after myself, it’s hard to say no to family”. This woman explained further that she understood the notion of ‘independence’ and could see how such a value, if internalised, had the potential to improve her material prosperity. However, this recognition was fraught with conflicting emotions and it was obvious to me that a deep sense of anxiety prevailed. She explained that, “independence is really, really, hard it fights my blood and my bones. I don’t think I can change now I would feel too sorry for family”. For Aboriginal people in Ngukurr life was highly interdependent. Many Aboriginal people found it hard to conceptualise a world where the onus was on the individual to maintain independence, through practices such as ‘saying no’ to people/relatives and not ‘asking of’ other people/relatives. This way of being-in-
the-world was ambiguous and often beyond the scope of the individual’s epistemology.

While I recognised that engaging in demand-sharing was the expected and accepted social norm in Ngukurr, it was individual emotional and psychological commitment to the system that overwhelmed me. As one younger women explained “people hate you for knock back [saying no], olabat [they] think you’re selfish and don’t care for them. I sometimes don’t want to give olabat [they] but they bin look after me longtime and me feel shame then”. Personal feelings of compassion, love and respect were internal to the demand-sharing system in Ngukurr.

As a consequence of this awareness, I became uncomfortable when a non-Aboriginal representative from Mission Australia began a diatribe on what he called the “Aboriginal problem”. He declared, in the company of a number of Aboriginal people, that “it’s simple. They just need to say no to family”. I was confronted by his construction of Aboriginal people, not as fellow human beings and valued individuals but as a “problem”. I was further perplexed by his suggestion that changing deeply embedded socially and culturally moral behaviours was in some way ‘simple’. I also felt embarrassed that his conceited comments had been directed at me, with little acknowledgement of the Aboriginal people present. I spoke with these individuals after the event and to my surprise they had not taken offence, and had just shrugged it off in a manner that suggested to me that this kind of incident was far from uncommon. When I asked one woman what she had thought about his hypothesis she replied with some degree of bewilderment that, “maitbi [maybe] mela [we] have to change some day, but us mob don’t really know how, maitbi [maybe] mela [we] can’t change. I just don’t know”.

On the flip side of this moral and emotional investment in the demand sharing system, I found that the notion of “humbug” was used to refer to the negative
experiences associated with this system. If an individual had any kind of resource it was socially and culturally expected, though often reluctantly accepted, that this individual would become the recipient of demands from relatives. I found through my own experience and through my discussions with and observations of Aboriginal people, that being such a recipient was often a frustrating, stressful and literally ‘demanding’ experience. For example, a female community elder, who was a traditional owner, and therefore eligible for royalty payments, was to receive a substantial amount of money. In the social and cultural world of Ngukurr, being such a recipient entailed a moral obligation to re-distribute and a responsibility to engage in negotiations about how it would be distributed. I sat with her for days at ‘camp’ as relatives came to argue for what they and others deemed was their legitimate claim to a share of this money.

I watched as she became more and more anxious and uncertain about what decision to make. It was impossible for her to satisfy everybody and there were numerous but equally legitimate directions her distribution could take. For at least two weeks this money, and how it was to be distributed, was the dominant focus of nearly all conversations at this ‘camp’. After much agonising, and many attempts at escaping the negotiations by leaving town, she decided under much duress to purchase a car with most of the money and divide up the rest between those she had decided were the most rightful claimants (or those she was most concerned about upsetting). When the car was eventually brought, her daughters, who had had a significant influence on her decision, attempted to encourage her to only allow certain ‘responsible’ people access to the vehicle. This was problematic for the woman concerned, and she was again the centre of intensive demands from numerous relatives with different arguments to support their eligibility. When this car was involved in an accident and damaged beyond repair less than a month later, I heard the old women sigh with relief, as she realised that the constant hard ‘work’ of negotiating relatives’ demands would diminish considerably, for the time being at least.
The demand-sharing system operated throughout Ngukurr on a daily and continuous basis, with all Aboriginal residents being intimately involved in its processes. There were however, degrees of individual success in this system and as Povinelli (1993: 198) has highlighted some “clever people know how to manipulate sentiments of relatedness, how to get what they want without asking”.

I also was witness to numerous strategies used by people to manage the demands made of them. One example of such a management strategy, in which I played a significant role, was at a community event where sausages and drinks were being sold in order to raise money for the local football team. A substantial amount of money was made during the day and at night. When everybody was packing up I was approached by a man with a container of money. He insisted that I was to take it with me and look after it until the non-Aboriginal staff member who was heavily involved with the football team returned to the community and I was able to pass it on to her. While at first unsure about this request I realised that it was this man’s attempt to secure the funds for the football team’s priorities. He knew that if he took the money with him, relatives would make varying but potentially legitimate demands on this money and he would feel obliged to acquiesce.

Another example of the entrenched sharing practices in Ngukurr is how I was consistently being used by individuals in their demand management strategies. Being non-Aboriginal I was perceived as being outside the system and in some ways immune to the social obligations and emotional responses of sharing practices. Therefore individuals often asked to keep things in my room, or me to look after things for them, or would even say that belongings were mine when in fact they were not. My role in particular individuals’ attempts to manage demands was further confirmed by their constant reminders: that I should not share “my” things with people other than themselves, and that I should not acquiesce to demands except those coming from them. They believed that if I fully engaged, on my own terms, in the complex social processes of demand-sharing they would lose their most effective and efficient demand management strategy.
The interactions, responsibilities, obligations, and negotiations inherent in participating in Aboriginal social engagement, kinship and demand sharing have been associated by a small number of authors with Aboriginal understandings of work (see Sansom 1980; Myers 1986; Povinelli 1993; Musharbash 2001; Austin-Broos 2003, 2006). My own fieldwork findings support this suggestion. As one woman explained to me:

You work for yourself, take responsibility for yourself. I [am] always working for family, that’s my main job, being responsible to family. Mother’s side, father’s side, husband ones, always working to show them I love and respect them. Then I know they will be there for my son and be working for him.

This finding was further supported by the comments made to me by other Aboriginal community members:

…I’m full-time busy with all this family business
…when mela [we] walk long way round gargins [cousins], we be working for them and their families, showing respect
…when this ceremony on we work for that mob then when the other one comes round olabat [they] work for mela [us]
…sharing im [is] hard work in this community

Austin-Broos (2003, 2006) has also found that ‘work’ for the Arrernte is often associated with ‘working for’ kin, and participating on a daily basis in the social and cultural dynamics of community life.

**Engagement with western work**

After recognising and in some small way participating in this way of engaging in the world, I began to have a greater appreciation of the difficulties people encountered when confronted with the structures and ideologies of western work. As Austin-Broos (2006: 9) has noted in regards to the western Arrernte of central Australia, “Working for’ and ‘working’ sometimes fight with each other”. The following section of this chapter discusses the ways in which Aboriginal ways of living, ‘working’ and engaging in the world are often in tension with dominant mainstream ideology and its expectations around the value, objectives and outcomes of participating in employment. Through this analysis I will add to the
growing number of themes or factors that, as an interconnected composite, inform contemporary Aboriginal work ideology in Ngukurr.

**The role of the “supervisor”**

In Ngukurr I observed that the interrelated kinship structures of relatedness and autonomy created difficulties for those engaging in western hierarchical environments, and often contributed to Aboriginal people in prescribed positions of authority experiencing considerable anxiety. I became acutely aware that this anxiety had a significant impact on people’s commitment to, and experience of, employment. That there are real and perceived incompatibilities between western work structures and Aboriginal kinship systems is not a new argument and has been highlighted by numerous academics (see Thiele 1982; Taylor 1984; Fox 1985, Trigger 1992; Rowse 1998; Cowlishaw 1999).

Such an acknowledgment was a dominant theme in my conversations with Aboriginal people holding ‘supervisory’ employment positions. One male supervisor in his late thirties detailed the problems he encountered in giving instructions to his workers. He stated, *“Blackbella can’t tell blackbella what to do, they don’t listen... if they white man they might listen but me, this colour, we family... you know countrymen”*. Many Aboriginal supervisors believed that the autonomy embedded in kinship understandings of the world contributed to their ineffectiveness in their attempts at delegating tasks and complete prescribed objectives in western work environments.

...it’s a bit hard, they don’t listen too much...

...blackbella too stubborn you know, they got their own way, olabat [they] don’t like being told what to do...

...its all bullshit...you try make them do something, sometimes they just laugh at you...

The employment history of one young woman also illustrates this real and perceived tension between autonomy and relatedness and unrewarding employment experiences. Unlike most others in the community this young woman was well educated and had completed year twelve. After finishing her education
she had taken up employment at the local school as a teacher’s aid. However, this work experience had been difficult; as she explained “them kids they know I am their cousin, they do not listen to me. They nomo sabi [don’t understand] I am a teacher in that place and a cousin la [in the] camp”. She described this experience to me as being one fraught with frustration and perplexity and as a consequence had left this employment. The experience of her second employment position (also short lived) again reflected the divergent expressions and expectations of relationships. As an administration worker in the local Council office, she explained, that older people would “bail her up” and she felt they showed little respect for her specific employment role.

The comments of two other women also express the difficulties in managing authoritative employment roles. One, working as a receptionist in the Council building, explained to me that she had been told by her non-Aboriginal boss to stop people from opening the partition and coming behind the front desk. She stated that: “I get in trouble letting them old people just walk in. It upsets me…I can’t stop them they look me and think who this young person, I don’t have to listen to her”. Another women in her mid thirties, who was working in an important position as Executive Assistant to the Yugal Mangi Council CEO stated that, while the non-Aboriginal staff listened to her requests and responded quickly, many Aboriginal people thought “who is this little girl trying to tell me what to do”. She emphasised to me that such situations caused her embarrassment and shame and made her feel insecure about her reasons for participating in such employment and her capacity to achieve desired outcomes.

This inherent difficulty of taking on a role of authority in employment environments led some people to believe that having a non-Aboriginal supervisor was easier for everybody. During fieldwork I documented an incident where an Aboriginal supervisor approached the Council and requested that “a munanga [white] supervisor should take my job…they [workers] wont listen to me im too stressful im making me worry and want to give up”. Another incident I observed
that illustrates this point was when a non-Aboriginal staff member explained excitedly that an Aboriginal person could take over the position of Women’s Centre manager - a position previously held by a non-Aboriginal person - and make it a wholly Aboriginal workplace. This was viewed by those in the non-Aboriginal domain of the community as a valuable opportunity for community empowerment. Their disappointment was evident when the workers unanimously expressed their desire to continue to have a non-Aboriginal person in control of their workplace. This Aboriginal tendency to feel more comfortable with a non-Aboriginal ‘boss’ is also expressed by a number of other authors (see Taylor 1984; Trigger 1992).

Negotiating the supervisory or authoritative work role was complicated for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. I became aware that this was related to the value and meaning Aboriginal community members associated with the role and purpose of a “boss” or leader. I observed at a community women’s meeting attended by approximately 30 women an example of this particular understanding. The meeting began with an older woman stating “nomo [I don’t] want to be the boss”. This woman had essentially organised this meeting and I realised that this comment had been made in an attempt to legitimise the gathering. She did not want to be associated with the notion of ‘boss’ and attempted to defuse any connection between herself and her position as instigator. As Liberman (1985: 21) has stated Aboriginal people “want to claim nothing more than their anonymous membership in an assembly”.

Many Aboriginal people in supervisory positions in work environments found negotiating this role difficult on numerous levels. These difficulties are effectively captured by the comments of one woman in such a position who explained to me that:

I ask them to do a job but some of them are my mummies [must respect them] so I ask them what job they would like to do. I try to organise them but they say I bin do that job on Thursday I nomo [don’t] want that
job. I try and write the roster but then I feel shame. I don’t know how to tell them what to do.

[Another woman states: “we should have a meeting tell them to listen to you”]

She Replies: Maybe 20 times we bin having that meeting and it’s still the same.

It was clear in this discussion that having to allocate tasks everyday was stressful for this supervisor. I later witnessed the way in which she attempted to negotiate this role. She primarily tried to satisfy her workers by asking them what they would like to do rather than just simply apportioning them tasks. She explained to me that her workers believed that her job was one of ‘looking after’ them, in contrast to one of authority in the western hierarchical sense. This Aboriginal notion of the role of leader or ‘boss’ is highlighted by numerous others (see Myers 1986; Povinelli 1993; Musharbash 2001; Austin-Broos 2003, 2006). This particular woman explained to me that it was only when her workers felt they could not sufficiently sustain their argument about not being ‘looked after’, that they reluctantly engaged in the work activities she had tentatively suggested. The same understanding of the role of ‘boss’ as one of ‘looking after’, and its association with reciprocal relationships of obligation, is captured in the following quote;

I am concerned for my workers in la office. They need support and encouragement, I look after them in that office, help them with things. They would probably leave if I did, I tell them they shouldn’t do this but it worries me that when I go they wont want to stay, they might just go back and sit la camp.

During my fieldwork I observed that many relationships between individuals in supervisory positions and their workers rested firmly on this notion of reciprocal obligation. It became clear that in most of these cases it was not the kind of employment or the particular work activity the individual worker had commitment to, but rather the individual who was believed to be sufficiently ‘looking after’ them in the employment context. Musharbash (2001) has similarly pointed out that, in contrast to non-Indigenous persons who consider their job done when they
have met the requirements of their job, Warlpiri people expect something else beyond the actual work. She has stated that “ideally, there should be a personal relationship between boss and worker, where both are tied to each other by reciprocal obligations. A boss should look after his or her workers” (Musharbash 2001: 159).

A further but slightly different expression of this relationship of which I became aware was that those in supervisory positions were often perceived of as not ‘working’ as hard as those below them. I witnessed numerous occasions where workers communicated to their Aboriginal supervisors a concern over the difference in wages between the supervisor and themselves. One male worker in his late thirties stated, “Supervisors aren’t working, they just giving orders”. This notion that supervisors were not working at all, or as hard as those they were supervising, was also expressed by another worker who had been reprimanded for failing to turn up to work;

only yesterday I miss work…last week mela [us workers] bin do all the work and im [supervisor] say I got to do paperwork but im not there [at work], I never bin look im…gammon [lying] him not doing any work, nothing

This perception that giving direction, planning and organising tasks was of lesser value than that of actively participating was further confirmed by my discussions with a number of Aboriginal men. They explicitly explained their dissatisfaction over receiving ‘short pay’ and implied that it was their ‘work’ and not the supervisors’ that should be attributed the highest value and be paid accordingly. A poignant example of this conception of ‘work’ as labour or physical exertion, rather than being about human resource management or administration, is effectively illustrated by the often aired complaints about the work behaviours of non-Aboriginal staff.

…They don’t know how to work, just sit in an office, they don’t sabi [know how] pick up shovel and work, they only now sit down and do nothing…Then they get all the credit.

…You tell us blackfella to work, you [non-Aboriginal staff] do your work…
...All they do is sit and talk on the telephone while we out here in the hot sun
...I never see her do anything just pick up papers then go outside and smoke

**Wealth accumulation**

I found that demand-sharing and its association with “too much humbug” negatively affected many Aboriginal people’s experience of employment. At the most extreme level I realised that a significant number of people had not, and did not, want to be employed. They believed that employment would influence their position in the demand-sharing system, contributing to a change in their social position, from one of legitimate demander to recipient of increased demands. As the comments of one middle age man illustrate “*why should I work, I get nothing but humbug when I work*”.

In contrast, I found that employment also provided increased opportunity to distribute resources and ‘look after’ others. For some older people in Ngukurr, employment and the increased resources it provided assisted in securing and maintaining their authority and power within particular social, cultural and political spheres. Through observation, it became abundantly clear that it was the distribution of resources that was powerful and persuasive, not the personal accumulation of resources. I witnessed many examples of where somebody, when able to distribute resources which reaffirmed and maintained relationships, was able to later call upon these relations for support in other contexts. This finding is supported by literature on Aboriginal demand-sharing and leadership (see Liberman 1985; Myers 1986).

As Davis (2004) has observed, there seems to be an incompatibility between a western economy focused on individual wealth accumulation and an Aboriginal economy founded on a complex system of sharing. Overcoming this system of sharing has been both implicit and explicit in many government and missionary policies directed at Aboriginal people throughout history (see Chapter five). It continues to be argued in contemporary academic circles that demand-sharing is
the major hindrance to Aboriginal economic development and is a cultural phenomenon that needs to change (Sutton 2001). Peterson and Taylor (2003), while also acknowledging that tensions exist between this system and the dominant market economy, conclude that the persistence of the demand-sharing economy in the face of modern pressures is remarkable and cannot be ignored.

I have discussed the way hunter-gatherer societies did not distinguish between the activities of living and the activities of work. I have also argued that the contemporary Aboriginal lifestyle, with its meaningful and complex activities of social engagement, can be understood as a form of ‘work’. The beliefs surrounding these activities could therefore be seen as informing the contemporary ‘work ideology’ of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. I have also proposed that the ‘work’ and ‘ideology’ of this particular social, cultural and psychological engagement is often in tension with, or sometimes even in direct conflict with, the dominant structures and ideology of mainstream employment.

The “Work” of Ceremony

I was privileged during my final stage of fieldwork to witness a most poignant example of this direct conflict between Aboriginal and mainstream structures and ideologies of ‘work’ in the contemporary context of Ngukurr. An initiation ceremony had been organised in Ngukurr and it began shortly after I arrived. It continued throughout my final stage of fieldwork and for a number of weeks after I had left the community. The ceremony involved many Aboriginal people, not only the initiates (approximately 35), but also numerous Aboriginal men and women of all ages.

The importance of this and other ceremonies to Aboriginal people in Ngukurr was made very clear to me both through their own conversational emphasis and my observations during this period. One elder stated “ceremony is the most important thing to us, it is everything for us”. The insight I gained about the purpose, meaning
and nature of ceremony was that it was a fundamental component to Aboriginal existence. Reflecting the findings of Dussart (2000: 47) I saw that ceremony could “quiet barking dogs, calm crying children, and suppress the rage of drunks. It... [could] replenish food supplies, nourish the landscape, heal the sick and strengthen the social bonds of the living”. I also became aware that the power of ceremony in the minds of Aboriginal people could not be underestimated and along side the positive connotations was the potential for great danger and death.

Elders in the community made it clear to me that it would be inappropriate to attempt to explain the intricate and complex nature and meaning of this particular ceremony. They also advised me not to write about particular nuances of activities associated with its performance. One elder gave an explanation for this decision, stating that “the ceremony is written in the ground and can not be words in books”. It was obvious to me that this decision was not solely about intellectual property concerns but rather it was correctly deemed that comprehending and describing the profoundly significant nature of this ‘ceremony’ was beyond my capacity as a young and naive researcher. Therefore the following discussion does not concentrate on the meaning and complexity of this ceremony as a socio-cultural event, but rather explores the way in which it highlighted to me components of, and conflicting elements within, work ideology in Ngukurr.

Every day during the ceremony I witnessed, and/or helped, women relatives prepare and dress initiates in specific culturally appropriate costumes. Once the initiates were dressed they would cover their heads and wrap themselves in a sheet and walk in a straight line towards the ceremony ground. While I was able to more intimately observe this process at my own ‘camp’ I was aware that initiates from other ‘camps’ were engaged in a similar process. I would often see them covered from head to toe walking silently towards the same sacred place. This would happen in the early afternoon around approximately 2pm and was repeated on a nearly daily basis for the duration of the ceremony. The initiates would rarely be
seen at any other time during the day or night as they were required to stay out of public sight.

A short while after the initiates left ‘camp’ I would observe, (and on a number of occasions was privileged enough to follow), female relatives to a specific area of the ceremony ground. There they would engage in their prescribed ceremonial obligations and perform their specific roles. The women would often not return to ‘camp’ till well after nightfall. They would be followed a while later by the initiates and the men involved in the ceremony. During the duration of the ceremony many men, both elders and others, spent considerable time in, and around, the ceremony ground. They would return once it was dark and on a number of occasions unintentionally startled me, as they quietly appeared out of the dark in their traditional attire.

Having the privilege of being in Ngukurr while this ceremony was occurring and having the opportunity to observe, listen, learn and experience this entirely foreign but deeply fascinating cultural and spiritual phenomenon was unforgettable. The ceremony included complex and intricate negotiations and organisation and demanded enormous amounts of mental and physical energy from all those involved. I came to realise that ceremonial activities were understood by Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, as ensuring both the fertility of people and land and thus concerning the maintenance of life itself. As such these activities were viewed by the majority of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr as culturally important ‘work’, if not the most significant or important ‘work’. It was also clear that a particular section of the population, defined by kinship affiliation, were regarded as the principle ‘workers’ within this ceremony and were often referred to as such.

I came to realise that this ceremonial ‘work’ was the source of mixed emotions for non-Aboriginal staff involved in the organisation and administration of employment projects in Ngukurr. While I found that most were sympathetic to the importance Aboriginal people placed on this ceremony, they were also concerned
about the perceived negative impact it was having on both individuals’ commitment to employment and the potential issues it would raise for the administration of CDEP ‘work’ projects. Soon after the ceremony began I was sitting with a number of Council members when they were approached by a non-Aboriginal staff member who asked them to nominate the specific date on which the ceremony would conclude.

By listening to and observing staff members I realised that the ceremony was perceived on one level as ‘disrupting’ the usual practices, processes, organisation and administration of employment and the general running of the community. A consequence of this was that some non-Aboriginal staff felt ‘frustrated’ and wanted to know when things would go back to ‘normal’. One of the Council members I was sitting with smiled and with a wave of his hand replied “might be one month”. The staff member attempted to confirm this ‘might be’ and asked “so it will go for 3 or so more weeks”. “Yes that’s right” replied the Councillor. My awareness of the conversations that went before and after this discussion made it apparent to me that this reply, rather than implying any commitment to the specified timeframe, was primarily directed at temporarily satisfying the staff member.

On a following occasion I witnessed a different non-Aboriginal staff member approach a Council representative with the same question. The Councillor in this instance attempted to explain to the staff member that “mela [we] have a different way of running ceremony. Ceremony doesn’t have a schedule. It nomo [doesn’t] work munanga [white] organisation way, im different thing”. I found that generally Aboriginal community members, particularly those involved with Council, were reluctant to commit to any specific timeframe for they were aware of the numerous factors that could influence the ceremony’s duration.

Yet, I found that non-Aboriginal staff continued to press for a specific date. Many felt anxiety over how to manage this uncertainty within their own employment
positions as well as within the highly regulatory and noticeably inflexible framework of community organisation and administration. The ambiguity of community responses caused some non-Aboriginal staff considerable frustration, as is captured in the following quote; “is it going to go for another two weeks, one week, what? I can’t get anything done or organise anything, everything is at a stand still”.

After approximately two weeks of ceremony, a Council meeting was called to discuss the real and perceived problematic relationship between the activities of ceremony and the administrative framework of CDEP work projects and participant requirements. In this meeting, which I attended, the non-Aboriginal CEO emphasized that the Council had to make a critical decision in regards to how much ceremonial leave CDEP participants would be eligible for; meaning how many days could they attend ceremony and still be paid without also “turning up for work” and fulfilling their CDEP requirements.

During this meeting the CEO explained to Councillors that within the CDEP scheme participants were eligible for “cultural leave” and that this could be utilized by participants who needed to attend cultural activities such as funerals and ceremonies. He pointed out that DWER had no permanent rule on how much “cultural leave” could be taken under the CDEP scheme. However the CEO emphasised that they had made a “strong” recommendation that it should not exceed ten days paid leave and ten days unpaid leave per year. He explained that if after the 10 days unpaid leave CDEP participants did not return to work they would compromise their position within CDEP and lose their participant status. This he said was further complicated by the fact that many people involved in the ceremony had already used up much of their “cultural leave” when attending funerals or other cultural activities.

The Councillors in this meeting had been asked to make a decision about how much “cultural leave” participants should be eligible for and had expressed the
desire that participants be paid throughout the ceremony’s duration. It became abundantly clear through this meeting that in reality they were being pressed on a number of levels to acquiesce to DEWR’s recommendation. One of the non-Aboriginal staff in this meeting urged the acceptance of this recommendation by arguing (and providing evidence that the Councillors had to concede was true), that numerous CDEP participants were neither turning up for work nor attending ceremony. She suggested that such people “were just using ceremony as an excuse to not go to work, or send their kids to school”.

Once the Councillors had reluctantly agreed to the 10 day “cultural leave” rule, the CEO and other non-Aboriginal staff, attempted to smooth over the issue by suggesting that really “there was no big problem”. They argued that because ceremony only started in the afternoon CDEP participants could still come to work in the morning and fulfil their “work-time” requirements. One staff member, to further the claim that such an arrangement was practical and acceptable, used the example of an Aboriginal woman who had been coming to work in the morning for four hours and attending ceremony in the afternoon. Council members again had to concede, with varying degrees of reluctance, that such an arrangement was possible.

At the end of this meeting I was aware that many of the Aboriginal Councillors felt resigned to the fact that, yet again, their priorities had been subjugated to the priorities of others. The non-Aboriginal staff on the other hand, left with a sense that things had now fallen back into place; CDEP participants would be expected too, and had no excuse for, not turning up for ‘work’. The community would no longer be at a ‘stand still’ and for these non-Aboriginal staff members the familiar routines of their employment could return.

Interestingly enough, outside of this meeting the ‘rules’ that had been half-heartedly accepted by the Councillors, were not enthusiastically acknowledged by many community members. Even the woman who had been used as a positive
example, by staff members and had been a catalyst in the Councillors having to compromise their stance, felt that the rules were placing considerable pressure on her. She explained in a discussion with me later that same day that;

…im [it’s] really hard working in the morning then working all day and night for that ceremony, im [it is a] big responsibility for me that ceremony, everybody watching me. I am so tired im [it is] making me want to give up that CDEP job, maybe I can’t go tomorrow.

This quote illustrates that in the mind of this woman it was the ‘work’ of ceremony rather than of CDEP employment that was the highest priority. I became aware that this same attitude was being reinforced throughout the community by the comments and actions of many elders. On one particular day I was sitting with a group of women near the ceremony ground. An influential female elder addressed those present by explaining the importance of the ceremony and advised them that they should “leave that munanga [white] work behind, you got to work for ceremony now”.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the relatedness and autonomy inherent in Aboriginal ways of being-in-the-world are often in direct conflict with western employment ideologies and their practical expression in the context of Ngukurr. The evidence in this chapter points to the fact that maintaining relationships, respecting family and negotiating demand-sharing, is understood as ‘work’ by many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. This full-time ‘work’ I have concluded, was found to create disincentives for engagement in employment and adversely affected individuals’ employment experience. Juggling the ‘work’ of social and cultural engagement with the ‘work’ involved in employment was inherently difficult.

From the discussion of Aboriginal experiences in supervisory employment positions it can be concluded that one strain of work ideology in Ngukurr values physical work above the activity of managing and organising human resources. In
this ideology a ‘boss’ is perceived of as someone who should ‘look after’ workers, rather than directing, organising and enforcing the employment behaviours common in mainstream society. The evidence indicated that the contemporary Aboriginal work ideology, rather than being based on a premise of individual wealth accumulation, is associated with making decisions around the level of participation and the role one will play in the demand sharing economy. This confirms the findings of Austin-Broos (2006), who has argued that ‘working for’ kin holds greater value and associated esteem for the Arrernte, than working in Western ‘work’ environments. It can be concluded from my own research that, in Ngukurr, the meaningful ‘work’ of cultural and social engagement was often given priority above and beyond the perceived ambiguous and uncertain value and nature of conventional employment, such as CDEP.

This chapter has shown that the commonly assumed necessity of cultural and social change to achieve Aboriginal advancement and economic development (see Lea 2000; Sutton 2001; Pearson 2000; Austin-Broos 2005; Trigger 2005), and the processes needed to achieve them are profoundly difficult to conceptualise, both for Aboriginal people and for myself as a researcher. Whether argued overtly or covertly, the assumptions behind these common expectations of change remain the same. As Cowlishaw (1999: 252) has stated, it is believed that Aboriginal people ‘must overcome resilient and resistant forms of social practice: that is, the ‘problems’ of the family and the clan’ if they are to progress in a way that is acceptable to mainstream society.

In conclusion, Aboriginal people in Ngukurr are struggling to find a balance between the ‘work’ of employment and the ‘work’ of engaging in their cultural and social milieu. Many people today are questioning the meaning and value of work in mainstream society and a discourse has arisen around WLB or WFB issues (see chapter three). On one level it would seem that the dominant culture and its institutions continue to apply a strictly old-fashioned definition of work to Aboriginals.
The following chapter further explores the complexities of the social and cultural environment in Ngukurr. It adds to the above discussion by highlighting the inherent difficulties of expectations of change through an investigation of additional elements that shape contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies in Ngukurr.
CHAPTER SEVEN
THE ‘WORK’ OF CHILDREN, FIGHTING, CARDS AND POVERTY

Introduction

To this point, my thesis has drawn together a number of historical, social and cultural experiences that appear to have shaped the way in which the Aboriginal people in Ngukurr relate to, engage in and value various constructs of ‘work’. My experience in the field and the critical analysis that followed, led me to acknowledge a number of other key themes or factors that played a significant role in Aboriginal understandings of ‘work’ and their perceptions of employment.

In this chapter, the first theme I explore is the significant numbers of children in Ngukurr. The second relates to the almost normalised nature of violence in the community. The third theme is about gambling and the importance of card games as both a wealth distribution and wealth generating activity. The final theme in this chapter is concerned with the experience of living in poverty. The following sections explore each of these aspects of Aboriginal life through the lens of their impact on contemporary constructs and meanings of work in Ngukurr.

Watching Children

From my fieldwork I saw the considerable impact children have on the interconnected and sometimes indistinguishable spheres of life and work in Ngukurr. As the 2006 census documented, there are approximately 339 children under 14 in the community (37 percent of the population). Subsequently I noticed
that children seemed to be everywhere. They pervaded all community and family activities and passed through, played in, and interacted with most community space. As explained to me by one woman, “we got big mob kids, not just one or two like munanga [white people] but maybe five of your own and then more of your sisters”. I became aware that it was not uncommon to hear Aboriginal people talk about having a “head ache from all them kids” or “being stressed out by that baby mob”. I found that, in sharp contrast to mainstream society, in Ngukurr it was the norm to see ten or more children, ranging in age from two to ten or eleven, playing together outside of the confines of school or childcare situations. Children were most often seen throughout the community in cohorts, or in “mobs” or “gangs” as they were commonly referred to by adults in the community. My own observations support the findings of Hamilton (1981:76) who suggested that “the most noticeable thing about peer group activities is how seldom there is any hostility or aggression between the children and how often they show great consideration for the feelings and safety of each other”. It was also clear to me that within these groups there was much emphasis on older children “looking after” younger children.

During my fieldwork, I became increasing aware that children were a dominant force of life in Ngukurr and that caring for them demanded much of adults’ time. Caring for children was consistently seen as and referred to by adults in Ngukurr as “hard work” and as draining energy resources. My observations, however, highlighted to me that this ‘caring’ took a distinctly different form than that to which I had been exposed in mainstream society.

Some or the most noticeable behaviours were that, for the most part, it was not always the parents of a child that were the primary ‘carers’. This responsibility was shared by many relatives both male and female. But commonly a significant load fell to the child’s grandmothers and aunties. Secondly, and in contrast to common practices within mainstream society, Aboriginal children’s time and activity were not highly structured by their carers. I quickly realised that there was
little emphasis within the adult domain on providing children with structured meal
times or defined sleeping times. I came to understand that Aboriginal children
were seen as extremely autonomous individuals with an inherent right to make
choices and demands of adults. This phenomenon has also been documented by
Hamilton (1981: 113);

…the child has freedom, the adult has responsibility, and perhaps the
major responsibility is to ensure that the children of the next generation
are given the same freedom as those of the previous one, that they, in
turn, can grow up following Aboriginal law with confidence and a sense
of personal worth (Hamilton 1981: 113).

Reflecting again the findings of Hamilton (1981: 50), I observed that Aboriginal
child rearing practices in Ngukurr were governed by the principle of never
interfering in a child’s activities until it, or another, indicated distress. I believe
that this practice was extensively shaped in my study setting by an Aboriginal
child rearing theory similar to that explained by Hamilton (1981: 160-161);

…the child is born with a set of needs, which can only be supplied
through social interaction; the child indicates these needs to others, and
the duty of the others is to respond; that there is no difference for a small
child between want and need, and that these things remain hard to
differentiate throughout life; that the older and stronger must be
responsible for the younger and weaker; that dependency behaviour is
perfectly right and proper; that the child is naturally sociable and wishes,
from its innermost being, to do the same thing that others do provided
the others treat it with fairness and equality; that the reward is not
necessary to produce acceptable behaviour providing everybody behaves
well.

Embedded in this markedly different cultural and social framework ordering child
rearing practices was a distinct way of envisaging and engaging in the ‘work’
associated with child minding. I observed that this ‘work’ often referred to as
‘baby sitting’, was predominantly one of observing or “watching” children’s
activities and acquiescing to their demands for food, drinks and other objects.
These “baby sitting” experiences were often interspersed with episodes of
considerable amusement over the children’s antics and behaviours toward one
another. It also often involved comforting an upset child and reprimanding another
for causing distress, or engaging in “bullying” as it was referred to. Often it was
the socially moral expectation to respond to and negotiate children’s demands that
were at the foundation of Aboriginal perceptions of the “hard work” involved in
child minding. As the comments, of a mother of five and aunty to at least another
fifteen children commented to me, “so much humbug all day from them kids.
Babysitting make me so nargarp [tired]”.

Interestingly, I found that the observational element of child minding was also
deemed by many individuals as a considerably important part of effectively
“growing up” children. This was because it was believed that consistently
“watching” children was an effective and gentle way of influencing the choices
they made and the directions they took within their highly autonomous world. It
became increasingly clear, however, that many people and particularly women
with children felt that, employment constrained their effectiveness and inhibited
their potential to be competent child carers. One woman explained to me that
“when I go to work in the morning I can’t make sure my kids get to school…I can’t
watch my kids when I’m working. It makes it hard for me and I feel shame.
Sometimes I think I might give up so I can look them kids good way”. I also
discovered that it was not uncommon for employed mothers, or those socially
constructed as child carers, to be stigmatised by others in the community. As the
following comment illustrates “she just sit in la office never see her kids running
everywhere, she’s not watching them kids, not looking after them proper way”.  
Another finding of my research was that some women in Ngukurr attempted to
juggle this tension between employment, “watching” children, and processes of
stigmatisation, by taking up employment in work environments that allowed them
to keep their eye on relevant children. One young mother explained to me “I took
this job at the school so I can look if my son runs away…when I bin work another
place he never bin go la school, nobody been here to watch him”.

In summary “watching” children in Ngukurr was predominantly, but not
exclusively, the domain of women. I observed a number of male individuals
during my fieldwork who engaged in the activity of “baby sitting” on a daily basis. Both men and women who regularly engaged in this activity would describe it as “hard work”. Yet expressions around the perceived difficulty of balancing employment and child minding responsibilities were restricted to the experiences and discourse of women. In contrast, the notion that “watching” children should be a woman’s priority, and placed above that of engaging in employment, was pervasive throughout the community. The following section of this chapter investigates a further theme that had a significant effect on understandings of ‘work’ and peoples engagement in employment.

Normalised Violence

Through my fieldwork experience in Ngukurr, I became increasingly aware that coping with and negotiating relationships encapsulating a violent component were activities referred to and considered to be “hard work”. I found that relative to my life experience, incidents and insinuations of violence were highly prevalent in Ngukurr. I found that it was common for Aboriginal people to display and engage in violent or aggressive behaviour in the public domain.

On a number of occasions I noticed that a significant proportion of the Aboriginal community, adults, children and dogs were all ‘on the move’ and walking in a similar direction. The first time this occurred I was perplexed, and joined in the procession in order to understand what was going on. It became clear when I reached the destination that a fight was in progress between two young men. Well over one hundred and fifty people were, from a safe distance, quietly observing this encounter. I felt an undercurrent of excitement in the audience as the two individuals on centre stage, moved between extravagant displays of aggression to short bursts of physical combat. The fight went on for a considerable length of time, without anybody receiving serious injury, before being ended by the loudly voiced objections of one closely related older woman. I found that in Ngukurr it was the norm for such fights to be conducted in this highly public manner. The fact
that they often occurred in the most public spaces in the community (such as outside the shop and council buildings) confirmed this. While at first confronting, I became aware that this public way of expressing anger was a socially and culturally established and accepted way of being-in-the-world for Aboriginal people. It did not only apply to fights between different people but on numerous occasions I also witnessed individuals expressing personal grievances through aggressive behaviours such as yelling and throwing things, in these same public spaces. I will not attempt to explain here the reasons behind these public fights and expressions of aggressive behaviour. Suffice to say that they were often associated with long running and complex family feuds, infidelities and punishment, allegations of sorcery and complicated personal grievances.

My fieldwork experiences also brought to my attention that, in Ngukurr, these public expressions of violence were not exclusively or even principally the domain of men. I found that it was just as common for women to be at the centre of these public displays. At first, I found this phenomenon confronting and a challenge to my own cultural and social constructs around female behaviour. Reflecting the findings of Burbank (1994), I found that, these women were expressing their anger in culturally prescribed and accepted ways. They were not, in any way, “deviating from societal norms, “rejecting their proper sex role”, or “having identity problems” (Burbank 1994:184).

I became aware that for many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr overseeing, engaging in and negotiating resolutions in this domain of public ‘fighting’ was often referred to as ‘work’. The following comments I documented reflect this interpretation;

…we working real hard with them boys to settle them down
…its hard work this trouble
…we all working to sort out this problem day and night mela [we have been] working

During fieldwork I also witnessed and heard of, many incidents of domestic violence between, husbands and wives and boyfriends and girlfriends. These
incidents were often also public in many respects. Individuals residing at the same “camp” and those in “camps” close by, were often witness to, or could at least hear what was going on in these aggressive and to me often very disturbing encounters. For example, while I was sitting outside one night with numerous other adults and children, a fight broke out in a nearby camp between a man and woman. We couldn’t see these individuals but we could hear the distraught wailings of the woman and the continual thumps of someone being punched and thrown around within the house. This was not the first time I had been exposed to such sounds while in the community and for the Aboriginal people I was sitting with it was a common occurrence.

As the noise escalated everybody became very quiet, children stopped playing and retreated back to sit with the adults. At one stage an elder suggested calling the police but nobody took the initiative to do so. Eventually the thumping sounds ceased and the woman’s hysterics slowly quietened. Then, as if nothing had happened, activities at ‘camp’ resumed, children began playing, conversations between adults resumed, music was again turned up. Being exposed to incidents such as this was very disturbing for me, and at first I could not understand why people did not interfere. I came to realise however, that it was only particular and concerned close relatives that had an accepted social and cultural right to interfere in such disputes. Interference by others was destined to be seen as inappropriate meddling in another’s business and would often result in acts of retribution.

It became clear to me, through observation and discussions, that close and concerned relatives referred to the negotiation inherent in attempts to resolve such domestic disputes as ‘work’. As one women explained to me “mela [we] have bin working all night counselling my brother and his wife, trying to help them. Nobody got any sleep in mela [our] camp everybody bin really worried”. I found that the prevalence of acts of aggression and violence in Ngukurr, often fuelled by alcohol, affected not only those directly involved, but also the community at large. Such incidents directly affected many people’s engagement with employment, as
the injuries sustained would often prevent attendance at work. The felt ‘shame’
associated with the public knowledge of events, could also influence the
perpetrator or recipient’s motivation to ‘turn up for’ or engage in employment.
That these incidents often disrupted people’s sleep and for some involved
considerable draining of emotional energy, affected the general wellbeing of
individuals and as a consequence their commitment to employment. As one older
man explained to me:

…there is big trouble in the community now, it keeps building up and
building up. We trying to sort this thing out but im taking a long time
people are stubborn. This fight been going for years now, nobody know
how to stop it, black magic coming from all directions in this fight. My
son can’t go to work today because of this trouble. Nobody can work
proper way with all this trouble.

My experience in Ngukurr and my conversations with residents made it clear to me
that negotiating and resolving social and familial disputes was seen by Aboriginal
people in Ngukurr as important ‘work’.

**The Economy of Cards**

A further factor that influenced Aboriginal work ideologies in Ngukurr was the
practice of gambling. From my first period of fieldwork it was clear to me that
“playing cards” was a well established and exceedingly common social practice
(see Altman 1985; Goodale 1987; MacDonald et al 2006). I found that every day
and night card games would be in progress at various camps within the
community. It became clear to me that while they were more common and
lucrative during “pay week” (the week social security payments were received)
relative to “mulla week” (the week social security payments were not received), it
was very rare for there to be no card games at any one time in the community.
This was evidenced by my continual observations of people sitting and or standing
around the perimeters of a mat or tarpaulin, which had been laid on the ground, for
the purpose of facilitating a clean and flat space for card playing.
Through discussions with Aboriginal people I discovered that “playing cards” had a long history in the community, its roots stretching back to the Mission era. One woman explained to me that during Mission times Aboriginal people used to make cards out of cardboard and go down near the river, out of sight of the non-approving missionaries and play a game known as “burdua”. This game, it was explained to me, was the forerunner of the contemporary card game, known as “Instant”, which is commonly played today. While in the past “burdua” had a maximum of eight players, “Instant” has been expanded to include a maximum of thirteen players. It also differs from its precursor through its inclusion of a system known as “bank up”. This system enables money to build up within the card circle and creates the potential for an individual to win a substantial amount of money, sometimes up to or exceeding six thousand dollars.

I discovered through playing “Instant” that it is a game with many subtle and complex rules that till this day still bewilder me. On the other hand, I observed that all Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, including many children, were experts in the rules of this game. Consequently the following description of “instant” must be considered from within my own simplistic understanding of the game.

The deck used for “Instant” includes no “picture cards”, meaning kings, queens or jacks. First, players place their bets in the centre of the circle. The monetary amount of these bets depends on the “price” of the game and can range from fifty cent to fifty dollar games. Secondly, everybody participating is dealt two cards. The objective, being to have them add up to ten or as close as possible to ten. For example if you received a: nine and three your score would be two; 5 + 4 = 9; 8 + 8 = 6; an Ace + 9 = 10. The player who deals and receives the last card is known as the “banker”. The players are then dealt a third card with the aim being to sustain their previous score or improve on it, for example; 9 + 3 + 8 = 10; 5 + 4 + 6 = 5; 8 + 8 + 3 = 9; Ace + 9 + 3 = 3. If there is more than one player with the highest score then they are eligible to “race”, and are dealt a further two cards, with the objective being to get as close to a score of ten with the five cards they
have been dealt. As the games progress, the “price” of each game can increase depending on what scores individuals achieve and money begins to “build up” in the circle. The winner or winners of each game receive a percentage of the money in the circle. They, together with those that come second in a “race”, do not have to pay the “price” for the following game. Throughout this process a share of the bets contributed are kept in reserve, often in an empty card packet held by the “banker”. When two or more individuals in a race go from a score of nine to ten, or ten to ten, the game becomes “Instant” and being part of this “race” is the ultimate aim of all players. An “Instant” game is when players are eligible to win all the money in the circle and that which has been “building up” in reserve.

If an “Instant race” did not occur, games could continue for hours and hours, sometimes even for days, and the money that would “build up” become considerable. Through participation and observation I saw that this game was not understood as simply one of luck. Instead it was associated with an individual’s skill and their capacity to psychologically influence the lay of the cards. This belief was indicated to me through the way in which all individuals handled their cards. I found that people would never just turn over a card but would “sneak them up” as it was described, slowly moving the card so that only the slightest part of the number was revealed. I was consistently impressed by the obvious familiarity Aboriginal people had with cards. Unlike myself, they could tell what number a card was when only the smallest amount of that card exposed to view. My inability to “sneak up” cards was often used by Aboriginal people as an explanation for my frequent losses.

The second card game that Aboriginal people played in Ngukurr was known as “cooncan”. I found that many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr attributed this game to the historical encounters between Aboriginal people and Macassans in Northern Arnhem Land. The deck for this game included “picture cards” and the number of cards dealt to each player was dependant on how many people were playing. For example, if three people were playing they would be dealt 10 cards each. The
aim of this game was to get a “set” or run of at least three cards, such as a: ten, jack, queen of the same suit; or three or more of the same number. Each player in their turn had to “throw away” one card and was either dealt another card or given the option of picking up the card thrown away by the previous player. This latter option was only available when the game was played in an “open” format rather than “closed” one, where cards were thrown face down. The aim of this game was to end up with the lowest score by having all or most of your cards part of a “set”.

I found that this game was often played just for fun and that it was rare for winnings to match those available in games of “Instant”.

Reflecting the findings of Goodale (1987), I found that in Ngukurr the exceedingly common activity of playing cards was often associated with notions of work. Through my own experiences and my discussions with others I concluded that it was an activity requiring considerable amounts of stamina and mental energy. As one young woman said to me; “I’m nargarp [tired] na [now], from working all day la [at] cards”. Other comments I also documented over the course of my fieldwork that reflect this sentiment include:

…real hard work them cards
…mela been working all day and night at this game and im still going
…she’s always working for cards

I found that for many Aboriginal people in Ngukurr the appeal of cards was their potential to provide an individual with a significant lump sum of money. Within the context of demand sharing, high grocery prices, and being a long way from a regional centre, having a large sum of money opened up a horizon with considerably more choice than that provided by a meagre wage. For example, they could win enough to charter a plane; buy a car; go shopping in Katherine; get enough groceries to feed everyone at “camp”; or buy luxury or expensive items that could not be purchased without such windfalls. For some Aboriginal people, employment was not seen as having this meaningful and valued potential to
provide choice. As a consequence some believed that it “is no use working I’ll get more rich la [in] card[s]”.

The Experience of Poverty

The concept of ‘poverty’ is complex, and as such, attempts at defining it remain highly contestable (Saunders 2005). Lister (2004:12) has stated that “there is no single correct definition” of poverty. In Australia, ‘poverty’ is usually understood in relative terms and defined through comparisons of indicators such as income level, employment, education, and health statistics (Saunders 2005). It is widely acknowledged that within this framework Aboriginal people, especially those residing in remote locations, are among the most ‘poverty’ stricken in Australia (Hunter 2001). The extent of this ‘poverty’, when represented in the media, or observed first hand, is often very confronting. Yet, Saunders (2005: 16) has pointed out that within the field of academia and politics there is “an obsession with measurement and an unwillingness to reflect on deeper issues surrounding the causes and consequences of poverty”.

My personal experience in Ngukurr led me to acknowledge that ‘poverty’, for those living with it, was about much more than statistics. It was about historical circumstances, about disempowerment, trauma and loss, about coping the best that you can, and essentially about fighting for basic survival. I discovered that poverty was not only a lack of things (income, food, material possessions) but also manifested itself on environmental, social, spiritual, and psychological levels. I was profoundly changed by my fieldwork experience in Ngukurr, and I can no longer understand or approach ‘poverty’ in purely abstract terms with no emotional or empathetic component. Investigating the complex causes and consequences of ‘poverty’ in Ngukurr, is however, beyond the scope of this thesis. Yet, I will discuss two simplistic elements of poverty, malnourishment and overcrowding, for I found that they had a direct and significant impact on ‘work’ ideologies in Ngukurr.
**Malnourishment**

It became obvious to me that the effects of poverty on people’s lives in Ngukurr could not be underestimated. I found that often there is not enough food for people to eat and they subsequently become malnourished. It was common for me to hear people talking about being “weak from no daga [food]” and on numerous occasions, in combination with the hot climate, I saw people faint as a result. In the context of demand-sharing (discussed in the previous chapter), I observed that the limited amount of food available at any one time was consumed rapidly. On numerous occasions I witnessed, three hundred to six hundred dollars worth of groceries being purchased and then cooked, given to others in need, and consumed as soon as it arrived at “camp”.

I also became aware that even such relatively large purchases, were often insufficient to adequately feed everybody at camp, or all those with a legitimate claim on the resources. I observed that a consequence of this was that if adults or children were not quick to ask, were absent from camp, or were busy engaged in something else (for example employment), they would often miss out on this valuable opportunity for nourishment. I became increasingly aware that it was an important priority for individuals of all ages to carefully and consistently observe their relatives and keep tabs on their potential accessibility to those resources enabling the purchase of food. A significant finding of my research was that engaging in employment was often perceived of as a hindrance to, rather than a facilitator of, individual requirements for nourishment.

Because food resources were often scarce and demand-sharing was the socially and morally accepted framework of relationships, many individuals found the financial rewards of employment unsatisfying. It was not uncommon, I realised, for someone who was employed to not have access to enough food to sustain their stamina and motivation in their employment environment. I witnessed numerous employees on ‘pay day’ spending all their wages on groceries, only to have nothing left for personal consumption the following day. It became clear that
engaging in employment in this context inhibited the socially and culturally prescribed processes of demand-sharing, and penalised the individual’s ability to obtain adequate nourishment.

This situation was recognised by a number of non-Aboriginal staff, who wished to establish a system where money would be deducted from ‘workers’ pay and food vouchers distributed. It was believed that these vouchers would be used by ‘workers’ to purchase lunch and dinner at the ‘tuck shop’ and would facilitate the development of a more nourished and consequently more effective workforce in the community. However Aboriginal ‘workers’ strongly rejected this proposal and wished to continue to receive their full pay. On reflection I have also realised that the distribution of vouchers would have had no influence on legitimate claims within the demand-sharing system. Sharing the vouchers, or the things that could be purchased with these, would be used, as with other resources, to validate and maintain relationships. This is also an important point to consider in the context of the aims and objectives of the recent Commonwealth Intervention into remote Aboriginal communities and its policy of managed incomes.

Similar to my discussion on demand-sharing, I discerned that it was not uncommon for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr to develop management strategies aimed at circumnavigating demands and facilitating the storage of food for later consumption. I often witnessed an intricate part of these strategies, with Aboriginal people requesting to store food in my room. I also saw that some Aboriginal people, through intensive processes of observation, would carefully choose when was a good time to purchase food, such as when the shop or camp was going to be relatively empty. Yet it became increasingly apparent to me that hoarding food in Ngukurr was both practically and morally difficult for individuals. Firstly, it was practically difficult because individuals had relatively little access to ‘safe’ spaces that were restricted to others or where restrictions could be effectively maintained. Secondly, I found it to be considered ethically ambiguous by many. As one woman explained to me “I can’t leave them kids
hungry, I know I am supposed to say no, just look after my own little family, but it’s not in my bones, I will always be sharing I’m never going to change”.

It became clear to me that one comparatively effective and common way for Aboriginal people to manage their nutritional requirements in Ngukurr, was by buying small amounts of pre-cooked food from the tuck-shop and eating it straight away. The prevalence of this particular strategy was revealed to me each time the local shop was closed (for various reasons such as “sorry days”). On these days I found that many people complained of being hungry and that there was a great demand placed on those with vehicles to drive to the next closest shop at Roper Bar some thirty-five minutes away.

In summary, Aboriginal people in Ngukurr had daily to ‘work’ hard to maintain basic nutritional requirements. There was often not enough food to go around and a significant possibility of missing out if you were absent. There was also the moral social and cultural necessity to share and the inherent difficulties in procuring food in a context where the shop could be shut and transport unavailable. The benefits, experience and productivity of employment were often negatively affected by this context of food scarcity and the necessary activities required in the process of obtaining sufficient food.

**Overcrowding**

A further element of poverty that influenced contemporary Aboriginal work ideology in Ngukurr was overcrowding. The official statistics state that the average number of residents per house in Ngukurr is 7.5 with 2.4 people per bedroom (ABS 2006e). These Census statistics were collected during the dry season, a time when there is significant population fluctuation, with many people...
outside of the community. While these statistics are considerably higher than non-Aboriginal mainstream averages, my own experience illustrated that in many houses there were significantly more people than the official figures allow.

For example, due to problems deemed dangerous by an electrician, a house in ‘top camp’ had to be evacuated. The thirteen residents of this house had to move in with relatives in ‘bottom camp’. The ‘bottom camp’ area to which they moved consisted of three houses but functioned as one camp. There were thirty people resident in this camp before the arrival of the new relatives, thereby making 41 people (including myself), an average of 13.6 per house. Combined the three houses had nine bedrooms; however one was occupied by a sole occupant (myself), leaving only eight bedrooms available. The average number of people per bedroom was therefore 5.1. In this instance some people chose to sleep in the common areas of the house. While I did invite people to sleep in the room that I had been allocated, all offers were politely refused due to feelings of shyness and presumable a perception that as a non-Aboriginal person I would require more privacy.

Overcrowding was common throughout the community. One older woman I had become close to spoke about her feelings concerning living in a house with five adults and seven children. She explained to me that she had been sleeping in the kitchen for some time now and was dreaming about having her own space. She stated that “even the back of a van would be good, I could just park it in somewhere. I had a tent once but its rubbish now, holes everywhere”. It became increasingly obvious to me that many of these overcrowded houses also had damaged or limited amenities. During my fieldwork I visited, stayed in, and was aware of, many houses where toilets were blocked or broken; taps did not turn off or on; floors in wet areas had rotted out; and hot water systems did not function. I often heard explanations for this such as “big mob family in this house, always things broken and long time they never get fixed”.

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I quickly became aware that electrical power in these houses was dependant on keeping credit through buying power cards and inserting them into meter boxes. I realised that it was not at all uncommon for houses to run out of power and for nobody to have the money to buy a power card. Power could run out at any time of day or night: lights would go off; air conditioners would stop working; fridges would defrost and spoil any food that may perchance have been in there.

Mattresses were also a rare commodity in the community and subsequently were highly valued. It was not uncommon to see five or six children; a husband wife and their three children; or three adults of the same sex sharing one double bed foam mattress. It became clear to me that, rather than the exception, these crowded sleeping arrangements were the norm in Ngukurr. I also saw that such high density living and the associated sociability it forces, affected Aboriginal peoples’ capacity to engage effectively in employment. It became progressively more evident that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr had a dominant culture of late night social activity. This activity involved the sharing of stories of all kinds and the common practice of playing cards. I found that night time in Ngukurr was not at all conducive to going to bed early in preparation for ‘work’ the next day.

If an individual’s interest in the stories being told waned, or the card game being played had become tedious and they wished to go to sleep, then this sleep would have to occur within this environment of continuing social activity, probably on a shared mattress, often amongst much noise and commotion. Relative to myself, people were surprisingly good at doing this; it was not uncommon for them to sleep for just a short while and then get up again. Compared with the long hours that I was used to sleeping and that are common in mainstream culture, I observed that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr often seemed to just take naps and that these were not constrained by whether it was day time or night time.

While overcrowding went some way to encouraging and facilitating this culturally embedded and valued sociability, I also realised that many Aboriginal people were
aware of and frustrated about the implications this overcrowding had in relation to employment and generally community wellbeing. The following quotes highlight this sentiment:

…let them [non-Aboriginal people] sleep one mela [our] house for one week see how they like it, five-six families in the one house

…housing they always say not enough money, not enough money all the time, we bin asking for 10 years for this housing, always say the same thing, no money

To summarise, the above discussion has shown that elements of poverty such as malnourishment and overcrowding have had an impact on shaping Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies and capacities in Ngukurr. Through my own experience and observations of others I saw that the experience of living in poverty is complex and multilayered. Yet in simplistic terms I have demonstrated that it played a significant role in influencing Aboriginal peoples’ engagement in employment and the value they placed on such participation.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown that the activities associated with: ‘watching’ or caring for children; participating, defusing or negotiating violence; gambling or partaking in card games; and surviving in a context of poverty; are perceived of as ‘hard work’ by Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. These ‘work’ activities I have concluded are often given priority over engagement in formal employment.

This chapter has highlighted a number of factors that are not commonly thought of or discussed in literature that purports to study ‘work’ in remote Aboriginal communities. Or more precisely the ‘problem’ of Aboriginal unemployment. The findings of this chapter, in combination with those of the previous (chapter six), point to the fact that ‘solving’ this ‘problem’ is not merely about creating more employment opportunities. If such a simplistic approach is adopted in Ngukurr
and the real complexity and multilayered nature of the ‘work’ situation ignored, it is inevitable that Aboriginal people will be once again ‘set up to fail’ in the face of mainstream expectations.

The following chapter also explores the potential incompatibilities between Aboriginal ways of life and the expectations and employment ideologies of mainstream society. It draws together the findings of the previous chapters and discusses them through the lens of the ‘work’ choices made by the younger generation in contemporary Ngukurr.
CHAPTER EIGHT
YOUNG PEOPLE AND ‘WORK’

Introduction

The factors affecting contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies, come together in this chapter and form the framework in which younger Aboriginal people in Ngukurr construct, understand and make ‘work’ choices. This chapter firstly describes characteristics of the younger population in Ngukurr. The main body of this chapter discusses the way in which certain mutually re-enforcing factors in Aboriginal work ideologies combine to create an environment conductive to developing and engaging in what I have termed a ‘social career’.

In order for the following discussion to be understood in context, I will briefly summarise the main factors that have been found to influence contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr.

1. Firstly, the distinctive historical exposure to western employment and ‘work’ ideology and the influence of older people’s memories in shaping contemporary understandings and values around ‘work’. Older people’s experience of engaging with country and developing knowledge and skills was highly valued, while employment is somewhat ambiguous in meaning and constructed as a choice rather than a necessity.

2. The second factor to consider is the present employment context which is dominated by CDEP, a relatively long running and familiar program albeit under consistent political scrutiny and threats of
abolition. Participating in CDEP was found to be fraught with tensions. While to differing degrees people were found to enjoy and take pride in this ‘work’ and value the program’s flexibility, it was also associated with perceptions of inequality, unfair wages, lack of recognition, inadequate relationships of trust, and unsatisfying work experiences.

3. Thirdly, the ‘work’ ideologies of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr are not confined to the sphere of employment. ‘Working for’ family and the behaviours associated with effectively engaging in their particular cultural and social world were understood as valued and meaningful ‘work’. It has been shown that to differing degrees this kind of ‘work’ was often in direct conflict with the expectations, behaviours and structures of western employment and that the former would usually be given priority.

4. Finally, I have demonstrated that watching children was understood as important ‘work’; negotiating complex and often violent social encounters was deemed hard ‘work’; and the ‘work’ of surviving in a context where malnourishment and overcrowding were the norm was often in tension with and sometimes given priority over engaging in formal employment.

The Young Adults in Ngukurr

The population this chapter focuses on are those people between the ages of 15 and 24 years old, approximately 178 people or 19.4 percent of the population in Ngukurr (ABS 2006c). Because of my position as a female researcher, and the social implications of this in Ngukurr, a greater proportion of this data was collected from young females. However my observations and discussions with a number of young men also supported my findings.
The characteristics of this population are diverse, with a small percentage having completed the latter years of secondary school but a much larger proportion having engaged in limited secondary school education. Senior and Chenall (2008) support this statement and argue that for many young women in the community schooling is cut short by pregnancy and marriage. The prevalence of early marriage and pregnancy in this population contributes to non-engagement with education but fits comfortably within the ‘social career’ paradigm.

I found that, while some of this focal population were employed in CDEP positions, a significant proportion would be classified as formally unemployed. There were a number of other employment characteristics common to this group. Through observation and daily discussions, I found that many of those participating in CDEP often did not fulfil the 32 hour a fortnight requirement and consequently received “short pay”. In addition many of those unemployed were not receiving any Centrelink payments and had no independent income other than that provided through engaging in a ‘social career’, (a phenomenon I will explain in detail below). This was particularly the case for those who had participated sporadically in the local employment market. In contrast, individuals who had been consistently unemployed for a long period of time were more likely to be receiving an independent and regular income through social security payments.

There are a number of factors that have a strong influence on the lives of these young people. These include relationships, children and acceptable behaviour within the community. I observed that the young people in this population were often in culturally and socially recognised relationships with a partner of the opposite sex, and were understood as being ‘married’ in this Aboriginal context. It was also common for them to have a number of children, or for younger women at least one child. Those with no children were often being encouraged by relatives to get married, preferably to someone in the culturally prescribed kinship category, and begin a family. However, manipulation of complex kinship
connections was commonly used to legitimise relationships where individuals had demonstrated relative autonomy in their choice of partner. For many people, particularly the mothers of young adults or teenagers, getting married was believed to be an important technique in attempts to “settle down” young women who were “walking about at night”. Senior and Chenall (2008) have described this “walking around at night” as associated with perceptions of unmanageable behaviour and beliefs around potential social, cultural and physical risks. Yet, they also explain that for young women “walking around at night is not a spontaneous or random activity” but rather one that “requires careful planning” (Senior and Chenall 2008: 274).

Understandings of Employment

While some young Aboriginals were employed, for most young people in Ngukurr formal employment was not highly relevant to everyday life. Employment was attributed little importance and as unnecessary to an individual’s future. It became clear through my field experiences, that for many younger people, engagement in and consistent commitment to employment was constructed as a choice, albeit a constrained one in the local labour market. This perception was reinforced by the attitudes of older people (see chapter three). As previously indicated, CDEP represented the primary employment opportunity for this population in the reality of contemporary community life. As a consequence, I found that CDEP had and continued to significantly shape young people’s perceptions of employment.

Career inertia

CDEP had come to play an important role in defining this population’s perceptions around the potential ways of participating in the social and cultural world of their community. Senior and Chenall (2008) has also suggested that the career aspirations of young women in Ngukurr are confined to the limited range of community based employment options, such as the various CDEP ‘work activities’. My fieldwork findings have suggested that this younger sector of the
population did not envisage their employment future in terms of working within a particular sector of the CDEP, but rather as just “working for CDEP” and moving around and through the limited activities thereby available (see also Taylor et al. 2000) What this finding suggests about young Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, is that employment was not associated with the notion of professional development or rising through the hierarchies associated with mainstream notions of ‘career’. Rather, employment was viewed from within a framework of CDEP requirements and payment systems, as a domain of intermittent activity, shifting directions and commitment. In summary, younger people in Ngukurr valued employment in a distinctly different way from their counterparts in mainstream society. Their behaviour reflected to some degree the transient or marginally attached employment behaviour of non-Aboriginal people of this same age category, albeit without the common ingredient of further education before being in the workforce (see ABS 2007). Their behaviour and beliefs also in part reflected the work values and behaviours of the older generation in Ngukurr. Yet, despite these similarities their ‘work’ ideologies diverged from these constructs and were comparatively unique.

When I pressed these young people to imagine employment beyond the CDEP sphere the most common response I received from young women was “maybe [I will] work in a shop [in] Darwin”. Such constrained responses illustrated to me that this population had difficulty envisaging a life other than what they were familiar with and been exposed to throughout their lives. I was acutely aware of the unrealistic nature of this notion, reinforced through my experiences of living in Darwin and the relatively uncommon experience of seeing Aboriginal people working in such retail ventures. I would also suggest that such imaginings were based on individuals’ perceptions around what was meaningful in mainstream society. Darwin was seen and experienced by this population primarily as a place to go shopping. I found that it was Darwin’s material richness and the associated choices it provided, that were most highly valued by this population and which had profoundly shaped their perceptions of employment beyond the confines of their
community experience. Thus, they often did not have realistic expectations of employment options or a broad understanding of what formal employment may actually involve, outside their own sphere of experience.

As I have discussed early in this thesis, many younger people in Ngukurr believed that all non-Aboriginal people had extensive employment opportunities, jobs that they liked, and substantial pay packets. I found that a more perceptive component of this unrealistic conception was that they believed that unlike themselves, non-Aboriginal people were born ‘workers’ and that it was an essential part of their nature to engage in employment and its associated behaviours. For many within this population being a “boss” or “leader” was not envisaged as principally an employment choice or opportunity but rather a characteristic of non-Aboriginal people’s identity or (more precisely) their ‘being’. As an extreme manifestation of this I learned that some of these young Aboriginal people saw non-Aboriginal people as profoundly different from themselves, as not being human in the same way. I found that this belief was reinforced in this population through their individual observations of and exposure to mainstream society.

This apparent divide between how these young people perceived non-Aboriginal culture and its inherent authoritative guise, was a subtle belief about the possible inferior nature of their own culture and sense of self. This was expressed through a lack of confidence and self-esteem when confronted with or when participating in mainstream domains such as employment, training and education.

**Shyness and Shame**

The uncomfortableness and ‘shame’ that people felt when confronted with mainstream institutions, practices and individuals, became clearer to me as I developed closer relationships with members of this population. I found that the personality of an individual could change dramatically when they were forced to interact with or participate in domains deemed to be non-Aboriginal. I witnessed on numerous occasions gregarious and confident individuals turn meek and non-
communicative when confronted by non-Aboriginal people and mainstream institutions.

In one such case a young woman was to attend a short training course being provided within the community. As I walked with her to the course she told me a funny story which was interspersed with loud and jubilant exclamations and expressions of extrovert behaviour. When we arrived she quietly and, with eyes downcast, provided the trainer with her name. She then sat in the classroom as far away from the trainer as was possible and throughout the session seemed somewhat distant and disengaged. I also observed that she responded to the trainer’s attempts to encourage her participation and answer questions with anxiety and awkwardness. When I later ask her why this change in personality had occurred she shrugged and explained with embarrassment “I bin shame”.

After I had developed friendship and trust with a number of these young women, I was often asked to attend essential meetings between themselves and non-Aboriginal people (for example: the CDEP Co-ordinator; police; administration staff; nurses) or make telephone calls on their behalf (to: banks; Telstra; hospital; Centrelink). I found that in such cases they expected me to “talk for them”. They would say things to me like, “me nomo sabi [don’t understand] munanga [white person], or “me shame, you delim [tell them]”. It became clear to me that this propensity to feel uncomfortable when dealing with non-Aboriginal people and mainstream institutions significantly affected their willingness to engage in formal employment. This was particularly the case in situations where they felt uncomfortable about their ability to adequately meet the expectations of either the non-Aboriginal supervisor or institution.

Through my fieldwork it became evident that when a non-Aboriginal person, especially one that people did not recognise, approached a camp it was common for children to alert the household by yelling “munanga [white person] guman [coming]”. The response of young adults, particularly those with limited
educational attainments, was that they would retreat into the house or away from the non-Aboriginal person and an older, or elected, family representative would be sent out to speak with them. I found that many younger Aboriginal men and women could be effectively described as profoundly ‘shy’ when placed outside their cultural and social comfort zones. My own experience with certain young women illustrates this tendency to shyness.

Previous chapters have highlighted the many different ways of valuing employment and the numerous employment disincentives that exist in the historically, culturally and socially constructed environment of Ngukurr. In the initial part of this chapter I have argued that ‘employment’ for younger Aboriginal people has been shaped by this context. Employment is not viewed as a necessity, nor as an experience associated with sustained commitment or consistent direction. It is not viewed as essential to identity construction or being-in-the-world. Nor is it associated with realistic expectations outside the sphere of CDEP or the community generally. The apparent lack of confidence and sense of inferiority, and the difficulties this creates in engaging with the non-Aboriginal world, suggests that, for these young people the value and meaning of formal employment remains uncertain.

In summary, my findings in regards to this population reveal that the historical, cultural, social and physical context of contemporary Ngukurr is not conducive to developing the employment, behaviours, practices and meanings actively encouraged, maintained and expected by mainstream institutions and discourse. To the contrary, this same environment brings together numerous and mutually beneficial factors that make participating in what I have termed a ‘social career’, a preferred and significantly less ambiguous ‘work’ option.

The ‘Social Career’
Through my fieldwork I discovered that, within this context of different understandings and limited employment incentives, the younger population of Ngukurr had formed a broader and different type of dependency on community; one that involved ‘working’ at creating and expressing opportunities to find purpose and meaning within their own social and cultural comfort zones. For example, by ‘working’ on managing established social and cultural processes and manoeuvring within them. This required skill, knowledge and considerable time commitment and was highly competitive. On a number of levels it reflected the notion of an employment ‘career’ where the aim was to, in relation to others in their peer group, become increasingly skilled, more successful, influential and subsequently powerful. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I have called this historical, social and culturally constructed phenomenon a ‘social career’. In the most basic sense this ‘career’ refers to the manipulation of obligations, negotiations and expectations of kin or others, in order to control the direction of daily life. This manifestation of the ‘social career’ may be emerging as the Aboriginal ‘work’ equivalent to the ideology attending mainstream work.

On countless occasions I witnessed representatives of this population patiently observing and critically analysing the common phenomenon of card games. I slowly but increasingly became aware that this activity was, not as first assumed, one of just passing the time. Rather it was an activity involving the accumulation of information on: the individual players’ evolving financial and card skill status; the social and emotional structure of the card playing group at any one time; the nature of the relationship between players and the observer; and the ingenious gauging of what opportunities existed within this sphere to benefit themselves. I found over time that many such activities, that at first I had considered to be expressions of purposeless or even boredom, were in fact intricately related to developing and maintaining proficiency within an individual’s ‘social career’.

My fieldwork revealed that not all those that participate in the ‘social career’ were experts in the field or consistently successful. I became aware that some
individuals, rather than effectively manipulating and intelligently monitoring those around them, resorted to less stealthy means and used degrees of violence and threatening behaviour to obtain what they wanted. This approach was often unsustainable and morally confronting, yet very effective while the power of intimidation remained with the individual. This practice of resorting to intimidation was often explained by Aboriginal people as an outcome of too much indulgence. It was often not the intimidating individual that was held accountable but rather the responsibility was placed on relatives who were perceived as having “spoilt” the individual. I found, that in Ngukurr the term ‘spoilt’, could sometimes be used interchangeably or sequentially to refer to the overindulgence of an individual by relatives that had consistently given in to their demands; or to the actual nature of the individual who, because of this indulgence, turned out to be highly dependant, selfish and even ‘ruined’ in some profound way.

A significant proportion of those individuals who ‘worked’ on a full-time basis for their ‘social career’ were often referred to by others in the community as being “spoilt”. The prevalence of such participation by younger people meant that this sentiment was often associated, not only with particular individuals, but with the entire younger generation within the community. As a number of older community members pointed out to me;

…these ones now they spoilt they nomo sabi [don’t know how to take] responsibility for themselves they always depend on family.

…they are married couples now and should look after themselves but olabat [they] to spoilt…

…that mob too spoilt always walking around everywhere looking for top-up [money]

…all them young ones [are] spoilt na [now].

Some people, particularly those who were commonly at the receiving end of the manipulation (and sometimes intimidation) inherent in a ‘social career’, would often make attempts to curb this individual’s career direction. I witnessed these particular people on various occasions trying calmly to discuss the implications of
a ‘social career’ with those participating. Or, in contrast, losing patience and shouting at them about this ‘work’ choice. At the foundations of both this shouting and quiet discussion I realised was the notion of ‘independence’ and the perception that those participating in a ‘social career’ needed to stop depending on others. I heard many comments in this vein during my fieldwork including:

…I can not support you all the time, you got to look after [your child]
…You always come to me for help when you going to look after yourself
…You got your own family now but always ask me for everything

Yet the paradox in this situation is captured by the term “spoilt”. I found that most people in Ngukurr acknowledged, to varying degrees, that relatives and the community context at large had facilitated the development of a ‘social career’ path through providing a conducive environment where participants had the potential to succeed.

After leaving the field I began to reflect on this notion of a ‘social career’ and the dominant perception held by many in Ngukurr that those engaged in this activity did not know how to “look after themselves”. I came to the realisation that while on one level this may be the case, on another it was clearly misguided. My findings have shown that individuals participating in a ‘social career’ were in fact experts at looking after themselves and gaining what they wanted. I would argue that, when Aboriginal people in Ngukurr spoke about ‘social career’ participants as “poor things”, they may well also have been acknowledging the ambiguous future of the ‘social career’. Yet, at the same time, they were underestimating the resourceful and intelligent ideology underpinning the ‘social career’ in Ngukurr.

**Interdependence verses independence**

The benefits of actively working at a social career, relative to those gained from striving to be ‘independent’, can be effectively captured in the attempts of one woman I observed who was trying to “take responsibility for herself and family”. This woman’s mother, who can be understood as ‘working for’ kin, had received a
substantial amount of money from royalty payments. Intense negotiations had been going on for days as individual relatives worked at their ‘social careers’ and argued for their eligibility to demand through the use of intimidation, emotional, social and cultural tactics or complex combinations of them. The mother began to become quite stressed by this incessant and demanding process and her daughter, who up till this time had been actively engaged in the negotiations, became reflective.

She asked me what I would do in her situation, would I ask my mother for money. I responded in a somewhat moralistic and naive way, that I would only ask her in desperate situations and that I would prefer not to, thereby showing I could be ‘independent’. I explained that I felt this would make my mother proud of me and I would then also feel good about myself. After some more consideration, this woman decided to opt out of the demand negotiations that by this time had progressed to a decision to buy a vehicle. She had decided that she would buy herself and her immediate family their own car with her tax return money. The vehicle she brought subsequently broke down on the way back from Darwin where it had been purchased, and she was left with no money and a useless wreck. In this attempt to be ‘independent’ she had also forfeited any right to the vehicle purchased by her mother. I found that while this young woman may have had the resilience to try to be ‘independent’, this experience was a serious blow to her commitment and reinforced her belief that the ‘social career’ often provided better outcomes.

Participating in a ‘social career’ required individuals to be continually alert and mindful of the wider social processes and dynamics within their community. That it had the potential to provide scope for younger people to become more skilled and develop a strong sense of discipline, patience and insight also became clear through my fieldwork experience. I came to realise that for these individuals engagement in a ‘social career’, relative to employment, was unambiguous in its rewards. I observed on countless occasions that ‘working’ at a ‘social career’
frequently payed off. Participants would accomplish their desired outcome and would be provided with the opportunity to feel a sense of personal achievement.

For this sector of the population the ‘social career’ was the most dominant aspect of their lives. It was ‘worked’ on twenty four hours a day, every day of the year. It involved intensive and often inventive processes around the development, maintenance and nurturing of intimacy within and between relationships of a cultural, social and personal nature. For young women being married and or having children did not hinder this objective but rather grew their sphere of available ‘connections’, and so increased their manoeuvring potential within many relationships. Alternatively, I observed that the ‘social career’ also often included creating drama within and between relationships and optimising on the opportunities provided by this drama to further, through careful management, their ‘career’.

It became increasingly apparent to me that the ‘social career’ rarely, if ever, extended beyond the manipulation of social networks within an Aboriginal domain. I found that it was built on strengthening existing relationships of inter-dependence solely within this sphere. Subsequently I realised that its bounded and insular expression was a contributing factor to the continuation of divisions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains in Ngukurr. It created a situation where engagement with non-Aboriginal spheres was often unnecessary and avoidable. Relative to the centrality of paid employment in mainstream society the ‘social career’ provided individuals with their daily requirements, was a valued source of pride, fulfilment, social identity formation, and affirmation.

Musharbash (2003) has claimed that within the Aboriginal domain of Yuendumu there were individuals who were focal in kinship networks and relative to younger people had more independence. My own findings in Ngukurr, to some extent support this assertion. Yet, rather than an individual’s age being the only factor affecting their independence, I found that it was significantly influenced by their
level of engagement in, and commitment to, a ‘social career’. While I found that the ‘social career’ was more common among younger people in Ngukurr it was not confined to this population. Many individuals of varying ages were emotionally, economically and socially highly dependent on others. Managing, maintaining and manipulating this dependence I found was an activity engaged in on a daily basis by many community members.

In chapter six and seven, I discussed the practices and ideologies associated with ‘working for’ kin. While interrelated with, and inevitably conductive to the development of a ‘social career’, the social career was also a distinct activity with its own ideologies. The term ‘working for’ simply implies ethically participating in the cultural and social processes, obligations and protocols of kinship. It is essentially about ‘working’ for the benefit of others. By contrast I found that the ‘social career’ was primarily about ‘working at’ using the local social and cultural systems to benefit oneself. This benefiting of oneself was often associated with the procurement of ‘cash’. Having money was valued in terms of its potential to enable an individual to engage in a highly esteemed experience. The freedom to choose what they wanted to do at that time and demonstrate this choice to others. I also found that another common objective was the accumulation of material resources, such as clothes, music, DVD’s and other desired items. In this sense, the ‘social career’ reflected dominant employment ideology through its construction of money as a way of demonstrating personal power and prestige and the associated potential of material possessions to be expressions of self and social identity.

As suggested above, relative to older people in Ngukurr, participation in the ‘social career’ was highly concentrated among the young to middle age sector of the population. This finding, points to at least two possibilities. The first is that the ‘social career’ could be an expression of a slight generational shift from a collective to a more individualistic consciousness in Ngukurr, a state of mind paradoxically encouraged by dominant mainstream ideology. Interrelated, or in
direct contrast to this suggestion, the ‘social career’ may be representative of the
different life-stages of individuals in Ngukurr, and the socially and culturally
constructed expectations around these phases.

This latter hypothesis was challenged by the shared expressions of older people. It
became clear to me that they had deeply seated concerns over the prevalence of the
‘social career’ and the potential outcomes it could have on the future of
participants and the community at large. They worried about what was going to
happen if the social and cultural structures that supported this career were eroded
through potential political and institutional change. I found that there was a
perception among this older population that the younger generation could not
conceptualise a future beyond the ‘social career’ and would be lost, frightened, and
disenfranchised without it. One older woman explained this to me by stating
“poorbella olabot [unfortunate young people, they] don’t even think about the
future”.

Yet, in support of my suggestion that the ‘social career’ may well be a life stage, I
realised that it would be overly pessimistic to assume that individuals could not
transcend the ‘social career’ if, and when, circumstances made it no longer a viable
option. The remarks of one of the most successful and accomplished ‘social
career’ participants I observed in Ngukurr highlighted this probability.
Unexpectedly, one day this young mother (age 22) with a six year old child, said to
me with an air of deep concern “my mummy and daddy are sick, what if they pass
away, there might not be anyone to mind me”. She then went on to suggest in
some what hesitant terms “maybe I should do an English course, so I can get a job
one day”. This was the first and only time during our extended friendship that I
had heard her consider the possibility of engaging in mainstream culture and its
institutions, or even to worry about the future.
The potential of education

While many people in Ngukurr held deep reservations about the future of their community and people, and felt burdened by expectations of change being placed firmly on their shoulders, they were not devoid of optimism. As one women explained to me,

...its going to be really hard for people, I worry so much. But maybe in the long run they can learn to take responsibility for themselves and this might be a good thing... being an individual is going to be hard for people, mela [we] are going to have to be strong, but im [its] right mela [we] always been strong people.

It became increasingly clear to me that those concerned about the future believed that education was the key. Yet, through observation I found that those individuals who were relatively educated and confident in non-Aboriginal domains were no more or less likely than the uneducated to be ‘working for’ kin or actively engaged in ‘working at’ a ‘social career’. One woman claimed to me that, ‘if I didn’t have education I would be drinking, smoking, following socialization circle all the time’. Yet, in reality she was just as engaged in the social and cultural processes of community life as anyone else. In addition to this full-time occupation, her role as Councillor, community advocate and leader, made her one of the most stressed individuals I encountered in Ngukurr and someone that was often on the verge of ‘burning out’. I saw that while she was in Ngukurr it was impossible for her extricate herself from the ‘work’ of emotional, social and cultural community engagement, and that she often considered leaving the community in order to become more ‘independent’. Yet this had remained firmly an idyllic dream.

On the other hand, I found that many younger people in Ngukurr expressed a desire to have a house of their own, full of all the modern and socially desirable material possessions, as defined within the context of Ngukurr. As one young woman explained to me,

I want my own house, with couches and spoons, knives and forks. I won’t let anyone come into that house. Nobody will take things or bustim [break things] up, I will clean it everyday. It will just be for me
and my son, maybe my mummy too. I am going to ask the council to give me one of them new houses coming up, here in middle camp.

Musharbash (2003) has discussed a similar idyllic tendency held by younger Aboriginal people in Yuendumu and suggests that their biggest challenge is to achieve independence rather than inter-dependence. She concludes her thesis with the statement that “the ultimate fantasy is not to have full control over one's life (resources, personhood, domestic space) but to have all this at Yuendumu” (Musharbash 2003: 257).

Recognition of this ‘dream’ and the difficult and profound challenges such ambition implies, illuminates many Aboriginal community members’ advocacy of more education and training. I found that in this sense education was not primary associated with future employment but rather as being potentially able to encourage engagement in mainstream society more generally and to facilitate the broadening of choices beyond the insular world of the ‘social career’. This educational priority was explained to me in terms of, “something needs to be done so mela [we] can feel comfortable in other environments”. It became clear to me that training and education were conceived of in a broad social sense in Ngukurr and were not confined to the spheres of future employment potential.

Conclusion

The ‘problem’ of Aboriginal unemployment should not be understood in simplistic terms, as solely about the need to provide more training and education. While such a stance is often embedded in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal discourse, both within and outside the context of Ngukurr, I would argue that the actual nature, purpose and outcomes of ‘training’ and ‘education’ often remain ambiguous. If the ‘problems’ of employment in Ngukurr are to be ‘solved’, whatever this may mean, an understanding of Ngukurr’s complex historical, social and cultural world is essential. Simply advocating more jobs, training or education, without
consideration of the issues discussed in this thesis, could be potentially detrimental to Aboriginal people in Ngukurr and set training and education programs up to fail.

I have argued in this chapter that mutually beneficial factors came together in Ngukurr to form the ‘social career’. In contrast to those of formal employment the rules and behaviours associated with this ‘career’ were defined within an insular Aboriginal domain and fully understood and meaningful to participants. The social career path was enticing because it offered a sense of freedom and control in individuals’ lives and resolved the inherent struggle between dominant ‘work’ ideology and Aboriginal culture.

By choosing this career path, Aboriginal people were not only protecting themselves from being set up to fail in a ‘white’ world, but were able to choose a future that offered potential to succeed in terms that were meaningful to themselves. Partly because of limited formal employment opportunities, it is possible that young people were choosing to embrace a social career, which functions wholly within an Aboriginal domain, in order to resist the perceived dominance and oppression of mainstream society and its associated ‘work’ ideology.
CONCLUSION

Introduction

My experience in Ngukurr, and the journey of learning involved in developing this thesis has been one that I cannot easily forget. Many of my own assumptions were challenged and I became increasingly aware of the complexity of culture and cross-cultural relationships. As Cowlsihaw (1999: 34) has emphasised, the predicament of culture is not merely about specific practices but rather about “personal, intimate, everyday ways of feeling and being”. This chapter draws together the findings of my thesis and aims to reiterate the complexity of ‘work’ ideologies in Ngukurr. It will also discuss the potential implications of such ideologies on policy development and implementation.

Dominant ‘Work’ Ideology

Mainstream Australian, western or dominant ‘work’ ideology has been shown to be primarily associated with the constructs of paid employment. This construct is fundamental to modern capitalist societies and as a consequence has become central to the lives of members of these societies. The development of this powerful ‘work’ ideology did not happen suddenly but culminated from a process of gradual cultural, social and economic change that took hundreds of years. This process of change was supported by the development of a particular kind of ‘work’ dogma and was encouraged through both religious and secular educational and political institutions. It also involved the forceful introduction of new work structures based on temporal regulation, increased supervision, and notions of a ‘work ethic’ and ‘career’.

My experience in Ngukurr made me aware of the extent to which this particular understanding of ‘work’ and the behaviours associated with it have been internalised
by most members of capitalist societies. I found that, even when aware of the culturally and socially constructed nature of employment and ‘work’ ideology, I felt compelled to behave in ways espoused by mainstream ideology. On reflection I realised that, the normalised nature of these ‘work’ values and activities had greatly influenced my expectations and had contributed to my attempts at encouraging or imposing such behaviours on Aboriginal workers. I came to the realisation that employment or ‘work’ was a structuring component of my own and other non-Aboriginal peoples’ lives in Ngukur. It was central to how we engaged in the world, defining and creating our understandings of time and particular activities, shaping our perceptions of ourselves and others, and often playing a significant role in constructing notions of meaning in life and general well-being.

The importance placed on employment underpins many other ideological positions in contemporary mainstream society, giving them strength and validation. The perceived importance of employment has permeated all dominant social institutions, educational, political, economical and cultural. For example, Thornton (1980: 207) has stated that, in capitalist societies, political authority is legitimized by “populating the political realm with persons whose integrity as political individuals is guaranteed by the way they are constituted as economic entities”. Since colonisation the centrality of employment to mainstream Australian society has framed interactions with Aboriginal people. It is the demands, values and expectations of capitalist economic labour relations that have shaped relationships between mainstream and Aboriginal society, with the former continuing to hold a position of relative power.

I have argued that, in contemporary Ngukur, relationships between non-Indigenous people and their Aboriginal counterparts have mostly remained confined to the domain of ‘employment’. I found that relationships between the two groups were conducted and constructed during ‘work-hours’. It was the norm for the non-Aboriginal person to hold the position of authority in these interactions and be the ‘boss’, while Aboriginal people were subordinate and in the position of ‘workers’. I would suggest that it is not only historical and dominant perceptions of Aboriginal people as ‘workers’ that have developed within this frame but also more general constructions of
Aboriginal culture, society and identity that have been shaped by and through ‘work’ relationships.

This thesis has also highlighted that the ‘work’ relationships between colonisers and Aboriginal people in Northern Australia were markedly different from the labour relations existing in mainstream society during the same historical periods. The process of industrialisation and the associated internalisation of particular work values and behaviours took hundreds of years within Western culture and was dependant on specific environmental, social and cultural conditions. However, it is rarely acknowledged that Aboriginal people in the Northern part of Australia have had a distinctly different past and a relatively short, ‘slave-like’, institutional exposure to capitalist expectations and employment behaviours. Any emphasis on Aboriginal people’s perceived ‘failure’ to adequately meet the expectations of mainstream society must be understood with this historical context in mind; as one woman explained to me “mela [we] need more time”.

Yet, parallel to this it is important to recognise that Aboriginal people in the Northern part of Australia and more specifically in Ngukurr have had an employment history. As Curthoys and Moore (1995:20) have stated,

If we begin by acknowledging that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders worked within their own modes of production and were incorporated as workers into introduced modes of production from the beginning of settlement, and that women and children as well as men worked, we may be on the road to acknowledging the importance of indigenous labour to post-1788 Australia.

The contribution of Aboriginal labour to the development of the north of Australia cannot be underestimated. To conceive of Aboriginal people as being without an employment history, or as unfamiliar with the notion of a ‘work ethic’, would be naive. It is these memories of employment that I have shown to be a contributing factor in the construction of contemporary ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr.

I found that the limited amount of literature on Aboriginal labour relations focused primarily on exploitation and abhorrent ‘working conditions’, a position that cannot be
denied but is nevertheless underwritten by the an assumption of employment’s centrality to life. In contrast, I found that in Ngukurr older Aboriginal people with experience in the pastoral industry, placed emphasis on the opportunities available within this restrictive paradigm to engage in activities that were culturally, socially and personally meaningful. Their memories of pastoral employment influenced contemporary ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr by attributing value to the experience of ‘working’ above the end product or outcome of such labour.

Mission institutions were a profound manifestation of the importance placed on ‘work’ in western societies. It was through ‘work’ that missionaries believed they could civilise and Christianise Aboriginal people. In the case of the Roper River Mission, getting Aboriginal people to ‘work’ was one, if not the basic principle, behind the Mission’s evangelical endeavour. I found that the missionaries’ emphasis on the importance of a ‘work ethic’ played a significant role in shaping contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr. Older Aboriginal people constructed ‘working’ or employment as a valued and positive experience and one that young people should also engage in and similarly value. Yet in a somewhat paradoxical manner they associated it with the oppression of their culture and people respectively; as a ‘white’ way of being that could somehow lessen your Aboriginality. I found that these mixed messages contributed to a contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr that placed employment in a position where its meaning became ambiguous and one of choice rather than necessity.

**Community Development Employment Program (CDEP)**

The employment environment in Ngukurr today is dominated by CDEP. The CDEP program is the contemporary expression of dominant work ideology in the community and its increasingly strict rules and regulations are aimed at enforcing the ‘work’ behaviours and values expected by mainstream society. It is a ‘work-for-the-dole’
type program aimed at overcoming the so-called ‘problems’ of Aboriginal unemployment.

CDEP has been the main source of employment in Ngukurr for three generations and as such has profoundly shaped Aboriginal understandings, behaviours and values around employment. Although thought of as primarily an employment program, I found that in this community it was understood and experienced by Aboriginal people as part of the fragile fabric of community existence. It both maintained basic standards of living and was an accepted way of participating in the social and cultural realities of life. I discovered that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, existing in a context of continual policy and program change, viewed CDEP’s stability, familiarity and flexibility (though diminishing) as its most important elements. That the program was under constant threat of abolition during my fieldwork, and that this power resided with non-Aboriginal parties, contributed to already pervasive feelings of anxiety, fear and disempowerment in the community.

Simultaneously, I concluded that Aboriginal participation in CDEP had been greatly influenced by public, political and academic discourse claiming that the program did not provide ‘real’ employment. Participants and other community members felt that they were: not paid enough; not given sufficient credit for accomplishments; not provided with adequate training, resources or equipment; not trusted or given responsibility; and not provided with meaningful work activities. That CDEP was perceived as ‘not real’ employment contributed to a context of disincentive and affected individuals’ motivation and commitment to employment. Yet, I also found that the notion of ‘real’ employment was often ambiguous or unrealistic in its interpretation.

Employment and Aboriginal Culture

Confirming the findings of others, my research has shown that many elements of Aboriginal culture and society in Ngukurr are in tension with mainstream practices and
behaviours commonly associated with employment and employment environments. I observed that many people in Ngukurr experienced anxiety when placed in supervisory positions. In a context of demand sharing, I also found that the financial rewards of employment, in contrast to mainstream society, were not necessarily positive in encouraging employment engagement or conducive to employment motivation and satisfaction.

My research has identified the emphasis often placed on the need for Aboriginal people to change, adapt to mainstream employment behaviours and adopt mainstream ‘work’ and related ideologies. It is unclear, to both myself as a researcher and to Aboriginal people in Ngukurr, how such a process of change could or would in fact occur. I found that expectations of change, with little acknowledgement of the profound difficulties involved, contributed to community unease and feelings of being set up to fail; “it’s the same old story melo [we] will get the blame”.

The history of Aboriginal engagement in employment, older people’s construction of employment as a choice, and the discourse and experiences surrounding the ‘not real’ work nature of CDEP, created an environment where the benefits and meaning of employment were ambiguous for many individuals in Ngukurr. Subsequently my research found that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr often gave priority to other ‘work’ activities. Within the social, cultural and physical world of Ngukurr these alternative activities provided individuals with many of the benefits commonly associated with employment: physical survival, sometimes financial reward, personal satisfaction, social identity, and a sense of purpose or direction in life.

Aboriginal ‘Work’ Ideology

In this thesis I have drawn out the numerous elements of Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr. These elements I have argued are distinct from mainstream practices and ideologies associated with paid employment. The first element of this ideology was
associated with former pastoral workers’ construction of ‘work’. It was not the experience of employment itself that was given significance by them, but instead the opportunities pastoral work provided to maintain relationships with country. This is in contrast to mainstream western capitalist societies, where understanding and engaging in the world is shaped by the centrality of ‘work’. Generally older Aboriginal people in Ngukurr saw and experienced ‘work’ through a lens which attributed centrality to relationships with ‘country’. It was not ‘employment’ that was meaningful in and of itself, but rather its meaning derived from the opportunities it provided for engaging in ‘work’ activities deemed to be culturally and socially meaningful.

Similarly, I found that the value of ‘work’ was not defined by specific employment roles or positions but rather was associated with the experience of moving through and between different employment spheres and accumulating diverse skills. In contrast to the upward, lineal or ‘logical progression’ commonly associated with the western notion of ‘career’, Aboriginal people in Ngukurr valued ‘work’ as a multidirectional journey involving high levels of transience between different spheres of formal and informal employment and training. In Ngukurr, both the younger and older sectors of the population were found to favour occupational mobility. This intergenerational tendency was found to be a significant component of Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology. Such mobility was not contingent on hierarchical progression through employment spheres. The choice to move from a position of work place authority to one deemed by mainstream standards as having less prestige, or to be qualified in one occupational area and choose to work in another, was not viewed as unusual by Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. These mobility patterns reflected both the desire to avoid or defuse familial or inter-personal tensions, and a common belief in the value of developing diverse skills and engaging in different and new experiences.

Further, acceptance of this circular rather than linear occupational mobility was a reflection of the way in which Aboriginal people in Ngukurr conceived power dynamics and authority in the workplace. Instead of valuing a chain of command that places the manager or organiser of human resources above that of the labourer,
Aboriginal people in Ngukurr saw authority as primarily residing with the latter. For example, the role of ‘boss’, rather than situated in a hierarchical position above the ‘worker’, was understood as assisting the ‘worker’. The boss, manager, or supervisor’s moral prerogative was to ‘look after’ or ‘work for’ others. Therefore moving from a position of ‘boss’ to ‘worker’ was not associated with losing prestige, but rather was a power shift from ‘looking after’ to ‘being looked after’.

This notion or ‘working for’ or ‘looking after’ was found to extend well beyond the domain of formal employment in Ngukurr. Unlike its western counterpart, this ‘work’ was not regimented by time or confined to specific places. This thesis has argued that in Ngukurr, contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology was as much shaped by activities outside of the formal employment domain as it was from within. I found that when not engaged in formal employment, Aboriginal people were (contrary to much non-Aboriginal opinion) not just ‘sitting around doing nothing’. They were often, if not consistently, participating in complex practises of kinship negotiation and obligation. These practices were part of all facets of daily life, from general familial participation and demand-sharing norms, to the organisation of funerals and ceremonies. This constant engagement with kin and country was the single most important ‘work’ activity in Ngukurr, and as such it formed the basis from which all other ‘work’ ideologies revolved.

Juggling time between the full-time ‘work’ of social, cultural and physical engagement and the expectations and requirements of formal employment was inherently difficult. In many cases the outcomes and benefits of full participation in the former outweighed the benefits and outcomes of trying to negotiate between the two. For example, the ‘work’ associated with effectively participating in, and gaining benefit from, the demand-sharing system was hindered by the time constraints of formal employment and the increased vulnerability to demand-sharing consequent upon receiving a ‘wage’. In contrast to dominant western ideology, where the accumulation of wealth is central to the meaning/purpose of ‘work’, contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in
Ngukurr involved regular decisions essentially around what position to occupy within the demand sharing system.

Participating in the physical, cultural and social world of Ngukurr, where ‘working for’ and ‘looking after’ play a central role, is the framework within which other elements of Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology have been identified. This thesis has proposed that contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology places significant value on a number of ‘work’ activity areas including: ceremony; ‘watching’ children; participating, defusing and negotiating violence; gambling or partaking in card games; and (on a basic level) surviving in a situation of poverty. The prioritising of these activities, above those of formal employment, demonstrates the centrality placed on social and cultural engagement within the ‘work’ ideology of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr. Unlike the dominant western ‘work’ ideology, the sphere of ‘paid employment’ is not where this engagement is fully realised. Instead paid employment is outside of and to a degree independent of these priority activities. It is not paid employment that lies at the heart of Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology, but engagement in the social and cultural world of Ngukurr, where status, a sense of identity, purpose, direction and meaning in life are developed.

Within this context I found that younger Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were making particular social and culturally informed ‘work’ decisions and choosing to engage in what here is termed a ‘social career’. This career diverges from the notion of ‘working for’ others and (on a number of levels) reflects the basic principles of mainstream work ideology; individuality, social status and expressions of prestige or power through material resources or wealth. Yet, it remains firmly within the Aboriginal domain. This ‘career’ is a profound expression of younger Aboriginal people’s attempts to negotiate engagement with mainstream society and internalise its dominant ideologies while at the same time maintaining their separate autonomy.
Directions for the Future

That these particular Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies have developed and continue to evolve should be recognised in their own right, rather than being viewed as an inferior or insufficient expression of the ‘right’ way to value and engage in employment. This is crucial if any deeper understanding of ‘work’ in the Aboriginal communities is to be gained. My research raises questions about the meaning and value of ‘work’, not just for Aboriginal people in Ngukurr but also more generally. As academic interest in the implications of placing employment at the centre of one’s life grows and analysis develops around work-life balance, Aboriginal ‘work’ ideologies may shed some light on alternative ways of being-in-the-world and creating meaning in life.

The implications of these findings point to the need to think creatively about ‘work’ and employment in this remote Aboriginal context. Aboriginal relationships to, and ways of engaging with country, are important points to consider when envisaging employment initiatives in remote Aboriginal communities. My research suggests that employment that facilitates moving through and interacting with ‘country’ may have more resonance with Aboriginal ways of being-in-the-world and be more valued. Further, if Aboriginal relationships to country are adequately understood and appreciated in their own right, then there is the potential for a paradigm shift to occur in mainstream understandings of employment opportunities within remote Australia. By placing a monetary value on Aboriginal management of ‘country’, the continuing work of Professor Rolf Gerritsen and the Indigenous Protected Areas (IPA) program are going someway towards this (see, Gilligan 2006; Garnett et al. 2008; Gerritsen 2008). With the advent of concern about climate change, Aboriginal management of country has the potential to achieve a monetary value. However there is still a tendency within such discourse for scientific knowledge and ways of seeing the world to rule by default and for Aboriginal knowledge to be undervalued and only acknowledged when it can be modified to fit with, or be an auxiliary to this dominant paradigm.
Another important policy implication of my research is that the ‘work’ ideologies and formal employment behaviours of Aboriginal people in Ngukurr were not found to reflect the western notion of ‘logical’ career development. Aboriginal people in Ngukurr engaged in career pathways that reflected a more circular approach. This pattern accommodated individuals’ particular needs and reflected a particular way of valuing ‘work’ and its pathways. CDEP, by facilitating such flexibility in and between employment and training spheres, enabled individuals to maintain positive personal and familial relationships within and beyond the formal employment environment. This finding highlights the need to maintain such flexibility within future employment and training initiatives. Rather than viewing such transience as reflecting a ‘lack of commitment’, it is in fact a prime example of Aboriginal people attempting to negotiate a balance between formal employment expectations and their own established practices of social and cultural engagement. By acknowledging this need/preference for occupational mobility, employment and training initiatives will potentially avoid ‘setting people up to fail’ through placing unrealistic expectations on individuals’ capacity to sustain consistent commitment to one employment position or linear career path.

Further, this circular occupational pattern reflects Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology, which places value on the accumulation of diverse skills and experiences. Adequately recognising this desire to move through formal and informal employment and training spheres on a frequent basis, raises interesting questions about the form employment and training initiatives could potentially take. Building the capacity for individuals to occupy different employment roles, and creating flexible positions that could accommodate frequent employee change, could be one such alternative approach. It is, therefore, not enough to simply advocate more education and training. For if Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology is to be incorporated, rather than ignored, then critically thinking about what kinds of education and training are required and what such programs aim to achieve, is of primary importance.
This thesis has emphasised the important role maintaining and negotiating kinship relationships plays in contemporary Aboriginal ‘work’ ideology in Ngukurr. Yet, as Cowlishaw (1999: 278) has stated, it is commonly believed “that commerce and [Aboriginal] kinship are, in some way, incompatible” or even mutually exclusive. I have argued that this misunderstanding has often led to the onus for change being placed on Aboriginals’ need to overcome their entrenched social and cultural practices. Cowlishaw (1999: 278) questions this hypothesis, however, and points out that, the terms kinship and commerce “co-exist everywhere, especially among the rich and powerful”. Therefore, as suggested above, while facilitating Aboriginal engagement in the market economy may involve more creative approaches, such engagement does not necessitate a complete abandonment of embedded cultural and social systems.

Gerritsen and Straton (2007) have suggested the possibility of employing Aborigines as a (related) group rather than as individuals. The composition of these groups, they argue, should not be expected to conform to pre-determined cultural sets but rather accommodate the uniqueness of particular situations and individual relationships (such groups would comprise people able to mutually cooperate and would avoid free riders). Thinking about Aboriginal employment in an innovative way - the potential opportunities it could provide, the form and structures it could take and how outcomes may be envisaged - is inevitably a complex challenge. However, this thesis has gone some way to show that taking note of the particular and specific physical, historical, cultural and social circumstances of Aboriginal people and their ‘work’ ideologies is essential, if such initiatives are to be developed in an informed and a sustainable manner.

Heterodox thinking outside the square is vital in any creative endeavour. In this instance moving beyond a façade of consultation and aiming to really listen to Aboriginal people is of primary importance. Such ‘listening’ will require a degree of patience and a significant allocation of time, as well as an ability to recognise cultural, social and personal assumptions on all sides. The process of developing creative responses must involve a readiness to accept and accommodate mistakes, a willingness
to allow time for adjustment and most importantly long term commitment. My thesis has shown that, in Ngukurr, policy instability, inflexible expectations based on mainstream suppositions, and short term funding cycles, caused considerable anxiety, affected formal employment motivation and behaviour, and contributed to a general feeling of disempowerment.

Shweder (2000) has emphasised, that the notions of economic development and associated work ideology are usually based on rarely questioned assumptions. He has proposed that the relationship between “globalisation” (the inter-linking of the world economies), “westernization” (the adoption of Western ideas, ideals, norms, institutions, and products) and economic growth is somewhat unclear. As such, considering economic potentiality and employment opportunities in remote Aboriginal Australia should not only focus on understanding what it is in Aboriginal life that is in tension with economic development but also involve a willingness to question the basic presuppositions of economic development itself.

Unfortunately, the dominant ideology and practice are so pervasive and powerful that accommodating difference on this scale is problematic. While listening to the smaller voice of Aboriginal people, particularly those residing in remote Australia, may occur on some levels and provide the opportunity for the development of creative responses, it is difficult to envisage in today’s political environment significant deviations from mainstream norms. Even with a change of Federal government occurring during my research, I found that little changed in the rhetoric surrounding Aboriginal employment and unemployment issues. So there may be little possibility of mainstream institutions accommodating difference and aiding in the development of creative and innovative employment responses on remote Aboriginal communities.

My research also indicated that inherent resistance (the desire for autonomy) within the Aboriginal community may influence the potential success of training, education and employment initiatives, even those with creative and innovative ingredients. For example, I have hypothesised that younger Aboriginal people in Ngukurr may -
through choosing a ‘social career’ that operates wholly within an Aboriginal domain – be strengthening their cultural, social and personal distance from mainstream Australian society. This expression of resistance, not only exhibited by ‘social career’ participants but also supported by older people’s construction of formal employment as a ‘white’ way of being, is firmly entrenched. Coming from a shared history of cultural oppression and disempowerment, it should be of no surprise that Aboriginal people in Ngukurr place considerable emphasis on maintaining and strengthening their interdependence and common identity. Yet, such conscious and unconscious resistance to mainstream expectations and values may come at a price, with initiatives directed at improving life circumstances being countervailed by the importance of maintaining and protecting contemporary expressions of group identity. In the face of overwhelming and unpredictable change, it is this shared identity that is at the heart of Aboriginal people’s continuing resilience.
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