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Money, Business and Culture: Issues for Aboriginal Economic Policy

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ABSTRACT

A central issue facing policy makers is how to meet principles of equity and social justice in access to economic benefits for Australia's diverse regional, ethnic and indigenous populations, while at the same time ensuring broad national goals of economic development are met. This issue is particularly complex in the case of Aboriginal people. A wide range of formal social statistical indicators demonstrate that while there are significant regional variations, Aboriginal populations across Australia are characterised by such factors as poor health and life expectancy, inferior living standards and low educational attainment, as well as having poor participation rates in the mainstream economy and significantly lower income levels. At the same time, whether they are in remote, rural or urban areas, Aboriginal people themselves assert the reality and legitimacy of their distinctive cultural values and systems, and this is recognised in many government policies and programs. The thrust of the arguments in this paper is that these distinctive values should not be seen as relating only to aspects of Aboriginal societies such as language, religion, or aesthetic and artistic traditions, but to 'economic' values and practices as well. The resilience of such beliefs and practices may well not be compatible with integration into the mainstream economy, through for example labour market participation or enterprise development.

This then brings into sharp relief a fundamental dilemma for policy makers and Aboriginal people alike: how to ensure that the goal of 'economic development' is not an unwitting tool for the assimilation of Aboriginal people into the mainstream society. This discussion paper proposes principles by which certain 'economic' aspects of Aboriginal culture and the impact of cash on Aboriginal social relations can be understood, and examines the implications of these principles for policy and program areas, particularly those under the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP).

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Foreword

This discussion paper, by Dr David Martin, is somewhat unusual for the CAEPR genre: it is based on completed and long-term ethnographic analysis undertaken at a remote Aboriginal community in north Australia. The paper reflects a recent trend in CAEPR research to further broaden the Centre's focus beyond what is already a wide interpretation of economic issues to highlight sociocultural factors that influence the contemporary economic lives of indigenous Australians. Many of these sociocultural factors are extremely difficult to incorporate into high level analyses, and hence remain invisible, yet they are often crucial for interpreting and understanding economic decision-making at regional and local levels.

In this paper, Dr Martin focuses specifically on the Aboriginal community economy, not in a quantitative manner that highlights production and output only, but in a broader way that examines the social relations that people establish to control the production, consumption and circulation of goods and services. The paper focuses on strategies that Aboriginal people have developed to incorporate cash into the indigenous domain. Dr Martin highlights how cash, and new institutions that circulate cash like gambling, and new organisational forms like enterprises, have been actively transformed by Aboriginal people to meet their own prerogatives, especially the key objective of accumulation of social capital. Two dichotomous tensions in contemporary Aboriginal society, which have important continuities with the past, are elegantly discussed. The first is the dynamic influence of autonomy and relatedness on social relations; the second is linked to the articulation between egalitarianism and demand sharing. The paper provides a provocative examination of the interactive relationship between community-level processes and the wider mainstream economy and the Australian state.

The paper ends by addressing a key policy issue that has permeated CAEPR research in the past five years: how can broad economic policy goals of equality be addressed, while at the same time recognising that indigenous priorities, especially in remote regions, might diverge from such goals? Dr Martin's paper provides a thoughtful and thought-provoking analysis of this issue from the perspective of one community. His research clearly demonstrates the multidisciplinary nature of CAEPR's approach. It also demonstrates the contribution that the discipline of social anthropology, based on the ethnographic method of direct observation and long-term fieldwork, can make to understanding indigenous social processes in all their diversity. Ultimately, policy formulation must be informed by such research if it is to be effective.

Jon Altman
Series Editor
November 1995

Introduction

The Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) was introduced under the Hawke Government in 1986/87. Since its inception, it has provided a major framework under which various Commonwealth agencies, particularly now the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET), have specific responsibilities for policy development and program delivery. This is in areas such as employment in indigenous-controlled community development programs (primarily through Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) schemes), enterprise development, and various labour market and training programs.¹ The policy focus of the AEDP has been the achievement of 'statistical equity', that is, equality with non-indigenous Australians as measured by standard social indicators relating to employment and income status (Altman and Sanders 1991a).

Much discussion about the AEDP and its constituent programs, particularly the CDEP scheme, has raised general concerns about the tradeoff between goals of economic equality on the one hand, and the recognition of indigenous cultural distinctiveness on the other (Altman 1987a; Altman and Sanders 1991a, 1991b; Finlayson 1995; Smith 1994). The paper, by exploring one particular case study in some ethnographic detail, argues that an understanding and recognition of distinctive economic aspects of indigenous cultures is crucial to policy and program development.

The ethnography centres upon a remote township in northern Australia, with a population of around 1,000 Aboriginal people and 50 or 60 non-Aboriginal residents, primarily service-deliverers. Geographically extremely isolated until recent years, and run until the late 1970s by a mission administration, it has since that time been increasingly exposed to the political, cultural, and economic forms of the dominant society.² Aboriginal people living in this region had little exposure to money throughout the mission years. Access to the basic necessities of life had essentially been predicated upon a system where people had exchanged compliance with the mission authorities, including a requirement to work, directly for food, shelter and other necessities. Money was not a medium in such exchanges to any significant extent, and consumer goods barely penetrated until the 1970s.

Along with the increasing exposure to the institutions of the wider Australian state from the late 1970s, there was a progressive monetisation of the Aboriginal domain, in this region as elsewhere. This was not only true of administrative and infrastructural funding, which escalated dramatically after the demise of the mission and the imposition of a form of mainstream local government in the late 1970s. Increasing amounts of

cash flowed to Aboriginal people in the region following the active program by the Commonwealth Department of Social Security from the mid 1970s, to ensure that all Aboriginal people who were entitled to social security benefits received them (Altman and Sanders 1991b; Sanders 1986). Although indigenous mechanisms of distribution and exchange continue to be distinctive features within the Aboriginal domain here, ultimately access to food and other necessities, to many of the services provided within the region, and to highly valued consumer goods, has become dependent upon cash.

By the mid 1980s, when research was initiated on the cash economy of this community, an average of \$50,000 net per week was received directly by Aboriginal people themselves, that is, was transferred into the 'Aboriginal domain' (Martin 1993: 81). This level of income has continued to the present time, with some \$75,000 per week being received by Aboriginal residents.³ For some, cash incomes are received as full-time wages, but most incomes are in the form of various government transfer payments or wages under the CDEP scheme, which have replaced the original unemployment benefits (Sanders 1988). Such payments are not predicated upon a notion of reciprocity, either within the Aboriginal domain or between Aboriginal people and the administrative regime as had been the case under the mission, but upon the rights of specific categories of individuals defined by the state, such as pensioners or supporting parents, to welfare incomes (see Collmann 1988; Finlayson 1991; Gerrard 1989: 99). The partial exception is work for the CDEP scheme, which is undertaken (albeit mostly in desultory fashion) for individual incomes essentially equivalent to unemployment benefits entitlements. Unlike work for the mission in the past however, labour is exchanged for cash, and expenditure by individuals is essentially discretionary in so far as the administration is concerned, apart from rent and other such payments.

The transition from the indigenous society as it had been late last century through to that of the late mission period in the 1960s, had seen significant changes to social and familial life. In this region, the mission had been relatively sympathetic to indigenous practices and beliefs. Nonetheless, here as elsewhere the missionaries had sought to supplant indigenous concepts of kin and family with those of Christianity, using the vehicle of the mission as extended family (see for example Finlayson 1991 and Attwood 1989 for discussions of this theme in other regions). The dormitory system in which Aboriginal children were raised and which was maintained in this township until the mid 1960s, was one important means by which these ends were to be achieved. The mission and dormitories also disrupted the 'promise' marriage system, which had served *inter alia* to establish and maintain relations between collectivities of people in the indigenous system rather than just between individuals as such.

Other changes had arisen through the processes of sedentarisation in the settlement itself, which was not simply a matter of people being 'settled' in the mission village, but also involved systematic attempts to replace indigenous beliefs and practices relating to social and geographic space with those of the dominant society (Morris 1989). More generally, the mission had sought to abstract the Aboriginal person from the matrix of links such as those of kinship and family, which were inherently *collective* in nature, and reformulate him or her as an *individual* in accordance with the beliefs and practices of the dominant society.

Thus, while the introduction of cash on a significant scale into the Aboriginal domain has been far from the sole factor underlying social and other changes in the past two decades, cash along with alcohol has had a profound impact upon indigenous society in this region. This paper delineates some of the broad parameters by which these impacts might be understood, and examines certain implications for key policy and program areas which flow from this. In so doing, I am adopting an approach which is tangential to those of, for example, Collmann and Finlayson. Collmann (1979) argues that the criteria adopted by the state in determining eligibility for welfare incomes, predicated as they are on familial and gender relations of the mainstream society, have contributed to major changes in Aboriginal domestic relations and structures. Finlayson (1989, 1991) examines the impact of welfare incomes on gender relations in a north Queensland near-urban community, arguing in part that the potential for such independent incomes to transform social relations and specifically to materially advantage women, is diffused by core cultural principles such as those which establish women as nurturers with a responsibility to care for dependants, particularly men.

This discussion paper however is concerned with two interrelated matters; firstly proposing principles by which certain 'economic' aspects of Aboriginal culture and the impact of cash on Aboriginal social relations can be understood, and secondly examining the implications of these principles for policy and program areas, particularly those under the AEDP. While the paper does not directly address the sometimes significant cash payments received from sources such as mining royalties in other areas of remote Australia, or the supplementary incomes from the sale of art and crafts (for example, Altman 1983, 1989; Kesteven 1984; Matsuyama 1991), it does set out to provide a framework within which certain dimensions of these impacts can be assessed.

The incorporation of cash into Aboriginal society

The transition from the pre-contact society to the contemporary one in this region, increasingly encapsulated as it is politically and economically within the dominant society, has seen profound changes. However, it

would be incorrect to portray Aboriginal people here as simply victims of forces beyond their control, passively accepting what the dominant society imposes on it. A vibrant cultural life is maintained, including the use of indigenous languages, mortuary and other ceremonies, and strong links to, and use of, people's ancestral lands. More importantly for the purposes of this paper, many of the political and economic forms and institutions of the dominant society itself have been incorporated into the indigenous system in ways which imbue them with particular meanings, and reflect contemporary indigenous values and priorities rather than those of the wider society. Cash provides one such instance, and before turning to a discussion of how cash has changed social and familial relations, its incorporation and transformation within the Aboriginal domain will be examined.

In the wider Australian society, and indeed in the increasingly global economy, money integrates otherwise disparate processes in a multitude of domains. In its construction and uses, money is necessarily linked to the dominant sphere of market exchange; in fact it is not analytically separable from it, and its further uses such as in gifts and other interpersonal exchanges or in governmental transfer payments, are subservient to this mode. In the standard formulation, in an economy of this nature money serves as medium of exchange, mode of payment, as unit of account and as a store of wealth. As Simmel has expressed it:

As a visible object, money is the substance that embodies abstract economic value ... If the economic value of objects is constituted by their mutual relationship of exchangeability, then money is the autonomous expression of this relationship. Money is the representative of abstract value. (It) is a specific realisation of what is common to economic objects (Simmel 1978 (1900): 120).

In this formulation then, money not only mediates but serves to *represent* relations between objects, and to *objectify* relations between persons. In Simmel's words it:

... is conducive to the removal of the personal element from human relationships through its indifferent and objective nature (Simmel 1978 (1900): 297).

Within the Aboriginal domain in this remote settlement however, the potential for money to objectify relations in this manner is attenuated, through what Sansom (1988) in writing of Darwin fringe dwellers aptly terms a resistance to 'monetisation of the mind'. This paper now turns to an examination of the mechanisms by which this occurs, as a means of understanding core indigenous 'economic' cultural values. The processes through which this resistance to money objectifying and depersonalising social relationships takes place can be best understood, it is suggested, as resulting from the particular tension in Aboriginal society between individual autonomy on the one hand and relatedness on the other.

Autonomy and relatedness

Much of the earlier literature on Aboriginal social, economic and political organisation emphasised bounded, supposedly corporate entities such as 'tribes' and 'clans' as the bases upon which indigenous societies were constructed. Hiatt (1987) provides a useful review article of the move in anthropology from analyses based upon these structures to those concentrating more on social process. Myers' (1986) important studies on Western Desert Pintupi, like those of Sansom (1980, 1988) on Darwin fringe dwellers, mark a significant move towards an understanding of Aboriginal social organisation as fundamentally characterised by its fluidity, negotiability, and indeterminacy. Myers argues that for Pintupi, a tension between the autonomy of the individual on the one hand and relatedness on the other (as expressed for Pintupi in shared identity through relations to land and of kinship for example), provides a fundamental dynamic to all social relations and interactions.

It could of course be argued that this tension exists to varying degrees in all human groups. However, Aboriginal societies are typically highly fluid and negotiable in nature and intensely egalitarian. They are characterised simultaneously by a strong emphasis on individuality and self-reliance on the one hand, and on the other by the primacy accorded to the web of social relations within which individuals operate (especially those defined in terms of kinship and family).⁴ This paper suggests that for such highly egalitarian societies, an account of the particular ways in which the tension between individual autonomy and relatedness is manifested in social practices can assist in understanding the impact of cash on social relations, and the nature of particular 'economic' dimensions of Aboriginal culture.

The high stress on individual autonomy is a feature which a number of contemporary writers have identified in Aboriginal societies (for example Martin 1993; Myers 1986; Sutton 1978; von Sturmer 1978). Amongst the Aboriginal people with which this paper is concerned, there is an omnipresent stress on personal distinctiveness at virtually all levels of social practice, including in arguments, gossip, and public rhetoric (Martin 1993: 12; Sutton 1978: 161-2). Attempts by others (Aboriginal or otherwise) to control people here are, in general, fiercely opposed, and there is a pervasive resistance to the imposition of authority and the establishment of new hierarchies.

Furthermore, contrary to the received wisdom which portrays Aboriginal people (in remote areas at least) as disinterested in contemporary material items, cash and consumer goods such as boats and vehicles are the subject of considerable interest and indeed, on occasion, enormous passion. Such resources - most particularly cash - offer unprecedented possibilities to extend personal autonomy through their accumulation, and considerable

effort is expended by many people in developing strategies to maximise access to them.⁵

Nonetheless, while there is an all-pervasive emphasis on personal autonomy and a distinctive equalitarianism asserted by Aboriginal people of this region, in common with other Aboriginal groups a central importance is accorded to relatedness defined through particular forms of shared identity with others. These forms include shared connections to traditional lands, ritual cult and language affiliations, and perhaps most importantly in connections to others expressed through the relations of kinship and marriage. For the Aboriginal people of the region, kinship informs social practices at a more fundamental level than is the case in many other areas of remote Aboriginal Australia, where additional factors such as clan or moiety and section affiliation can be significant in social, political and economic life, as well as in religious practice. In this community for example, most residential and other groupings, including those within which distribution and exchange take place are comprised of groups of closely related kin and agnates (Martin 1993).

Kinship is not simply an abstract set of genealogically based linkages between individuals. Relatedness itself, and its emotional dimensions, are substantiated and perceived by these Aboriginal people in terms of flows of valued items, both intangible (as in the showing of respect or sorrow) and tangible (as in the giving of food or cash). The concepts of love, nurturance, respect and obligation have approximate counterparts in the Aboriginal languages of this area, but above all else it is in the distribution and exchange of material items such as food, consumer goods, and particularly cash, that they are manifested.

Like so much of social relations for these Aboriginal people, such processes are encoded in the formal structures of kinship, in terms of the system of kin categories by which people are linked, and the associated normative rights and obligations between them. These structures are realised in mundane social life in the interactions and the flows of goods and of services between kin. Simultaneously, kinship relations are themselves reproduced by the exchanges and distributions between people. Conversely, a refusal by a relation to share, or the receipt of a perceived inadequate share from them, is seen as a denial of relatedness, of one's rights and interests in that relatedness, and as a denial of a set of norms and values culturally understood and represented as self-evident.

Aboriginal social relations can thus be characterised as requiring constant validation through the flows of services and material resources between individuals who watchfully monitor them to ensure equality. In such a fluid and negotiable system, relatedness between individuals and indeed collectivities can never be taken for granted. Rather, it must be constantly

validated and recreated through social interaction, particularly through the flows of resources. This 'performative sociality' is central to the ways in which these Aboriginal people use cash, with relatedness needing to be constantly reaffirmed and demonstrated through the flows of services and material items between kin.⁶

Usually, people only proffer money for services sought from those outside their own active kin network. That is, while people will offer cash for services to those who are in other kin groups, they will almost never do so to close 'family'. Nonetheless, even where cash is used as exchange for labour or other services, there is rarely the formal calculation of the amount of money involved according to some objective set of relationships between money, goods and labour, as there is with the wider market system. That is, labour is not commodified by cash within the internal indigenous economy. Rather, the calculation is in terms of subjective and conditional assessments by individuals of the current status of their relationship with the other person or group.

This process of social calculation correlates only in broad terms with kin distance, in that people's monitoring of the flows of goods and services becomes less calculating for close relations. This is the phenomenon for which Sahlins (1972: 193-210) advanced his model of 'generalised reciprocity' between close kin, 'balanced reciprocity' or direct exchange between more distant ones, and 'negative reciprocity' (the attempt to get something for nothing) at the other extreme. In reality, the situation in this Aboriginal society is far more complex and conditioned by a host of factors, including personal preferences and histories, the ages and genders of those concerned, and other such contingencies. There is for instance asymmetry in the flows between Aboriginal men and women in the favour of men, and women are in general more generous for their male kin than they are for female relations.⁷

The exchanges of material and intangible items such as cash, food, alcohol, labour and etiquette, not only underpin and affirm relationships of amicability, mutual sharing, and cooperation, but indeed mark social differentiation and separateness. Within the Aboriginal domain, whether or not cash is exchanged for access to others' consumer goods, services or labour, and the amounts of cash involved in the transactions, are dependent upon contextual assessments of the social worth of the proposed transaction, rather than its formal economic value. In such a system, money is no longer the object of formal calculation governed by the impersonal principles of the market place. On the contrary, it is transformed within the Aboriginal domain, becoming more the subject of contingent social calculation and a means through which a distinctive order is stamped upon the world (see also Peterson 1991; Sansom 1980).

'Egalitarianism' and demand sharing

I have argued elsewhere (Martin 1993) that the ethos which has been glossed in hunter-gatherer groups as 'equality' or 'egalitarianism' (see, for example, Woodburn 1982) does not flow from a rights-based model of humanity that sees all people as inherently equal, but rather from one articulated by individuals which asserts that they are equal to all others. This more accurately characterised 'assertive egalitarianism' involves a rejection of the right of others to infringe upon one's own autonomy, and in this region is encapsulated in the pervasive statement, 'Nobody is boss for me, I am boss for myself!'

'Equality' for the Aboriginal people of this region is not an elaborated discourse, abstracted from everyday practice, concerning the moral or existential equivalence of individuals. Rather, it is realised through the pragmatic and contextual negotiation of equivalent status between individuals in their shared activities. In particular, the potential for resources, both tangible and intangible, to establish enduring hierarchies is watchfully monitored. From early childhood, Aboriginal people of this region learn to observe and appraise the flows of resources towards themselves in comparison with those to others around them, particularly cash, but also food, consumer goods, access to vehicles and attention and affection from kin. As Aboriginal people express it here, people should be 'shoulders together', not one higher than the other. Transactions between individuals and groups over time should be equivalent, and perceived imbalances arouse strong feelings amongst adults and children alike. These feelings manifest themselves in such practices amongst children as endemic teasing and fighting, and amongst adults in gossip and in disparagement of others which often lead to outright confrontation and violence. Such views also frequently lead to a refusal to recognise the authority and rights to control resources of those, Aboriginal or otherwise, who have prominent positions in indigenous organisations, and the status and legitimacy of those bodies.

What has been glossed as 'egalitarianism' then consists of the forceful assertion of equality between individuals through social transactions being represented as equivalent, even in fact when objectively they are not. This portrayal contrasts with discussions of Aboriginal Australian and other 'hunter-gatherer' societies which stresses their cooperative nature, the lack of competition, and the presence of a strong sharing and generosity ethic (see also Peterson 1993; Schwab 1995). This discourse, based more on Rousseauian notions of pre-industrial peoples than on detailed observations of actual social practices, has in turn been incorporated into wider contemporary Aboriginal political rhetoric and into public expressions by Aboriginal people across Australia of what distinctively constitutes their culture and society.⁸

Thus, Aboriginal people of this region distinguish themselves from Europeans in claiming that the latter do not share resources outside their immediate households. They contrast such characteristics unfavourably with their own, represented in terms of a generalised willingness and obligation to share. Certainly, it is the case that sharing between Aboriginal people of this region is not generalised at all, but largely takes place through ego-centred kin networks within broader groupings such as regional associations. However, while there may be self-interest and strategising in the giving, it is important to recognise that 'sharing' for these people is more than simply a cultural rationalisation.

At the same time, Aboriginal people of the region in question explicitly recognise the role of pressure in the sharing of resources, and use elaborate strategies to attempt to circumvent it. These strategies are rarely successful in the longer term however, because of the extreme pressure brought to bear on those with resources. In fact, much social transaction (including that of material resources such as food, tobacco, alcohol, and cash) arises as the result of demanding rather than of sharing. In demanding, an individual is asserting their personal right (as a son, an aunt, a clansman and so forth) to a response from others, but is also acknowledging, and thus through their actions substantiating, their relationship with the other person. Peterson (1993) has argued that such 'demand sharing' underlies much of social transaction in Aboriginal societies. It can be understood as one instance of a wider set of actions which can be characterised as 'testing behaviours' (Martin 1993; Peterson 1993); as argued above, not even the most nominally basic of relationships can be taken for granted, but must be constantly reaffirmed and recreated.

I suggest that it is fruitful to see such practices in terms of the essentially unresolved tension between autonomy and relatedness which provides their social dynamic. Thus, 'demanding' behaviour cannot simply be explained as unproblematically arising from individual desires for given resources; people do not ask for food just because of hunger, for example, or for cash only because they require it for the necessities of life.⁹ If demanding of others is exercising a form of autonomy, fundamental to the symbolic importance of these material items is their implication in the production and reproduction of the Aboriginal social world, particularly through their centrality in establishing relatedness. For, in making demands of others, Aboriginal people are explicitly seeking to assert and test their place within the social world, and to impose an order on it in which the potential of these goods to create and sustain hierarchies is challenged. These goods are thus 'decommodified', that is incorporated into an indigenous domain in which their values are not determined primarily as commodities within the market system, but in their capacity to sustain and inform social relations (Gerrard 1989; Sansom 1980).

Gambling

The incorporation of cash into Aboriginal society can be clearly seen in the primary economic activity within the indigenous domain in this township: card games involving large sums of cash, often thousands of dollars. Although gambling, like drinking, uses a medium appropriated from the dominant society, it is essentially organised and conducted by Aboriginal people themselves within their domain. Like so much of Aboriginal life, gambling is almost always public, highly fluid in terms of social composition and location, often noisy and disputatious, and constructs a complex social phenomenon from a simple technical base, in this case a limited repertoire of relatively unsophisticated card games.

Both Altman (1987b: 163-8) and Goodale (1987: 19) portray gambling as an adaptation to contemporary settlement life which is embedded within distinctive modes of Aboriginal practice, in contrast to the Berndts who over 40 years earlier saw gambling as a major contributory factor in the collapse of Aboriginal society (Berndt and Berndt 1947). Altman analyses it as a response to the increasing amounts of cash available following the introduction of welfare and other payments to a western Arnhem Land outstation community which he studied. In his view it is:

... a mode of distributing cash. It seems to function fairly effectively both as a redistributive mechanism and as a mechanism that facilitates small-scale capital accumulation (Altman 1987b: 168).

Gambling certainly serves these purposes. However, it is also important to examine phenomena such as gambling and drinking in terms of basic principles and existential dilemmas which continue to underlie social forms in Aboriginal societies, albeit in often vastly changed circumstances.

Firstly, gambling, like drinking, is a *collective* activity; in the sense that the games are public, involve a significant proportion of the Aboriginal population, and draw upon and collectivise resources (in particular cash and time) from disparate individuals and households. As such, it is a practice which stands in structural opposition to those of the dominant society, which are based on individual rights and property (see also Morris 1989: 147-9). Furthermore, internal hierarchies and divisions (including those between age groups and between genders) can be replaced for the duration of the game at least with egalitarian relations amongst the whole group of players.

Secondly, gambling is a means by which Aboriginal people can manage social relationships in situations of high stress. The original indigenous social forms and practices evolved in contexts where much of life took place in small fluid groups of closely linked kin, and once the number of people having to interact with each other on a long-term basis increases to more than 20 or 30, tensions rise significantly. A significant factor

underlying the high levels of conflict within the contemporary township is what McKnight (1986) calls the 'relational density', the relatively very large numbers of Aboriginal people living in close proximity. Gambling allows the complexities and ambiguities in relationships between people in such townships, such as taboos, resentments, hostilities and obligations, to be temporarily avoided and submerged in an almost ritualised context of enjoyment and even euphoria.

It is through specific social practices such as gambling that cash is transformed, and assimilated to Aboriginal social processes and purposes. They are thus core means through which the potential for money to radically change indigenous society is partly at least attenuated. Furthermore, while material resources such as cash can be utilised in attempts to increase individual autonomy, the particular construction of relatedness in terms of flows of material as well as intangible resources, together with the forceful emphasis on equality, means that there is intense pressure to distribute them. Despite the availability of cash and consumer goods on a hitherto unprecedented scale, wealth for the Aboriginal people of this region continues to lie primarily in social forms of capital, especially people, and ultimately what are accumulated, managed and contested in their domain are not material resources so much as social relationships.

Aboriginal 'business'

In common with many other areas of Aboriginal Australia, there is a domain of practices in this region which Aboriginal people themselves refer to as 'business', which involves such matters as the organisation and control of ritual, politicking about land and sites, and the strategies to acquire or control socially prestigious resources - particularly cash. In the mid 1970s, a number of Aboriginal entrepreneurs in the region successfully sought loans from the then Aboriginal Development Corporation (ADC) for equipment such as saddles, bridles, stock whips, boots and other equipment.¹⁰ The ADC advanced the loans on the basis that the individuals and their respective groups would each establish their own enterprises based on mustering and marketing cattle from their traditional estates, which lie within the Aboriginal-held lands of the region. Intense interest was evinced in the scheme by many men, with a series of discussions and negotiations held between several clan groups at which arrangements were agreed upon regarding mustering certain areas jointly and the labour and material support which each cooperating group would provide.

Few cattle were ever mustered by these groups, in part because of the almost insurmountable difficulties in coopting younger Aboriginal men from each group to accept the authority of the older men and undertake the necessary physical labour, and also in no small part because most groups

did not have critical infrastructure, including horses on which to put the saddles (Martin 1984). Other Aboriginal entrepreneurs at various times attempted to establish family-based enterprises within the township, such as small stores selling leather goods or confectionery and soft drinks, and a small general store on one outstation. These small enterprises, like those proposed to muster cattle, formed focal points for sociality within the groups running them, and for the unceasing struggle over status between them and others. They all failed, usually after quite short periods of operation, in that the income from sales failed to meet costs. Non-Aboriginal staff saw these failures as resulting from the inability of the individuals concerned and their kin to manage money, to understand the technical notions of profit, markups on cost price and other such matters, and to withstand demands from kin to share the resources that needed to be reinvested in the businesses to make them commercially viable.

These arguably were relevant factors. However, these Aboriginal enterprises had little to do with financial profit, material productivity or commercial viability in the western business sense, although those establishing them certainly legitimated their actions to non-Aboriginals in terms of making a living and becoming independent of welfare incomes. In the wider society, 'business' is situated within the market system, underpinned by and evaluated against the objective institution of money, and notions like 'profit' are specifically constituted as objective indicators of performance and relative efficiency within that system.

Aboriginal business on the other hand is *personalised* business, embedded within the matrix of social, political and economic relationships of the Aboriginal domain, and the indigenous currency against which its success is evaluated is not primarily commercial viability and cash profits, but rather social viability and social capital. Equally, while work in the mainstream economy is primarily valued in terms of its productivity and efficiency assessed against objective measures, what is considered 'work' within the Aboriginal domain is typically concerned with such indigenous goals as sociality, balancing the complex system of social debt and obligation, establishing and maintaining political relations, and ritual preparation and performance.¹¹

Thus, the resources that are invested by Aboriginal people of this region in their enterprises (labour, time, creativity, government grants and loans and equipment such as saddles or vehicles) are not primarily used to develop a capital base for reinvestment, expansion, and material productivity, but in the accumulation of social capital.¹² The Aboriginal enterprises described above which failed in commercial terms, nonetheless for their duration served to produce wealth in the form of relationships and alliances in a world that was fluid, contingent, and demanding of unceasing constitution through the flows of services and of material resources.

Transformations of Aboriginal social relations by cash

While money is transformed within the Aboriginal domain, so too does it transform social, political and economic relationships with profound implications for the manner in which Aboriginal society is produced and reproduced. Some dimensions of these transformations, particularly as they relate to social and familial relationships, will now be examined.

I have argued above that the tension between the autonomous individual and the wider collectivity provides a basic dynamic to Aboriginal social forms and processes. While autonomy can be realised in part through the control of intangible and material resources, relatedness is substantiated through flows of these same items (including cash) between individuals and collectivities.

Thus, while the introduction of money as such in relatively limited contexts in the latter years of the mission era had not of itself created fundamental changes, the development of a cash-based economy based on welfare payments from the mid 1970s did. This is not simply a matter of demands being created in an analytically unproblematic fashion by the increased availability of consumer goods, vehicles, alcohol and the like. As Douglas and Isherwood (1978: 59) have observed, commodities are not simply needed for subsistence or for competitive display, but '(make) visible and stable the categories of culture'.¹³ More critically, with virtually all Aboriginal people having ready access to cash incomes if they so choose, through social security payments or CDEP scheme employment, money offers a powerful medium through which the basic themes of autonomy and relatedness can be played out in the flux of daily life.

When Aboriginal people in this region still primarily lived out bush rather than in the settlement, access by each person to the basic necessities of life had been dependent upon the complex human/landscape association expressed in the land tenure system. This access had been mediated through relationships of exchange and distribution, over which had been superimposed such factors as restrictions on consumption of specific items occasioned by particularities of age, ritual status, seniority and so forth. Under the mission regime, a form of quasi-personalised reciprocity had been established in which Aboriginal people exchanged compliance with the requirements of the missionaries (to work, to send their children to the dormitories and to school, to attend church, and so forth) in return for access to basic needs such as food and shelter, within the mission settlement at least.

The township itself had in the past been associated for Aboriginal people with the persona of the missionaries (and secondarily with the few other staff). In the contemporary township however, staff essentially interact with Aboriginal people in terms of their formal work roles, and no such

personalised reciprocity or social relationships of any depth exist between them. Paradoxically therefore, despite the increasing penetration of the institutions of the wider state into Aboriginal society in even this remote region, Aboriginal people have a higher degree of autonomy from non-Aboriginal staff at the level of day-to-day interaction than in the past.¹⁴

In contrast with the mission system, and with that operating in the past in many areas in the pastoral industry, the advent of the welfare-based cash economy has meant that access to cash incomes and to the goods and services they can purchase is no longer directly mediated through any such system of personalised relationships, either with administration staff or most significantly within the Aboriginal domain.¹⁵ Rather, it is predicated upon a person's rights as a citizen of the wider state in a particular category which is defined by the state, not from within the terms of the indigenous society itself. People are thus increasingly able to assert their independence from others through the means which cash offers: men from responsibilities towards their domestic units, wives from their spouses and children, and younger men from older ones.

It is not just that having an independent cash income allows individuals the choice to obtain basic necessities such as food outside the network of reciprocal rights and obligations of the Aboriginal domain. Especially in the case of men, it enables them to become involved as relatively autonomous actors in establishing credit and prestige, through such means as the direct distribution of cash from their wages, the purchase and sharing of alcohol, and the distribution of gambling winnings. Many young men in particular use the bulk of their CDEP scheme incomes for gambling, purchasing alcohol, and travel.

Of course, having spent all their money young men are dependent upon others for their basic sustenance, and these others are usually women - their mothers, grandmothers, and older sisters. This is not just a case of young men exchanging as it were dependence upon senior men in the past for access to valued knowledge, for dependence upon women for material items in the contemporary situation. Women's nurturance of men is expressed through the provision of support, care and physical sustenance for them. The capacity of men to draw upon the intangible resource of women's affections for and bonds with them in order to appropriate their labour and money, reduces the potential of women's independent cash incomes to generate increasing autonomy and independence.¹⁶

The ready availability of cash therefore, particularly through welfare payments, is one critical factor in the rupturing of relations between older and younger men, since neither access to cash nor its use needs to be mediated by senior generations. The pervasive construction in Aboriginal societies of older generations nurturing or 'looking after' younger ones

(Myers 1986), in part by passing on valued knowledge and practices in return for respect and deference, is no longer objectively possible under such conditions. For young Aboriginal people, critical contemporary sources of value increasingly lie in material and intangible forms incorporated from the dominant society, such as cash and consumer goods, rather than in those originating essentially in the indigenous domain.

A significant proportion of men's expenditure in this township is on alcohol. Much of the alcohol consumption in the township and most of the drinking trips to regional centres involve men almost exclusively; that is, considerable proportions of their own incomes as well as gambling winnings are being used to finance activities whose values and meanings lie largely within an essentially male domain, and not within the indigenous domestic one. Such activities and income allocations, together with their ability to draw upon the labour and sustenance of female kin, allows men to carve out effectively autonomous domains of practices; that is, men's access to cash incomes allows them to create a contemporary style of life defined in opposition to that of women and the requirements and demands of the domestic sphere.

In this sense, cash (like alcohol) is implicated in the increasing ability of men to assert their autonomy collectively *vis a vis* women, just as it enables young men to assert their independence from older generations. However, most particularly within these domains, the strong emphasis on equality and the relentless pressure on those with resources, attenuates the potential of money and consumer goods purchased with it to create either lasting hierarchies or real personal autonomy.

Furthermore, the ready availability of cash has major consequences for the manner in which nurturing relationships with children are expressed. Unlike mainstream Australian society where most expenditure for children is done on their behalf by adults, principally parents, Aboriginal children in this region directly and indirectly control a significant (although difficult to quantify) segment of the cash economy through their own expenditure. Children have a high degree of personal autonomy; they have a right to be given or to demand money, and those who have responsibility for them have the obligation to give it. In fact by distributing valued cash directly to a child who has reached the age of effective independence from its mother (around three or four years old), a woman is both discharging her nurturing responsibilities and accepting the right of the child to make autonomous choices about the allocation of resources. The consequent increasing disengagement of parents from direct responsibility for the care and nurturing of their children is a significant change in child-rearing practices with major implications for the manner in which this society is being reproduced.

Summary: cash, autonomy and relatedness

A key dynamic underlying much of Aboriginal social process in this remote region is the tension between autonomy and relatedness, and cash provides a powerful new medium through which these themes can be played out. If autonomy can be sought through accumulation, relatedness is realised through distribution. Cash allows for the expression of autonomy in its accumulation and use in the purchase of for example alcohol, airline tickets, consumer goods and vehicles, in a manner quite unprecedented in indigenous society.

Yet, anyone who attempts to circumvent ideals of sharing material resources and to accrue capital or maintain exclusive control and use of a resource, is subjected to intense pressure and even violence. In the fundamental world of relatedness, Aboriginal people almost inevitably succumb to the pressure to distribute cash and other material resources. Material accumulation itself poses major dilemmas for Aboriginal people of this region; if jealousy is occasioned by others' attempted accumulation of material capital, its counterpart is the discovery by the accumulator that a surplus brings intolerable demands to share.¹⁷

In the light of the above discussion, it can be seen that small Aboriginal-run enterprises and gambling are primary collective practices surrounding money: they are not so much means of accumulating capital nor of distributing cash, as of accumulating, maintaining and managing social relationships. They thus serve to transform surplus cash above that required to maintain very basic subsistence levels into social capital. This I suggest is the locus of what writers such as Sahlins (1972) have labelled the 'anti-surplus principle' in so-called 'primitive' economies. As it stands, Sahlins' formulation has the cultural basis of the principle set firmly in the domain of 'economic' practices. I would argue that for Aboriginal people, the principle lies not in the economic domain as such, but in that of a performative social world in which relatedness must be continually maintained and substantiated by the constant flows of goods and services.

It is not just the bureaucratic, administrative, politico-legal and commercial institutions of the wider society which impact on encapsulated groups such as these remote Aboriginal people. Cash, that taken-for-granted medium, has the most profound consequences right at the core of everyday life in remote Aboriginal society, as indeed it has for the wider one.

My argument in this paper has been that, central to the particular ways in which the Aboriginal people of this remote community have incorporated cash, consumer goods, and notions of 'business', is what I have termed a 'performative sociality' in which social relations are unceasingly realised through the flows of services and material items between individuals and groups. Money then is less the object of formal calculation governed by the

impersonal principles of the mainstream market place. On the contrary, it becomes the subject of contingent social calculation, a means through which a distinctive order is stamped upon the Aboriginal social world. At the same time, it provides a powerful medium through which the tension between autonomy and relatedness can be played out within the Aboriginal domain, with major consequences for the relations between the sexes and between the generations. If money is transformed within the Aboriginal domain, so too it transforms Aboriginal social relations, with profound implications.

Policy implications

A central issue facing Australian policy makers is how to meet principles of equity and social justice in access to economic benefits for its diverse regional, ethnic and indigenous populations, while at the same time meeting broad national goals of economic development. This issue is particularly complex in the case of Aboriginal people. Most formal social indicators unequivocally demonstrate that while there are significant regional variations, Aboriginal populations across Australia are characterised by poor health and life expectancy, low living standards and limited educational attainment, as well as poor participation rates in the mainstream economy and significantly lower income levels (for summaries, see for example Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1995; Daly 1995; Jones 1994; Taylor 1993).

At the same time, whether they are in remote, rural or urban areas, Aboriginal people themselves assert the reality and legitimacy of their distinctive cultural values and systems, and this is recognised in many government policies and programs, such as those supporting the Aboriginal homelands movement. The thrust of the arguments in this paper is that these distinctive values should not be seen as relating only to aspects of Aboriginal societies such as language, religion, or aesthetic and artistic traditions, but to 'economic' values and practices as well. While the focus here has been on the people of a remote Aboriginal township, there is evidence also for distinctive Aboriginal economic modes in rural and urban Australia (for example Sansom 1980; Schwab 1995; Smith 1994, 1995). Such beliefs and practices may well be incompatible with integration into the mainstream economy, through labour market participation or enterprise development, for example (see also Altman 1987a; Altman and Sanders 1991a: 10; Rowse 1992: 81; Smith 1994).

This then brings into sharp relief a fundamental dilemma for policy makers and Aboriginal people alike: how to ensure that the goal of 'economic development' is not an unwitting tool for the assimilation of Aboriginal people into the mainstream society.

A recent major review of the AEDP (ATSIC 1994) sees its central challenge over the remainder of the decade as delivering increasing growth in indigenous employment which is characterised by higher skill levels, greater training opportunities, and greater occupation and industry diversity. While supporting the essential thrust of the AEDP, the review recognises that it has had an unrealistic emphasis on achieving statistical equity and has not taken account of the diversity of circumstances and aspirations of indigenous peoples. It recommends that AEDP objectives and targets should be reformulated to take account of this diversity of circumstances, and explicitly recognises that economic integration is not necessarily the desired outcome or indeed the realistic choice for a proportion of indigenous people. The review observes:

... statistical equity is not the appropriate framework against which to measure the success or failure of the AEDP. The importance of statistical equity measures is to indicate the different income and employment outcomes achieved by indigenous people in relation to the total population; the imponderable is the extent to which the outcome is in fact desired, or a reflection of lack of choice (ATSIC 1994: 60).

It can be argued therefore that the AEDP review recognises, to some extent at least, the core policy issue identified above; the potential incommensurability (for some indigenous groups at least) between participation in the formal mainstream economy and the maintenance of distinctive economic and other aspects of their cultures.

However, to respond to this challenge with a change in focus towards regionalism and regionally-based indigenous economic development (ATSIC 1995) runs the risk of assuming that indigenous regional diversity is primarily a function of factors such as locational advantages and disadvantages, labour force participation rates, the availability and skills of the workforce, and other such formal aspects of regional economies. This paper argues that on the contrary, a fundamental measure of regional diversity potentially lies in the economic dimensions and values of its indigenous cultures. While the focus here has been on a remote community, there is also evidence of a distinctive 'economic' domain of indigenous values and practices in urban and rural communities (Smith 1994, 1995).

An implication of this argument is that for particular regions or indigenous societies, there may be significant incompatibilities between core government policy objectives of indigenous economic development, self-determination, and the recognition of indigenous cultural values and priorities (Altman 1987a; Coombs et al. 1989; Sanders 1991).

For example, under the AEDP there is a major focus on the development of Aboriginal controlled enterprises, through such schemes as ATSIC's Community Enterprise Initiatives Scheme (CEIS) and Business Funding Scheme (BFS), as well as through CDEP schemes. In many areas of

Aboriginal Australia, if the force of the arguments in this paper are accepted, the present AEDP vision for such enterprises may be ignoring Aboriginal notions of what 'doing business' is in fact about. It is arguable that it is this policy failure, rather than just an absence of skills and formal training amongst indigenous people themselves, which is a significant factor in the very high failure rate (87 per cent) of ATSIC funded indigenous enterprises identified by the Office of Evaluation and Audit (OEA). In its evaluation of ATSIC's Enterprise Program in fact, OEA argued that the Program had failed to meet its objectives, and that there was a strong case for terminating it (OEA 1991). The challenge for policy makers in this regard is whether it is possible to facilitate the development of indigenous enterprises which are commercially viable, but at the same time enable distinctive Aboriginal values relating to such matters as work practices and relations, hierarchy and authority, the distribution of profits, and more broadly social viability, to be realised.

Equally, particular challenges are posed for the CDEP scheme by the necessity to balance the potentially competing imperatives established under principles of equity and social justice on the one hand, and the recognition of indigenous cultural values and priorities on the other. Equity demands that unemployed indigenous people have the right to the same basic level of income as that which would be provided through the welfare system. The arguments in this paper suggest that cash, in the form of individual incomes, can have profound consequences for indigenous family and social relations, which potentially compromise the viability of particular aspects of remote indigenous society. It is also suggested that Aboriginal people may value and use cash incomes in ways that significantly differ from those of the mainstream society, in part through mechanisms such as demand sharing.

Clearly, to argue for the replacement of individual incomes by some other form of income support would not be 'policy realism' (Altman and Sanders 1991a) and could be discriminatory. However, there is considerable scope for the development of creative strategies and processes in the implementation of CDEP schemes, which draw upon and reinforce indigenous social, political and economic structures and values rather than compromising them. CDEP schemes should not be seen as primarily providing a pathway to employment in the mainstream labour market, a goal which is neither realistic in many regions nor desired by many indigenous people. Rather, their potential to establish a realm where indigenous priorities relating to such matters as the social value of work should be recognised and explicitly supported at the policy and program levels.

As one example, regional or sub-regional schemes could be developed which maintain the requirements for economies of scale and financial

accountability which the wider administrative system demands, but which maximise the devolution of responsibility and control to the smaller family or locally based groups which typically constitute indigenous society. Such schemes, in which the work and other processes through which cash incomes are received could be more closely integrated with indigenous values and practices, would be less likely to compromise indigenous social relations than highly centralised ones where CDEP incomes tend more to be seen as essentially 'welfare' incomes.¹⁸

More broadly, the very notion of 'economic development' which underpins much government policy in this area needs careful examination in relation to indigenous societies. The arguments presented in this paper suggest that there is an economic arena within contemporary indigenous societies which is linked to that of the mainstream society, but which nonetheless is comprised of distinctive values and practices. This indigenous economic realm is one in which social capital, rather than financial or other forms of material resources, is typically given primacy. This then suggests that 'economic development' should be understood as a process through which financial and other material resources can be brought to bear on maintaining and enhancing the viability of indigenous societies, rather than as one concerned primarily with developing infrastructure, increasing wealth, and so forth. In the specific case of enterprise development, Aboriginal people's strong emphasis on sociality and on maintaining kinship and other social relations, should be valued as a legitimate and core dimension of business structures and objectives, and not simply as a peripheral concern.

Finally, remote indigenous societies are confronted with a range of internal factors such as poor education and skill levels, and relatively high birthrates and consequent high proportions of younger people. There are also factors located more within the mainstream society such as the increasing requirement for skilled rather than unskilled labour coupled with existing severe locational disadvantages created by residence in remote regions. In such circumstances, indigenous employment and income levels are by any objective assessment likely to remain intractable problems, and goals of economic self-sufficiency and development unrealistic (Altman 1987a, 1990; Altman and Sanders 1991a).

In such circumstances, the challenge for policy makers, and for Aboriginal people themselves, is to make creative use of the objective reality of dependency upon transfer payments in such a manner that indigenous social and cultural viability is enhanced, rather than compromised.

Notes

1. Altman and Sanders (1991b) provide a brief historical account of policy development in this area.
2. This paper is based on research conducted between 1985 and 1988 towards a doctoral thesis (Martin 1993). The identity of the township concerned is not specified in this paper, in part to preserve the anonymity of the Aboriginal people concerned, but also because the processes discussed are in the view of the writer typical of those in remote and rural Aboriginal Australia.
3. Allowing for inflation, total cash income to Aboriginal residents has been almost constant over the period in question.
4. Discussion in this paper concentrates on Aboriginal people in the more remote areas of Australia. However, urban Aboriginal society has also been portrayed as highly egalitarian, with an emphasis on self-reliance and individual autonomy coexisting with a high stress on the networks of kin and family within which individuals are embedded (for example, Sansom 1980; Finlayson 1991)
5. Although, arguably, such material resources compromise collective Aboriginal autonomy from the state.
6. Sansom (1988) adopted the term 'performative kinship', applied by Goody (1982) of Inuit, in writing of the essential fluidity and negotiability of relationships amongst Darwin fringe dwellers; see also Myers (1986: 163).
7. Altman (1987b: 129) notes of Gunwinggu outstation dwellers in western Arnhem Land that it is a truism that people are more altruistic in their dealings with close kin, but kinship is only one factor influencing distribution of and access to resources; others such as seasonal factors and co-residence are also crucial. Anderson (1984) makes similar observations of Kuku-Yalanji people of Wujalwujal in south-eastern Cape York.
8. Keefe (1988) discusses the claimed ethic of 'caring and sharing', along with such other qualities as a spiritual connection with the land, as essential elements of Aboriginal discourse defining the commonalities of culture inherited by all people of Aboriginal descent.
9. In this regard, Gerrard (1989) has provided an insightful analysis of the demanding of money and services from Europeans by western Arnhem Land Aboriginal people, in a process which *inter alia* attempts to restructure relations between the two groups.
10. From 1989, the Aboriginal Development Commission has been incorporated into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
11. Smith (1994) discusses such indigenous goals for work operating in the Port Lincoln CDEP scheme.
12. Chase (1980: 87) equivalently notes that in the distribution of high prestige items (including cash), eastern Cape York people are placing value on sociality and investing in the future in terms of social and material support. See also Kesteven (1984: 373) who writes of western Arnhem Land Aboriginal people 'amassing social capital' from mining royalty payments.

13. See also Bourdieu (1984) in his classic study of consumption patterns and their relationship to status groups in French society.
14. Paradoxically, while more than ever before remote Aboriginal society is being overwhelmed by the institutions of the wider state, there is less direct personal intervention in Aboriginal mundane lives in comparison with the overt attempts by missionaries to radically reformulate Aboriginal belief systems and social practices.
15. At least in the first instance; access to cash once it is circulating within the Aboriginal domain is mediated through the networks of social and material debts and credits within which each Aboriginal individual operates.
16. See Finlayson (1991) for an extended argument of this theme.
17. This is a point made to me by Peter Sutton (personal communication).
18. Smith (1994) briefly discusses the operation of a CDEP scheme based on such principles at Ceduna, South Australia.

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