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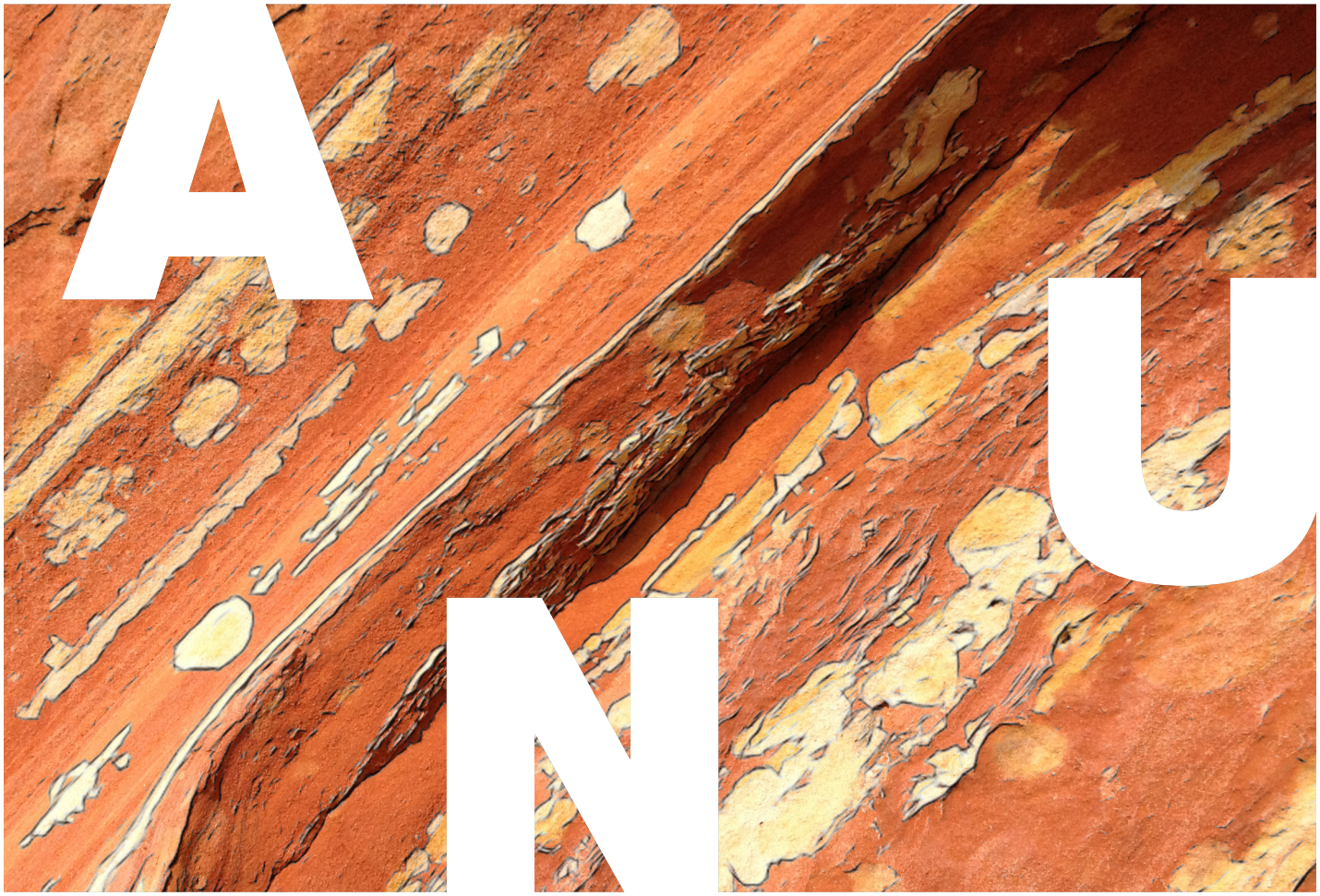

POLICING THE FRONTIER: CHRISTMAS IN BORROLOOLA

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Policing the Frontier: Christmas in Borroloola

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A version of this Topical Issue was published in Crikey on 24 December 2012 under the title, 'No room at the inn for Aboriginal customers in Borroloola'.[1]

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'The role of "punishing the blacks" was usually done by the police', says the historian Tony Roberts in his gruelling Blackheath History lecture of 2009.[2] He was talking about policing the frontier of the south-west Gulf of Carpentaria in the late 19th Century. He might as well have been talking about today, in Borroloola, the main township in the south-west Gulf, because the police are still 'punishing the blacks'.

Borroloola sits on the banks of the McArthur River approximately 1,000 kilometres south-east of Darwin by road. It is an isolated township with a violent colonial history. About 90 per cent of the population is Aboriginal, made up predominantly of Garawa, Gudanji, Mara, Waanyi and Yanyuwa peoples. Borroloola is an open town where most of the small white population live up in the subdivision, on higher ground, in superior housing, behind the school. On the edges of the township are the 'camps' of the Aboriginal groups. All the businesses, except one, are owned and managed by the white population.

In the lead up to Christmas the south-west Gulf is sweltering, with temperatures in the forties. It was still 35 degrees at seven in the evening when I arrived on the 10 December 2012. The Build-up is lingering; there's little rain as yet and things are getting uncomfortable. People are looking forward to the wet season finally arriving, bringing the country back to life and cooling things down a bit. Like most Australians, the people of Borroloola are also looking forward to catching up with family and friends and enjoying the Christmas break. Many families have been putting away a bit of money each week on Chrisco Christmas hampers throughout the year.

Chrisco has been in business for 30 years, supplying hampers in Australia since 1997. It boasts a sound reputation. 'Chrisco: Helping everyone save for a magical Christmas!' is what the company's website proclaims.[3] There are a variety of Christmas hampers on offer, targeted to different tastes and different budgets.

Several family-oriented hampers don't have alcohol listed in their contents, but are accompanied on the Chrisco website by the image of a bottle of sparkling wine; thrown in for good cheer perhaps. If it's alcohol that you want for Christmas, then Chrisco will also do a variety of hampers from Bundaberg, Jack

Daniels, Mixed Spirits or the Happy Hour Mix, all of which can be paid off over 52 weeks, making them accessible to people on small incomes. There is a small warning down at the bottom of the Chrisco website drawing people's attention to the *Liquor Act* 2007 and the *Liquor Control Reform Act* 1998, but there's nothing about the laws imposed through Northern Territory Emergency Intervention (NTER) or what's now politely called the Stronger Futures Framework, and dangers of taking grog into what have been defined, until recently, as Prescribed Areas. Perhaps, given what unfolded in Borroloola when Chrisco's hampers arrived two weeks before Christmas, there should be.

As people began making their way to the Pandion Haulage depot in Borroloola, where the hampers had been delivered, police were 'tipped off' that the Christmas Hampers were on their way to Borroloola and some of them contained alcohol.

It's not illegal to bring alcohol into the open town of Borroloola, but it is illegal to take it into the Prescribed Areas—the Aboriginal Camps. The police—in their designation as community police officers—could have informed Aboriginal people at the Pandion depot that they couldn't take any hamper containing grog back to their homes, but instead they called in reinforcements from Katherine—some 670 kilometres away—and waited. They waited until Aboriginal people brought their Christmas hampers into the Prescribed Areas and then conducted, as they describe it on the Northern Territory Police Facebook page with accompanying photographs, a 'detection and seizure operation' that resulted in the seizure of '18 bottles of assorted spirits and 106 assorted spirits cans, and three vehicles'.[4]

Yes, that's right, you can lose your vehicle for transporting alcohol into Prescribed Areas, regardless of whether you were doing so intentionally or as happened to at least one unfortunate vehicle owner, were merely giving a lift to someone who couldn't carry their Christmas hamper.

This type of activity has the look of entrapment. It reeks of punishment. Aboriginal people see it as deeply unfair.

On 11 December, in response to the heavy-handed police tactics, and in the middle of a significant initiation ceremony, Garawa, Gudanji, Mara, Waanyi and Yanyuwa leaders and community members met with the police. It was a hot day and a hot meeting. Senior Aboriginal people were dismayed that they hadn't been spoken to about a problem that was about to unfold. They were particularly aggrieved because they have been trying for years to manage alcohol in the town—especially the management practices of the local pub, operating at one time under the licence 'Cash Cow'—while getting little support from government agencies. What was most offensive to Aboriginal leaders was that both the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth Governments are currently trying to draft an Alcohol Management Plan, 'a living progressing document', and apparently desperately seeking the involvement of 'the Aboriginal community'—some cynically say so the community consultation box can be ticked. Getting representative Aboriginal input is proving difficult. Aboriginal leaders say there's no point developing a plan that has no involvement from the people who drink. They also say the heavy-handed tactics are pushing grog consumption to the fringes of the township where people can't be looked out for. It sends young men and women to their deaths as they drive outback roads dotted with wallabies and stock to the nearest roadhouse where they can buy the hot stuff. The carnage from these trips is leaving deep scars across many families.

In response to the meeting the police didn't invite senior Aboriginal representatives to sit down with them and work things out. Instead, they erected a road-block outside one of the Aboriginal camps; the place where the most articulate and vocal critics of top-down policing live. One community leader, on his way to an initiation ceremony with old men was punished for not carrying his drivers licence.

Who is accountable for this debacle?

Perhaps it's the Aboriginal drinkers, on the lookout for grog to feed that constant desire, to numb the pain of existence. But we know that Borroloola has no dry-out place, no counselling services. Money pours into the local medical centre to deal predominantly with the after effects of grog abuse.

Perhaps it's the wider Aboriginal community, tired of trying to make themselves heard in the whirlwind of top-down government programs to improve their lives.

Perhaps it's Chrisco. Maybe they need to develop polices about sending alcohol out to remote areas where Aboriginal populations live in areas prescribed as alcohol free.

Perhaps the family-owned and operated Pandion could have contacted senior Aboriginal people and raised the issue that they were delivering grog that in all likelihood would end up in the Prescribed Areas.

Perhaps it's the Northern Territory Police, who had ample opportunity to demonstrate community policing by working with Aboriginal leaders to nip the problem in the bud. They could have been at the Pandion depot, with Aboriginal leaders, and asked people to check their hampers to make sure there was no grog in them and to remind people that they could not take the grog into the Prescribed Areas.

Looking for explanations is not always helpful. But learning from these types of experiences might be. And it's here that the Garawa, Gudanji, Mara, Waanyi and Yanyuwa people are hoping the Northern Territory Police might learn something by reflecting on the principles of productive community policing.

Community policing is fundamentally an alliance between the police and the community identifying and solving community problems together. The police are not the sole guardians of law and order; all members of the community become active collaborators in the effort to enhance the safety and quality of 'their community'. Community policing can have far-reaching implications bringing about change, improving people's circumstances and saving tax-payers' funds. The essential ingredient of community policing is community members actively participating in the process of problem solving. This is not always easy to achieve as it requires profound changes within the police organisation and culture, and this is where the Northern Territory Police need to reflect and change their practices so that they don't slip back into the old role of 'punishing the blacks'.

Notes

1. See <http://www.crikey.com.au/2012/12/24/no-room-at-the-inn-for-aboriginal-customers-in-borroloola/>

2. "Black-White relations in the Gulf Country to 1950" by Tony Roberts, Blackheath History Forum, Saturday 29 August 2009, available at <http://www.blackheathhistoryforum.org.au/images/stories/tonyroberts.pdf>.

3. See <http://www.chrisco.com.au/>

4. See <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Northern-Territory-Police-Force/143359822402689?fref=ts>