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Discussion Paper

Aboriginal employment, native title and regionalism

J. Finlayson

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SERIES NOTE

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- investigate the stimulation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander economic development and issues relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment and unemployment;

- identify and analyse the factors affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour force; and

- assist in the development of government strategies aimed at raising the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour market.

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Professor Jon Altman
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ABSTRACT

The recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody identified tourism as a potential source of private sector employment and enterprise development for Aboriginal people. The question arises as to how realistic this expectation is, given the findings of the 1994 Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) mid-term review that Aboriginal people are reluctant to actively seek work in this sector of mainstream employment. This paper describes a commercial tourism venture in north Queensland which employs local Aboriginal people. As a case study, the venture provides a context for reflecting on wider AEDP issues associated with both private sector employment and regional economic development. The importance of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre is not simply its commercial success, or the fact that it operates without government subsidies, but that these result from a partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples. An unintended consequence of the successful commercial partnership is the heightened profile of Djabugay people in the Cairns region. This is also reflected in their assertion of self-determination through a native title claim and a proactive engagement with wider regional economic opportunities in tourism development.

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Foreword

Between March and May 1995 the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) sponsored a thematic seminar series titled 'Policy Aspects of Native Title'. The following eight seminars were presented:

- 'Relative allocative efficiency of the *Native Title Act 1993* and the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976'* by Siobahn McKenna (March).
- 'Resource development agreements on Aboriginal land in the 1990s: features and trends' by Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh (March).
- 'Negotiations between Aboriginal communities and Mining companies: structures and process' by Ciaran O'Faircheallaigh (April).
- 'Tourism enterprise and native title: the Tjapukai Dance Theatre, Cairns' by Julie Finlayson (April).
- 'Funding native title claims: establishing equitable procedures' by Jon Altman and Diane Smith (April).
- 'Native title and land management' by Elspeth Young and Helen Ross (April).
- '*Native Title Act 1993*: latest developments and implementation issues for resource developers' by Jon Altman (May).
- 'Native title and regional agreements: the Kimberley case' by Patrick Sullivan (May).

Five of these seminars have now been revised into *CAEPR Discussion Papers Nos 85-89*. Of the others, Siobahn McKenna's seminar was published earlier as *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 79* and Jon Altman and Diane Smith's seminar was published as 'Funding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Representative Bodies under the *Native Title Act 1993*', (Issues Paper No. 8, *Land, Rights, Laws: Issues of Native Title*, Native Titles Research Unit, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra).

Owing to the pressing public policy significance of the issues addressed in this series, these discussion papers are intentionally exploratory and aim to disseminate information to a wider audience than that able to attend the seminars at the Australian National University.

Jon Altman
Series Editor
July 1995

Introduction

A focus of the recent mid-term review of the Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) was the extent to which opportunities existed for the improvement of indigenous socioeconomic status through income equity, equality, economic empowerment, skills acquisition, labour mobility and employment diversification in the private sector (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xiv). In the first part of this paper, the issue of private sector employment and regional economic development is addressed in the context of a local case study of Aboriginal employment in a commercial tourism venture in north Queensland. The second part of the paper discusses the influence of native title claims on possibilities for such economic strategies in a regional framework. This approach provides a forum to reflect on some of the wider issues of AEDP policy and the fine tuning required of AEDP to promote policy realism and practical economic outcomes at the local level.

Indigenous involvement in tourism was singled out as a potential source of private sector employment and enterprise opportunities in the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADC) (Commonwealth of Australia 1991). Although the Commonwealth Government's AEDP was established in 1987 following recommendations of the Miller Report on Aboriginal employment and training programs (Miller 1985), the Commonwealth government also responded to RCIADIC recommendations on tourism. This led to a $15 million allocation of funds over five years to promote indigenous participation in the arts, tourism and pastoral industries; all industries singled out for their potential to enhance Aboriginal socioeconomic status. The Tourism Industry Advisory Committee has initiated pilot studies, workshops, a road show promotion and database. The AEDP review, however, suggests that substantive progress toward industry strategies remains at a fundamental level largely directed toward preliminary development and coordinating of specific industry strategies (Commonwealth of Australia 1994).

Being primarily a labour market governed policy, AEDP has concentrated on evaluating changes in socioeconomic status through its employment and training goals. Consequently, AEDP programs operate in tandem with program initiatives to address the relationship between indigenous socioeconomic disadvantages and high levels of unemployment and low labour force participation rates. AEDP programs are coordinated across Commonwealth departments such as the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) to achieve the necessary transformations in education, training and labour market programs, in order to raise indigenous income levels and address employment disparities.

Recommendations of the AEDP review, however, suggest that current policies and program strategies fail to align effectively with the on-ground situation of indigenous peoples, and consequently to attain any significant realisation of the wider AEDP objectives (Commonwealth of Australia 1994). Two points in particular stand out from AEDP review consultations with ATSIC regional councils. Firstly, councils repeatedly argued for a more effective policy and program response to the diversity of situations in which Aboriginal people live, and to particular economic conditions. The summary recommendations of the review acknowledge the weight of these points in the 'need for continuing program assistance to be more effective and responsive to the local and regional economic environment' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xiii). Taylor has also argued the need to decrease reliance on the publicly-funded employment sector (including the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme) and to increase opportunities for work in the private sector beyond present concentrations in Aboriginal community service, recreation and personal service industries (Taylor 1994). The AEDP review recognised the importance of participation in the private sector as 'vital to achieving sustained improvements in the choices and economic power of indigenous people' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xv). Yet no definitive strategies are offered to help achieve this.

Participation in the private sector, whether through the mainstream labour market or specific enterprise developments, are problematic options for indigenous people as this paper will show. Moreover, the question of what self-management and self-determination means as workplace practices in the private sector is not clear. Indeed, it is arguable whether these are realistic or compatible objectives; although Smith's study of a CDEP scheme best-practice case certainly suggests that both goals may be appropriate and achievable in particular circumstances (Smith 1994).

Neither AEDP policies, nor associated employment and training programs, are confined to public sector initiatives. In practice, however, the majority of policies operate in this domain. Research on indigenous employment by industry sector stresses the importance of redirecting the emphasis on public sector indigenous employment and encouraging greater participation in other mainstream labour market areas (Altman and Smith 1993; Taylor 1994). Yet one of the ambiguities of AEDP policies is the emphasis placed on indigenous self-determination and self-management. This objective is affirmed in the review recommendations: '... the design, delivery and evaluation of labour market programs for indigenous Australians needs to be negotiated on the basis of self-management and self-determination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xiii).

Is it possible to marry such an objective to the demands of the private sector? How would one transfer the goals of indigenous self-determination

and self-management into the private sector? In terms of indigenous business ventures, how realistic is it to see the private sector adopting the goals of indigenous self-management and self-determination in commercial enterprises, when the track record of publicly-funded indigenous commercial projects is poor? From the AEDP review it is unclear how the private sector can facilitate such AEDP objectives. Perhaps the real issue is the question of economic control as a necessary element of self-determination, that is to say, economic determination. How closely is the potential for change in Aboriginal incomes, economic empowerment and skills acquisition, tied to formal Aboriginal economic self-determination in the private sector?

AEDP and private sector employment

The AEDP review concluded that only limited success had been achieved in lifting indigenous socioeconomic status through AEDP policies and strategies. There was an insignificant 'overall reduction in welfare dependency' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xiv). Admittedly, the CDEP scheme has markedly improved the statistical profile of indigenous unemployed people particularly in rural areas (Taylor 1994). However, since most CDEP jobs perpetuate Aboriginal people's involvement in low-skilled part-time occupations, the CDEP work projects are a mixed blessing for many participants and appear to be doing little to achieve the AEDP's goal of income equality (Altman and Smith 1993; Altman and Daly 1992).

The ATSIC regional councils, however, were aware of the gloss CDEP programs put on regional official employment profiles and expressed their concern to the review. The on-ground familiarity of regional councillors with the circumstances in which Aboriginal people live and seek work, enabled them to confirm the statistical record of low levels of indigenous employment in the private sector and to explain the hesitations of mainstream employers to offer job opportunities to long-term unemployed low-skilled indigenous workers without an attached incentive subsidy. Councils were equally aware of the challenges facing Aboriginal participation in mainstream labour markets. They drew attention not only to demand-side factors, but also to the role played by cultural factors in limiting Aboriginal participation. Councils mentioned, specifically, the nature of different expectations which often result in conflict with the employer, and concluded that private sector employment was often a 'daunting, alienating experience' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: 51). A mismatch between the expectations of Aboriginal employees and their non-Aboriginal employers is likely across a range of workplace issues and practices, quite apart from concerns over wages and salaries. Other research confirms that the cultural perspectives of work explain much of the reluctance by Aboriginal people to actively seek employment in the

private sector, even where designated positions in private sector employment such as the hospitality industry are designed to encourage participation (Finlayson 1991a). The review found cultural factors were not insurmountable obstacles to indigenous employment in the mainstream. The following detailed case study presents a local example of a private sector workplace which successfully accommodates diversity. The Tjapukai Dance Theatre is an instructive best-practice example.

Figure 1. The Kuranda region.

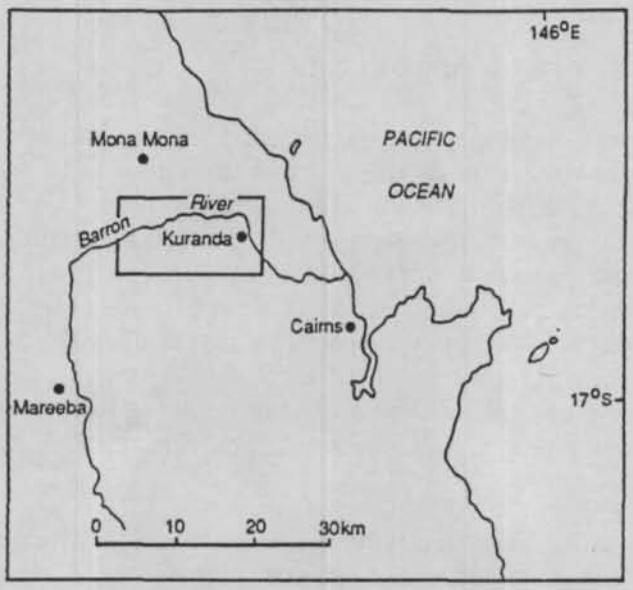
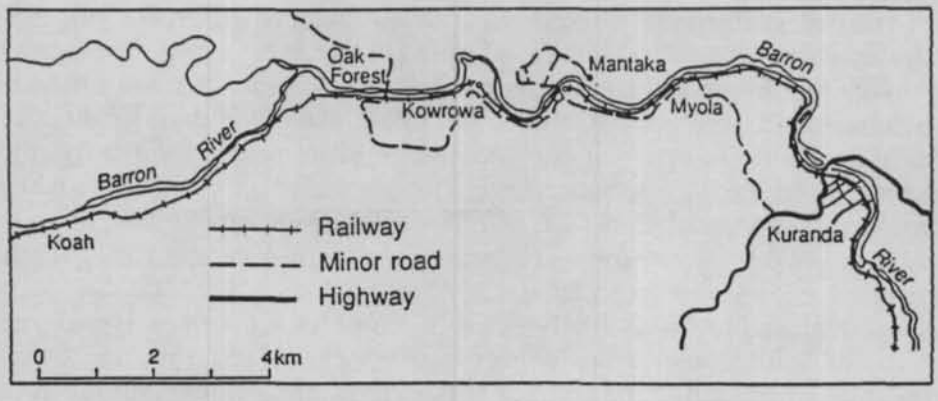


Figure 2. The study area.



Tjapukai Dance Theatre

The Tjapukai Dance Theatre located in Kuranda, north Queensland, is an example of a successful commercial tourism venture operating without any formal structures or mechanisms for Aboriginal economic control. The Theatre operates as a joint partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal owners-managers. It is a private sector enterprise with no association with AEDP initiatives and no public funding. The Theatre offers Aboriginal people employment options in the tourism and hospitality industry, as well as the opportunity to develop specific technical and retail skills. Aboriginal employees, mainly women, staff the Theatre's reception area and booking office, together with the retail shop. There are several teams of Aboriginal male dancers who work on a shift basis to cover the daily round of performances. Backstage work, such as lighting, set construction and stage management is handled by local Djabugay men.

The Theatre began as a partnership based on skill specialisation between a non-Aboriginal couple Don and Judy Freeman, and David Hudson a local Aboriginal man and his non-Aboriginal partner Cindy. These individuals brought their respective skills to the enterprise in choreography, theatre production, marketing and office management. The venture employed ten people, seven Aboriginal male dancers on a training program and two production members. The first performances were held in rented rooms with seating for 120, on the lower floor of a shopping mall and the business operated six days a week with two evening performances. The initial concept of a theatrical enterprise had its beginnings in a community theatre production, 'The Odyssey You'll Ever See', held in the Kuranda Amphitheatre the previous year. David Hudson had a key performance role and the Freemans were closely involved with production.

Aside from CDEP,[1] the Tjapukai Dance Theatre is the single largest employer of Aboriginal people in Kuranda. In six years, the theatre has grown from a business with a capital base of $45,000 to a theatre complex employing 37 Aboriginal people and turning over $1 million (gross) annually. The apparent positive economic outcomes are wide-ranging. There are economic advantages for Aboriginal employees through access to, and participation, in a mainstream labour market. Much of the Theatre's success is due to management's flexibility in workplace practices; notably, the capacity to accommodate the culturally-based behaviours and etiquette of the Aboriginal employees. At the same time, it is first and foremost a commercial venture. Income scales are based on performance: primarily for loyalty to the theatre; regular and reliable work attendance; and years of service. Yet the Theatre's commercial success and capacity to deliver substantial economic gains to its indigenous employees is not predicated on the degree of indigenous control stressed in current ATSIC and AEDP employment policies. How are positive economic gains achieved and sustained by Tjapukai's employees? Conclusions to questions like these will be instructive for developing AEDP policy realism.

A particular insight afforded by the example of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre are the processes by which Aboriginal people with limited formal education have been able to access opportunities for skilled work. The need for such opportunities was recognised by the ATSIC regional councils during the review process. They expressed concern that AEDP policies and programs should not simply reproduce the conditions of restricted employment options. It was especially crucial that AEDP reviewers appreciate the importance of quality, not simply quantity, in job creation programs. Councils stressed the importance of building greater flexibility into programs in order to expand employment opportunities between occupation areas and across industry sectors. Participants at the National Indigenous Business and Economic Conference, held in Alice Springs in 1993, expressed the same view. Many indigenous people '... are concerned not simply with obtaining employment and reducing dependency on income support, but with the quality of that employment, with strengthening the ownership of resources, and with the development of the enterprise base' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: 95).

Taylor 's assessment of the relative economic status of indigenous people in Queensland in the intercensal period 1986-91 supports the need for reassessment of present AEDP policy emphasis (Taylor 1994). He examined the relative economic status of indigenous and non-indigenous people according to section-of-State statistics. He concluded that if work opportunities continue to cluster in unskilled occupations and low-wage work such as that offered under the CDEP scheme, then no substantive economic status changes can occur for indigenous people, nor will there be any significant redress of the long-term socioeconomic consequences of intergenerational unemployment.

This paper deliberately highlights comments to the AEDP review from the ATSIC regional councils. Their views arise from detailed regional knowledge and experience of immediate employment situations and options. Other contributors to the AEDP review, however, tend to argue for policy adjustments based on statistical evaluations of policy and program efficacy. Such statistically-driven assessments need to ensure that policy changes accommodate on-the-ground circumstances. In particular, detailed discussion of a case example of Aboriginal employment in the private sector can make an instructive contribution to policy development. At present, AEDP policies and programs for indigenous employment in the private sector are based on limited ethnographic data.

Although commercial businesses, such as Telecom, Qantas and the Australian Conservation Foundation have actively participated in the AEDP employment programs, they also share political and economic ties to government. In this sense, they do not represent an unmediated experience of the pressures and circumstances of indigenous participation in private sector employment. AEDP policies advocating private sector

employment for indigenous Australians face practical problems and policy ambiguities as long as the focus of self-determination is seen as the principal means to this end.

Unlike Telecom or Qantas, few private commercial businesses want to be involved in what many entrepreneurs regard as a social experiment (Finlayson 1991a). Consequently, the success of a privately funded joint tourism enterprise such as the Tjapukai Theatre will be a useful example of how Aboriginal people might achieve the AEDP goals of income parity, skill diversity, economic empowerment and choice through employment in mainstream labour markets.

Kuranda Aboriginal community: the socioeconomic profile

The 1991 Census identifies Kuranda township as a bounded statistical collection district. However, while Aboriginal people do live in the township, the majority of the local Aboriginal population live outside it in the village communities of Mantaka, Kowrowa, Oak Forest and Koah. These settlements are in a different Census collection district to Kuranda. Consequently, the number of Aboriginal people enumerated in the 1991 Census represents only a proportion of the total Aboriginal community associated with Kuranda through residence, shopping and sociality. One of the problems with the Census collection districts is the lack of correspondence to on-ground groupings due to the inability to identify small population clusters outside of Kuranda. Thus, the Kuranda community is best understood as a social collective that includes people who are spatially disaggregated. In an attempt to approximate this collective population, figures were obtained from the 1991 Census for both Kuranda and the neighbouring collection districts which incorporate the rural settlements of Aboriginal people associated with Kuranda.

Tables 1-5 present census social indicators data for the whole of the Kuranda Aboriginal community with a distinction drawn between Kuranda township and the neighbouring collection districts containing the associated rural Aboriginal settlements. These data present a picture of an economically marginalised community: out of 239 Aboriginal people aged 15 years and over, only 59 people are employed and of the total labour force of 99 people, 40 are unemployed.

The distribution of employment by industry sector indicates that no Djabugay[2] Aboriginal person is employed in either the Commonwealth or local government sector, although 12 people are employed by the State government. Significantly, of the total number of 59 employed people 32 are employed in the private sector. This is interesting because in the experience of most indigenous communities the public sector is usually the principal and, indeed, may be the only employer. In the Kuranda

community it is clearly the effect of employment with the Tjapukai Dance Theatre which is reflected in this figure. In terms of the distribution of employment by industry division, indigenous people in the Kuranda community are limited to four areas of employment: agriculture, the wholesale and retail trade, transport and storage, and recreational and personal services. Thirty-two people of a total of 59 employed Aboriginal people work in industries related to the tourism industry, the principal source of employment in the town and surrounding area. Previous avenues of employment, in agriculture and transport (the state railways in particular) are diminishing employment options. With present state policy to close rural railway lines, opportunities for future employment are limited.

Table 1. Distribution of employment by industry sector: indigenous people in Kuranda community, 1991.

Industry sector	Kuranda town	Rest of community	Total
Commonwealth Government	0	0	0
State Government	6	6	12
Local Government	0	0	0
Private sector	21	11	32
Inadequately described or not stated	9	6	15
Total	36	23	59

Table 2. Labour force status: indigenous people in the Kuranda community, 1991.

Industry sector	Kuranda town	Rest of community	Total
Employed	36	23	59
Unemployed	20	20	40
Total labour force	56	43	99
Not in the labour force	52	88	140
Population aged 15 years and over	108	131	239
Employment rate	33.3	17.5	24.6
Unemployment rate	35.7	46.5	40.4
Participation rate	51.8	32.8	41.4

All figures exclude those who did not state their labour force status.

Table 3. Distribution of employment by industry division: indigenous people in Kuranda community, 1991.

Industry division	Kuranda town	Rest of community	Total
Agriculture	6	3	6
Mining	0	0	0
Manufacturing	0	0	0
Electricity, water and gas	0	0	0
Construction	0	0	0
Wholesale and retail trade	3	3	6
Transport and storage	4	0	4
Finance, property and business services	0	0	0
Public administration and defence	0	0	0
Community services	0	3	3
Recreational and personal services	19	9	28
Inadequately described or not stated	4	5	9
Total	36	23	59

Table 4. Distribution of employment by occupational major group: indigenous people in Kuranda community, 1991.

Occupational group	Kuranda town	Rest of community	Total
Managers and administrators	3	3	6
Professional	7	9	16
Para-professionals	0	0	0
Tradespersons	0	0	0
Clerks	0	0	0
Sales and personal service workers	9	3	12
Plant and machine operators and drivers	0	0	0
Labourers and related workers	10	0	10
Inadequately described or not stated	7	8	15
Total	36	23	59

Table 5. Level of qualifications: indigenous people in Kuranda community, 1991.

	Kuranda town		Rest of community		Total	
Qualification level[a]	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent	Number	Per cent
Degree/diploma	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other diploma	3	2.7	3	2.3	6	3.0
Vocational	3	2.7	6	4.6	9	3.7
No qualifications	105	94.5	122	93.1	227	93.3
Total	111	100.0	131	100.0	242	100.0

a. Excludes those inadequately described or not stated.

In terms of employment by major occupational groupings, it is interesting to note the cluster of Djabugay people at the extremes of the white collar and blue collar spectrum of the occupational scale. Out of a total of 59 employed Djabugay people, 44 people identified their employment as professionals, managers and administrators, sales and personal service workers. The only other group of employed Aboriginal people in the community were labourers and related workers (10). Once again, the surprisingly high number of indigenous people working in white collar occupations is a consequence of the employment impact of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre.

The Theatre's impact is all the more marked once the level of educational qualifications in the Kuranda Aboriginal community is reviewed. Of the total Aboriginal population in the Kuranda area 93.3 per cent of people have no educational qualifications. Without the benefits of private sector employment through the Tjapukai Dance Theatre, it is obvious that Aboriginal people in this community would have a higher unemployment rate and no other immediately obvious employment options; at least, not in the private sector. Clearly, their ability to access the mainstream labour market is restricted and likely to encourage recycling (such as short-term and casual) employment, and confinement to low-skill mainstream occupations such as labouring all associated with erratic and low levels of income. The employment histories of individuals bear this out.

In terms of AEDP objectives, what the Tjapukai Dance Theatre can offer Aboriginal employees is the potential for training in theatre skills and retail sales and management, either in vocational training or certificated training through association with the local college of Technical and Further Education. In at least one case, a staff member of the Theatre has time off for participation in a diploma study course, even though this is not related to his area of work at the Theatre. It is also interesting that while the Tjapukai Dance Theatre has been commercially successful in its partnership with local Aboriginal people, no other private sector business in the community has followed the example. Consequently, despite Aboriginal people with skills and experience in sales and retail in the Theatre's shop, no employment options exist locally for such employees.[3] If further research confirms this, then it raises the question of how successful the Tjapukai Dance Theatre will be in terms of providing an exit into the mainstream labour market for Aboriginal people. In short, the capacity of the private sector labour market to absorb indigenous employees may be limited by factors other than skills or qualifications, but by specific views about race and the nature of Aboriginality.

If the impact of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre is factored out of the employment options, the 1991 Census figures give an impression of a socioeconomically depressed community with little evidence of positive employment outcomes achieved under AEDP and certainly no easy exit

points into other private sector labour markets for Aboriginal job seekers. The Kuranda profile adds weight to regional councils' recommendations to the AEDP review to adopt policies which recognise the diversity of local economic contexts and to translate this diversity into programs based on a realistic appreciation of available local economic opportunities. Without such correlation AEDP strategies are ineffectual on the ground.

Taylor's assessment of indigenous income status by section-of-State for Queensland provides evidence to support the need for fine-tuning AEDP policies to match regional and local conditions (Taylor 1994). By distinguishing between Aboriginal communities according to population sizes (major urban, other urban, and rural), Taylor illustrates the link between population groupings and available socioeconomic opportunities. In rural Queensland, he found that Aboriginal communities like Kuranda are structurally disadvantaged in comparison to urban communities and this is largely a result of restricted access to mainstream labour markets. He suggests that the gap in economic opportunities between rural and urban Aboriginal communities has widened in Queensland in the intercensal period 1986-91. Although, as mentioned earlier, CDEP schemes have brought some income improvement in rural areas, this could be seen as a misleading gain. It depends on how the situation is viewed. If, as Altman and Smith (1993: 21) argue, CDEP income should be included in the definition of welfare payments, then the AEDP policy in Queensland has failed to achieve any level of income parity between indigenous people and other Queenslanders. Taylor concludes from this that in policy terms 'improvements in labour force status alone are not sufficient to enhance income status. Of equal importance to job creation is the nature of the work involved and the income it generates' (Taylor 1994: 16). Once again, the issue for policy makers centres on the problem of up-skilling Aboriginal employees and cutting the structural ties which bind their employment to dependence on both public sector and low-grade employment.

In Kuranda, structural problems of accessing the mainstream labour market limit Aboriginal employment participation. Until recently, the only available employment opportunities were low-wage occupations vulnerable to technological change and industry restructuring. Historically, employment options for Aboriginal people in Kuranda have been confined to the kind of low quality and poorly paid employment associated with the unskilled and semi-skilled work provided on Mona Mona mission: scrub clearing, timber getting, saw milling and agricultural labour for men, and domestic service for women. Many of these options have, of course, disappeared with mechanisation of rural industries and wider social changes. But the capacity of unskilled or semi-skilled Aboriginal people with limited education to earn a living wage is vulnerable in such contexts. Certainly, the nature of the historical relationship between Aboriginal people and mainstream labour markets, including the private sector, warrants consideration in the AEDP programs. 'Indigenous people appear

to have been adversely affected by economic and industry restructuring, in large measure because so many have had only casual and low-skilled labour market attachment to private sector manufacturing industries. Without specific attention to their needs, their chances of benefiting from micro-economic reforms will continue to be limited' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xiv).

A CDEP scheme began at the former Mona Mona mission in the early 1990s; in 1995 approximately 125-136 people are registered participants. However, criticisms of the quality of work and associated levels of income common in most CDEP schemes also applies in this case. Consequently, in the economic context of this rural Queensland town it is reasonable to expect that an enterprise like the Tjapukai Dance Theatre will impact significantly on Aboriginal employment options and have the potential for gains in income equity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that long-term employment with the Dance Theatre does result in improved economic status through property ownership (home and car) and a higher standard of living (Brim 1993: 48).

Aboriginal employment in the Tjapukai Dance Theatre

By the mid-1980s, a generation of young Aboriginal people in Kuranda were educated beyond the educational attainments of their parents and grandparents. Most young people now complete the early years of secondary school and some individuals have gone on to tertiary training courses. Nevertheless, local employment situations offer no alternative to the limited placement of Aboriginal people in casual and low-skilled employment. Willie Brim, a young Aboriginal man explained the situation he faced, 'Well, there was virtually nothing really [no jobs] ... most of the guys just left town and got jobs on the railway which I did for a while. I just went on the railways' (Brim 1986). Brim later became one of the first Tjapukai dancers.

Throughout the 1980s tourism was thriving in Kuranda. Visitors took the scenic railway through the Barron Gorge to the weekly Kuranda art and craft markets. In 1986, the Queensland Railway estimated that 200,000 people per annum would visit Kuranda on the Cairns-Kuranda railway. Despite the employment opportunities emerging from the growing tourism profile of the town, Aboriginal employment in the private sector simply did not eventuate. This opportunity only arose with the development of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre in 1987.

In the first year the Dance Theatre opened, Hudson commented on its significance to the Kuranda Aboriginal community: 'The Tjapukai Dance Theatre has changed all our lives. And it has also changed the attitudes of the white residents of Kuranda to the Aborigines who live here' (Hudson

1986). In 1992, Willie Brim, one of only two of the original seven dancers explained how employment with the Dance Theatre impacted on him:

> My experience with tourism has changed my life. I now own 20 acres of land, my own house and four-wheel drive. My standard of living and that of my family has been lifted dramatically. ... Not only me, but my brothers and sisters who have stayed with Tjapukai have also lifted their standard of living. The economic and social benefits have flowed on to the entire community in increased respect for my people and greater integration between the white and black community (Brim 1993: 47).

Brim outlined the nature of the financial success of the Tjapukai Theatre:

> Success has seen the sale of Tjapukai's tickets increase from $135,000 in 1987 to $1,500,000 in 1993. They are still increasing. The success of Tjapukai has changed the local and international reputation of Kuranda and has made Tjapukai the largest employer of people in the town (Brim 1993: 48).

Don Freeman, one of the owner-managers of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre, charts the commercial success of the venture in these terms:

> Born in the basement of a small shopping centre, it has had no government funding - perhaps that is another reason for its success. From day one we were responsible for our own fate. Wages were paid from our earnings and if there were no earnings we would have closed. With a capital base of just $45,000 and seven dancers doing seven shows each week, in just six short years Tjapukai has built its own $1 million theatre complex in the main street of Kuranda ... it has expanded to 42 employees (37 Aboriginal and five white) presenting 17 shows every week. ... Perhaps the most important single thing that has led to the ever increasing Aboriginal employment at Tjapukai is that it is a successful business. And it is a successful business because that is its primary motivation. It was not formed as part of a land rights claim, or to raise the status of the clan or language group over another, or as a social experiment. It is a business dedicated to providing a quality tourism product to a dynamic industry (Freeman 1993: 63).

The issue of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre as an employer of Aboriginal people in the tourism industry is a source of much debate and criticism, both within the indigenous community and amongst non-indigenous people. While much of this criticism could be characterised as jealousy over the undoubted commercial success of the venture, the rumblings of discontent also focus on questions of the salaries paid to indigenous employees; the need for training programs; and ultimately, the desire on the part of the dancers and some members of the Djabugay community for a larger share of the economic rewards and resources associated with the Theatre and its commercial growth. Some of the fundamental economic issues are couched as concerns about cultural authenticity and intellectual property.

Private sector employment: policy implications

The Theatre has undoubtedly expanded employment options for Aboriginal people in Kuranda and improved income levels. It has also done this

outside the context of the policy of self-determination emphasised by ATSIC. The AEDP review acknowledges the difficulty of gaining acceptance for the AEDP objectives in mainstream labour markets and in the private sector. Some of the reasons for the reluctance were mentioned above. The AEDP review was, nevertheless, optimistic about negotiating different work expectations; although there is clearly a general reluctance in the private sector to engage with such issues (Finlayson 1991a). Questions of how the managers of Tjapukai Dance Theatre have managed to deal with these concerns will be left aside, as this is the subject of ongoing research. Instead, this paper will focus on the symbolic gains which employment with the Theatre entails for local Aboriginal people and how this translates into regionally-based strategic thinking about economic issues. In my view, an unintended outcome of employment with the Theatre is the development of Djabugay Aboriginality as public persona. This identification has become socially and culturally empowering for Kuranda's Aboriginal people and has contributed, indirectly, to active Djabugay participation in current debates about land and commercial development throughout the Cairns region. The interest in land is generated by specific native title issues, but usually it reflects wider regional Aboriginal politics disputing indigenous rights to place and space. The combination of specific and regional interests in land has direct policy implications for ATSIC's regional councils in regional planning processes and strategies for self-determination and AEDP policy. These ATSIC objectives will be tested in the arena of indigenous politics over funding and resource allocation. In a sense, success in real private sector employment is feeding into reassertion of cultural identity and regional economic developments.

Native title and economic gain

The Attorney-General's Department (1994) asks what difference the *Native Title Act 1993* might make to the economic status of indigenous Australians. Altman argues that on evidence from the Northern Territory land rights legislation, little substantive benefit in terms of improving Aboriginal economic status stems from land ownership (Altman 1994). Similarly native title, in his view, will prove no panacea for current economic deprivations. He argues that even as a compensatory mechanism the proposed National Land Fund will have only a limited capacity to increase Aboriginal economic options and status. Altman considers the key factor endowments which might be expected to flow as a consequence of the *Native Title Act 1993* to be: 'native title to additional tracts of land, mainly unalienated Crown land and land to be purchased; additional capital from negotiations, resource exploitation or compensation; and possibly, some additional employment generated by the need to administer the legislation'. Altman concludes 'that each of these avenues and their combination, has limited potential to influence the overall (national)

economic wellbeing of indigenous Australians, although in regional contexts native title might make a considerable difference, if not in today's generation of native titleholders then certainly to tomorrow's' (Altman 1994: 71).

Initially, these conclusions are not encouraging; although Altman does refer to a potential for change at the regional level. He argues that in the final analysis the majority of indigenous Australians will still face improving their economic status through the mechanisms of 'mainstream labour markets and the mainstream economy' and hence, the question is what can people achieve through AEDP programs (Altman 1994: 73).

The same question of the potential of native title to impact on the socioeconomic status of indigenous Australians is approached here, but in anthropological terms and with reference to a local case study of the possible benefits for Kuranda's Aboriginal people. Native title has emerged in many Aboriginal communities as first, a means for asserting cultural identity; and second, on a regional level it gives indigenous values and priorities a potentially instrumental role in development forums. In Kuranda, for the first time, Djabugay people are extrapolating their economic interests from the basis of a specific native title claim to a demand for wider involvement in regional economic development.

Cultural identity and employment

The Tjapukai Dance Theatre constitutes a watershed in the politics of identity formation in the Kuranda Aboriginal community. Employment in the Theatre has provided not simply a basis of income equality with non-Aboriginal people in Kuranda, but a forum for the emergence of a specific Aboriginality. Prior to the Theatre beginning, the Aboriginal community saw their common background of life on Mona Mona mission as both the primary focus and marker of a specific regional cultural identity (Finlayson 1991b). This is not to imply that people did not also see themselves as Djabugay people; rather that public expressions of association with this identity were largely issues of internal community politics. The employment and wages provided by the Tjapukai Dance Theatre certainly developed the self-esteem of Aboriginal people and their ability for dealing with the burgeoning tourism which was increasingly part of daily life in Kuranda during the 1980s.[4] In the early years of the Tjapukai Theatre, Kuranda Aboriginal people were at liberty to attend any or all of the performances. Over time, there was general identification in the wider Aboriginal community with the public profile of the Theatre and with the cultural identity it promoted. In recent years, such identification is more cautiously embraced, especially in the light of criticisms from other Aboriginal communities that the Theatre's representations of Aboriginal dance and song are unauthentic. Indeed, hostility has also come from

Aboriginal quarters complaining that the dances 'borrow' too heavily from other Queensland Aboriginal groups. Consequently, wholly identifying the Tjapukai Dance Theatre with Djabugay culture and Djabugay personhood is seen as problematic. There are now two ways of spelling the local language reflecting distinct political positions; Tjapukai refers only to the Dance Theatre, while Djabugay is the cultural, as opposed to theatrical identity.

The cultural impact of the Theatre in constructing and promoting a distinctive Aboriginal identity was paralleled in 1986 by the introduction of a Djabugay language revival program. In that year, a partnership between a Djabugay man and a European man steadily developed language work to include teaching Djabugay at the local Kuranda primary school and in a Cairns high school attended by Kuranda Aboriginal youth.[5] They have also produced books on Djabugay history and cosmology, children's games based around use of the Djabugay language, music and songs, together with vocabularies and dictionaries in Djabugay. Both the Theatre and the language programs are opportunities for public assertions of Djabugay cultural identity. Critically, through the medium of the Theatre, Kuranda Aboriginal people developed a national and even international profile of who they were as a cultural and historical group, and simultaneously, enabled them to associate Djabugay people with specific geographical locations. This latter development is crucial in the current context of local disputes for ATSIC regional funds to prepare native title claims and to proceed through mediation. It is *de rigeur* among indigenous groups in the Cairns region to establish a public profile, often for the benefit of dealing with non-Aboriginal local and regional authorities, of an association between language affiliation and traditional land.

Native title and tourism

Native title claims arise from legal acknowledgment of Aboriginal proprietary rights in common law. It is this concept and its capacity to transform the political nature of Aboriginal relations with the State which fuels Aboriginal confidence in their right to demand active participation in wider politics of land development and management. In the Cairns-Kuranda district, land is of immense economic interest to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike. A native title claim over the Barron Falls National Park was lodged by a member of the Djabugay Aboriginal Tribal Corporation in May 1994. The claim process has been a catalyst to Djabugay thinking about the terms in which they wish to argue their interests in land and associated economic development within the regional perspective. Increasingly, the clash of values about land centre on commercial tourism projects. Preservation of heritage values in land within the Kuranda region are of concern to both conservationists and Aboriginal people. However, conservation interests focus primarily on the ecological importance of protecting and maintaining the existing regional rainforest

and wet tropics areas. While indigenous people share concern for these issues, their interests owe more to daily socioeconomic concerns and questions about equity in a region of booming commercial investment.

The signs of community controversy over the future of the Barron Falls National Park erupted in 1994 when plans were made public about the granting of government leases to a private developer to build staging platforms for a cableway in the National Park. It is alleged that the leases were granted only three days after the native title claim was lodged over the Park. In the following months, details of other commercial tourism developments in the Kuranda-Cairns corridor were released. These projects include the necessity for acquisition of large tracts of land to build Skyrail's infrastructure and parking space for tourist vehicles and coaches.

Amid the controversy over the location of the cableway and the native title claim, the Tjapukai Dance Theatre also announced the Theatre's relocation from Kuranda to land adjacent to the Skyrail base station at Caravonica. As a result, issues surrounding the operation of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre immediately became linked, by association, to the progress of local native title claims and to economic development conflicts. The proposed Theatre will form part of a $6.5 million Aboriginal cultural theme park due to open in April 1996. Owner-manager of the Theatre, Don Freeman, made every effort to disassociate the new Tjapukai venture from the Skyrail project. He described his vision of the new project to the regional newspaper, the *Cairns Post* (3 November 1994).

> Mr Freeman said the cableway provided an ideal business opportunity to set up a complementary tourism experience. ... He said the four separate theatres would be able to stage different, yet interwoven productions, all enhanced by more than $1 million-worth of high-tech, multi-visual special effects. The 3,000 sqm complex will have the capacity to handle up to 1,600 visitors a day. It will include two restaurants to seat up to 600 people and an artefacts/craft gallery and shop expected to generate $1 million a year for local Aboriginal artists and crafts people.

Another theme park, Goldworld, based on the geological history of north Queensland is now planned for the Redlynch Valley at the bottom of the Barron Gorge. None of these proposals have been mooted without public controversy, not least from the Djabugay and Yirrikandji people of Kuranda and Cairns (see *Cairns Post,* 5 November 1994). A dominant issue for Aboriginal people in the area is the question of their participation in, rather than marginalisation from, the economic opportunities opened up by multi-million dollar projects such as Skyrail, Tjapukai and Goldworld. In that regard, the Dance Theatre has always had its critics in relation to sharing economic gains. Don Freeman refutes the accusation of exploitation:

> When we first started Tjapukai there were occasional accusations within the community of exploitation, but there were years of hard work with relatively

> little reward in the beginning. Now those who have stuck with it have begun to reap the rewards. They have bought or built houses, own cars, they travel the world and have pride in their accomplishments. These things are not the result of government programs, jobs or handouts; they are the result of their own labour, providing a quality product they have been instrumental in creating and designed to meet the needs of their customers (Freeman 1993: 64).

Ironically, the success of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre as a private sector venture has no formal link with AEDP funding or a conscious association with the self-determination policy of AEDP. Yet the Theatre is becoming intricately linked to that policy and notions of control, economic self-sufficiency and native title. In the future, the Tjapukai Dance Theatre will be unlikely to be able to differentiate itself from these wider political issues.

Native title and the regional economy

The High Court's Mabo judgment and the associated *Native Title Act 1993,* have undoubtedly encouraged indigenous groups in Australia to expand their political demands for equity in regional economic development. What is not clear at this stage is how and through what avenues this will be achieved, especially as elsewhere land acquisition alone has not proved a sufficient basis for economic gains. However, under the *Native Title Act 1993*, s.21(4) it is possible for native titleholders to establish regional agreements with respect to their rights as native titleholders, and presumably this could include economic developments. Consequently, there are grounds for exploring the potential of this approach, especially as regionalism aligns well with existing ATSIC structures and policies for regional planning, prioritising, and decision-making. Aboriginal people in the Cairns region are well aware that Aboriginal culture is a saleable commodity with the potential to increase their incomes (see Finlayson 1991a). Indeed indigenous Australians are responding to announcements of developers' plans with the argument that if the land concerned falls within their definitions of traditional country, some form of financial recognition, including compensation, is warranted (see *Cairns Post,* 5 November 1994 comments by Anzac Palmer). All the projects mooted for land at the base of the Kuranda Range and in the vicinity of the Barron Gorge are seen by Djabugay and Yirrikandji peoples as 'on their land' and thus entitling them to a share in the financial gains from the projects. Yet until native title determinations are made over claimable land, the arguments of Aboriginal communities for equity from regional tourism development are largely confined to the forum of moral rights.

What models do regional Aboriginal people have for sharing in private sector tourism development (aside from employment in the labour market)? The only experience Djabugay people have had with participation in private commercial developments has been the Tjapukai Dance Theatre.

Not surprisingly, many Aboriginal people are linking developments in the area of native title with developments in tourism and the central role of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre. In the minds of many indigenous Australians, native title is now the window of opportunity for potential economic gains through rights to the land. Indigenous people glimpsed this in the debates and processes associated with the passage of the *Native Title Act 1993*. More important than the glimpsed economic opportunities is the fact that the Act recognises indigenous cultural rights as a basis for ownership of land.

For policy makers, the ultimate question is how to achieve economic status improvements? This question must be addressed in the context of 'the wider social and economic relations between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-indigenous people' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: 37). This paper is focusing that wider context on Aboriginal regional development and economic perspectives. In Cairns, commercial tourism development is intense, and consequently a coordinated regional approach among Aboriginal groups for a stake in the economic benefits of tourism would make good political sense. The ATSIC regional councils already have a statutory obligation for developing strategic regional planning processes to deal with issues of economic and social development. With the increasing devolution of funding decision-making powers from the central ATSIC bureaucracy to the ATSIC councils, these bodies also have a range of independent planning mechanisms. Councils have argued their case for AEDP policies and programs to correlate with regional approaches and local knowledge of employment sectors. Aboriginal people in local communities are also linking economic and tourism developments in regional issues concerning native title. Clearly, grounds exist to expand the contexts of coordinated regional action beyond that of policy rhetoric.

Since 1994 there has been a proliferation throughout the Cairns region of Aboriginal native title claims. Many of these cluster along the coastal plain, claiming the few remaining pockets of available Crown land. Fierce competition between commercial developers and Aboriginal groups for this land flourishes at the State political level. In at least one case, developers have been assisted by the Queensland government in gaining access to claimable land when part of the land was re-gazetted making it unavailable for claim (pers. comm. G. Skeene).

Of course, the issue of native title and economic development is fundamentally a question of equity, not simply between indigenous Australians and the State, but also between local Aboriginal groups. Issues concern representation, as well as process. In the Cairns region, applications to lodge native title claims have led to intense rivalry between local Aboriginal communities (and in some cases, families) to present themselves as the principal land-holding group. This is why the relationship of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre to the Kuranda Aboriginal

community has been so important to the claim process; the Tjapukai Dance Theatre promoted a specific cultural association between identifiable people and identifiable place. However, such connections between people and land are not straightforward in the Kuranda and Barron Gorge districts. But once tourism projects such as the Tjapukai Dance Theatre, Goldworld, and Skyrail are located on land at the base of the McAlistair Range, the issue of boundaries between land-holding and language groups are not so clearly defined and in fact, are open to dispute.

As expected, the location of the Skyrail project and the relocation of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre has opened the field for intra-Aboriginal feuds about who owns land (traditionally and historically) and who is the legitimate representative group for any negotiations with developers or State government officials. The possible realisation of Aboriginal participation in these projects, either through the allocation and use of the land, or in private sector employment, are jeopardised by disputes among competing Aboriginal groups. Regional planning, like regional agreements in native title cases, has the potential to include a range of Aboriginal stakeholders in regional economic development. Regional economic planning should be an incentive to resolve potentially damaging local feuds over the legitimacy of indigenous associations with land. It may also provide the means for looking at how a number of indigenous groups can have their interests in land recognised outside of the native title claims process, but included within a regional indigenous strategy for participation in commercial land use. Recommendation 56 of the AEDP review makes it clear that the AEDP has a potential role to play in such a beneficial regional approach. This recommendation gives emphasis to a whole-of-government approach to regional planning and the delivery of AEDP programs and strategic use of regional funding allocations and resources (Commonwealth of Australia 1994: xxv). The Queensland Government has made it clear that it acts as the umbrella body for a diverse range of public and private groups opposing native title claims in the State. Indigenous groups may, perhaps, see the same advantages in common action. However, achieving a regional approach will doubtless suffer from the same problems all Aboriginal broadly representative bodies and organisations face; namely, the struggle between the elevation of a particular interest group over the concerns of community and regional interests. Unfortunately, in the Cairns region both the native title process and the response to wider economic development indicate how deeply embedded the loyalties of parochialism are in regional decision-making. It is also clear that such affiliations and interest groups cannot be ignored in the assessment of ATSIC's policy effectiveness at a regional level. Nor should the inability to effectively ground policy or to address policy realism be swept under the carpet by explanations about the effervescence of self-determination.

Conclusions

What lessons can be drawn for AEDP goals, from the success of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre as a private sector employer of Aboriginal people? In particular, does the experience of the Theatre suggest that economic equality in the broad context of self-determination should remain a primary goal of AEDP, or given the commercial success of the Theatre, that more joint ventures should be encouraged? While the Tjapukai Dance Theatre seems commercially successful without either a public policy of Aboriginal self-determination or Aboriginal control, regional developments such as native title, tourism, the push for greater resource development by the Queensland State government, and the very success of the Tjapukai Dance Theatre, nevertheless, all create greater political pressure around self-determination issues. On the basis of the evidence in this case study, it may well be that policy realism in AEDP rests on greater promotion and support of regionalism.

Notes

1. CDEP operates at Mona Mona mission and Mantaka community. The catchment area of CDEP extend from Kuranda township to the associated village communities and Mareeba. Recent quarterly figures show there were approximately 125 people registered with the Mona Mona CDEP scheme.

2. Different orthographies are used to represent the different personae: Tjapukai refers only to the Dance Theatre, while Djabugay is the self-ascribed term for the Kuranda Aboriginal people.

3. The shop sells souvenirs, clothing, books, prints, and publications associated with the Theatre, as well as more general Aboriginal souvenirs.

4. Kuranda Aboriginal people were somewhat familiar with tourism. During the 1940s and 1950s , local tourist coaches brought day trippers to Mona Mona to meet the mission residents and buy their art and craft work. In the 1970s and 1980s tourists visiting the Kuranda markets were sufficiently curious about the Aboriginal people in and around the town to ask to photograph them. Nevertheless, in general, Aboriginal contact with tourism was haphazard and no substantial economic benefits flowed to them from such relationships.

5. Michael Quinn, a 'new settler' in Kuranda, is a non-Aboriginal person with qualifications in English as a second language and anthropology. Roy Banning is a Djabugay man from the Redlynch Valley, whose first language is Djabugay. Together, these men are teaching Djabugay language and developing materials, as well as writing songs in Djabugay many of which have been commercially recorded.

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