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THE ABORIGINAL PASTORAL ENTERPRISE IN SELF-DETERMINATION POLICY

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Introduction

This chapter describes the origins, development and operation of Aboriginal Cattle Enterprises (ACEs) as efforts by governments to assist Aboriginal self-determination in the Northern Territory of Australia. Few ACEs satisfied their Indigenous participants and bureaucratic champions. I draw on agronomist Stuart Phillpot's study of Northern Territory ACEs in the period 1972–96 and on my own thesis research.¹ After contextually assessing two ACEs (the Puraiya Cattle Company at Ti Tree and the Ngarliyikirlangu Pastoral Company at Yuendumu), Phillpot found that government support did not allow for ACEs' multiple land use aspirations and that this led to those organisations' decline. While Phillpot explains this outcome by pointing to poor communication, misunderstood and undiscerned cultural assumptions, and the inflexibility and variability of government funding, he does not assess the effects of the internal social dynamics of the Aboriginal groups involved in ACEs. I will argue that the growing gap between generations was also significant in determining the sector's long-term viability. Drawing on analyses of social

1 Phillpot, 'Black Pastoralism'; Ward, 'Gurindji people'.

change among Aboriginal groups beyond the Territory, I will suggest that the lessons drawn by Phillipot and myself are of wider relevance in northern and Central Australia.

Origins

When the Labor Government, on the advice of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs, announced in 1972 that it would 'restore to the Aboriginal people of Australia their lost power of self-determination in economic, social and political affairs', a novel economic and geographic problem faced thousands of Aboriginal people in Australia's remote centre and north.² During colonial settlement, Europeans had occupied Aboriginal people's lands for the purposes of farming cattle and sheep. For decades prior to the mid-1960s, pastoralists relied on the presence on their leases of a pool of labour made up of Aboriginal traditional owners. Aboriginal people subsisting on pastoral leases had gained little or no cash income, as they were paid in rations or in small wage payments held in trust. It was rare, however, for their employment to exceed 30 weeks per year.³ In the 1950s, the Australian Government increasingly took responsibility for Aboriginal people, resulting in the award of invalid, aged and nursing pensions to Aboriginal adults in 1959.⁴ Although pastoralists and missionaries continued to supply goods rather than pass on the entire benefit as cash, people were exposed to money from this time in the form of a small proportion of the government allowances and a low cash wage for employees. By the early 1960s in the Northern Territory, the amount paid to Aboriginal workers was still approximately only 20 per cent of the *Cattle Station Industry (Northern Territory) Award 1951*.⁵

By the late 1960s, this situation was changing, as investment in the beef industry reduced the demand for labour and as Aboriginal people explored opportunities to live in new ways on missions, government settlements and in towns. In line with assimilation policy, both the North Australia Workers' Union and the Commonwealth Government argued that Aboriginal workers should get the same protection of their living standards that other employees enjoyed and, in March 1966, after

2 See Whitlam, 'Statement'.

3 Peterson, 'Capitalism', 90.

4 Hamilton, 'Aboriginal Women', 174; Rowse, *White Flour*, 133.

5 Berndt and Berndt, *End of an Era*, 71.

weighing union and government submissions against the pastoralists' warnings of dis-employment, the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission decided to include male Aboriginal workers in the Cattle Station Industry (Northern Territory) Award (while authorising lower wages for those classified as 'slow workers').

The 'equal wages' decision, as it became known, contributed to a decline in employer demand for labour and thus to a fall in the number of Aboriginal people employed and/or residing on Northern Territory pastoral leases. According to government figures, 4,676 Aboriginal people resided on pastoral properties in 1965, and by 1969 this figure had declined to 4,305.⁶ In the opinion of policymakers, the weakening attachment of many Aboriginal people to the pastoral industry created both problems and opportunities for them. Some people moved off leases, at either their own or the lessee's initiative. Those station camps that persisted did so with great uncertainty about their future as a labour force entitled to unemployment benefits and as resident communities entitled to basic services (health, housing and education). Some Aboriginal groups that were reluctant to terminate their involvement with the pastoral industry wished to recast their pastoral activities on their own terms. As well, growing political support for the idea that Aboriginal people had customary rights to own land raised the question of the tenure of Aboriginal groups still resident on pastoral leases that included some or all of their traditional country.

To consider the future of Indigenous people on Northern Territory pastoral communities, in December 1970 the Gorton Government commissioned a team of experts, chaired by Cecil Gibb, Professor of Psychology at The Australian National University. The committee's terms of reference included:

- To survey the situation of Aborigines on pastoral properties in the Northern Territory so as to identify problems and special needs;
- To examine ways by which [their] economic and social conditions may be improved;
- To see whether new or additional steps need to be taken to give effect to existing policies for Aboriginal communities on pastoral properties.⁷

6 Gibb, *The Report*, 34.

7 Gibb, *The Report*, 2.

The Gibb Committee predicted that many Aboriginal people would in future have to find employment outside the pastoral industry, and it recommended strengthening ‘a wider ranging employment service to Aborigines to encourage and assist their training and placement in work in other areas as well as on pastoral properties’.⁸ For those who would remain on pastoral properties, the Gibb Committee proposed that land should be excised from pastoral holdings for residential and small-scale subsistence-type activities. Recognising the aspirations of some Aboriginal people to own, manage and be employed by their own cattle enterprises, the committee recommended that the government:

- [Encourage and help Aborigines financially] to establish enterprises in activities serving the cattle industry e.g. contract trucking, mustering, fencing and yard building, bore sinking, share farming etc (with experienced managers).
- [W]herever a coherent group of Aborigines indicates effective interest in establishing a group-owned enterprise it should be encouraged if the enterprises possesses reasonable prospects of success; [government grants] together with technical and managerial expertise could be justified.⁹

The committee also recommended that the government legislate to ‘enable an Aboriginal Community Society to be loosely incorporated’, leading to the *Aboriginal Councils and Associations Act 1976*. Thus, the ACE became possible as legislation, and government land purchases and operational funding facilitated the participation of Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry through novel, hybrid enterprises. I argue that their (usually unanticipated, misunderstood and/or inadequately resolved) hybridity made them largely unsuccessful vehicles of self-determination policy.

The Aboriginal pastoral sector

The Gorton Government had established the Commonwealth Capital Fund under the *Aboriginal Enterprises (Assistance) Act 1968* to assist Aboriginal people to establish business enterprises; this was the source of the government’s first land purchases for Aboriginal groups. In October 1971, the McMahon Government was persuaded to allocate funds for the

8 Gibb, *The Report*, 72–77.

9 Gibb, *The Report*, 72–77.

purchase of pastoral leases for both economic and social purposes. Senior bureaucrats in the Department of the Interior and Liberal–Country Party Coalition politicians impeded grants to Aboriginal individuals and/or groups of individuals (rather than families, clan groups or ‘communities’).¹⁰

Among the Aboriginal groups frustrated by government resistance to arguments for Aboriginal land rights were the Gurindji, employed on Wave Hill Station in the Victoria River District of the Northern Territory. In the years 1966–72, Gurindji elders and their activist supporters had generated much publicity for their quest to own land on which they could make a living by raising beef cattle. On coming to power, the Whitlam Government favoured such aspirations and passed the *Aboriginal Land Fund Act 1974*, implementing a decision made in 1972 by the McMahon Government (following a Gibb Report recommendation). This established the Aboriginal Land Fund Commission (ALFC) – an expert statutory body to manage the purchase of pastoral land for Aboriginal people. The ALFC worked in liaison with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs (DAA).

Under the policy of self-determination, government consulted groups such as the Gurindji and sought to adapt the laws and policies of the settler state to assist the realisation of their aspirations. I argue that the government gave insufficient thought to whether incorporated proprietary companies were appropriate vehicles for remote Indigenous aspirations. In the period of the Whitlam Government, the ALFC purchased three pastoral properties or parts of pastoral properties. One was made on behalf of the Gurindji: Wattie Creek, or Daguragu, which was then part of Wave Hill Station. These purchases by the Whitlam Government were the first of many. By 1993, 20 pastoral leases had been purchased, and cattle enterprises had continued or been initiated on a further 13 properties contained within former reserve land, now held under ‘Aboriginal freehold’ title granted through the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (ALRA). During the period of the Fraser Government (1975–83), the ALFC’s land-buying passed in 1980 to the new Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC). In 1990, during the period of the Hawke and Keating governments (1983–96), the land-buying program passed from ADC to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). Such grants and purchases are summarised in the table below:

10 Palmer, *Buying Back*, 21–23.

Table 3.1: Northern Territory Aboriginal communities with Aboriginal Cattle Enterprises (ACEs) on Aboriginal freehold or leasehold land with date of title (granted or purchased) prior to 1993.

Communities with Cattle Enterprise	Year Freehold Granted or Lease Purchased
Murwangi	ALRA 1976*
Gulin Gulin	ALRA 1976*
Oenpelli/Gunbalunya	ALRA 1976*
Croker Island	ALRA 1976*
Yugal	ALRA 1976*
Daly River	ALRA 1976*
Lajamanu	ALRA 1976*
Yuendumu	ALRA 1976*
Santa Teresa	ALRA 1976*
Haasts Bluff Land Trust	ALRA 1976*
Palumpa	Pastoral Lease 1976
Peppimenarti	Pastoral Lease 1976
Beswick (Jimboingal)	Pastoral Lease 1976
Amanbidjji	Pastoral Lease 1973
Yarralin	Pastoral Lease 1973
Willowra	Pastoral Lease 1973
Daguragu	Pastoral Lease 1975
Ti Tree	Pastoral Lease 1975
Yuelamu	Pastoral Lease 1976
Utopia	Pastoral Lease 1976
Robinson River	Pastoral Lease 1980
Mt Barkly	Pastoral Lease 1981
Eva Valley	Pastoral Lease 1984
McLaren Creek	Pastoral Lease 1985
Atula	Pastoral Lease 1989
Tanami Downs	Pastoral Lease 1989
Hodgson Downs	Pastoral Lease 1990
Elsley	Pastoral Lease 1991
Fitzroy	Pastoral Lease 1991
Muckaty	Pastoral Lease 1991
Mistake Creek	Pastoral Lease 1992
Loves Creek	Pastoral Lease 1992
Alcoota	Pastoral Lease 1993

*ALRA 1976: In these communities, cattle enterprises were operated by mission or government authorities on land that was 'reserve' until the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976* converted the tenure to Aboriginal freehold title.

Source: Adapted from Hanlon and Phillipot, 'Rural Development', 38–40.

To benefit from gaining title (either by purchase or as an effect of the ALRA), Aboriginal cattle enthusiasts were obliged to incorporate. Charles Rowley, founding chair of the ALFC, later reflected that ‘the transfer of land or other property to a group long dispossessed brings a new upheaval, as new problems of its use, of leadership, and distribution of profit, are thrashed out’.¹¹ Government policy was to vest grantees with the responsibility of a lessee. For instance, the Daguragu Pastoral Lease granted to Gurindji people in 1975 by the Whitlam Government (as codified by the *Northern Territory Crown Lands Ordinance 1971*) determined the tenure and terms, and thus the nature and timing, of the Muramulla Company’s improvements. It was a condition of ACEs’ funding that the grantees seek profit by selling beef. When government-contracted consultant agronomists predicted that ACEs would be able to return a net profit with requisite monitoring and financial and ‘technical’ (practical) support, governments only committed to provide ACEs with financial support until they made a profit.

ACEs were typically led at a local level by a coterie of Aboriginal former stockmen, guiding the involvement of their families or clans. Those elders were commonly responsible to a much larger group of kin and other groups comprising the landholding body. Usually these groups were thoroughly proficient in all the physical operations of a cattle station, with comprehensive ecological knowledge of their leasehold. They did not usually possess the knowledge required to manage the businesses that they were funded to run, however. In most cases, they had been deliberately denied the opportunity to gain managerial knowledge during their earlier experiences as pastoral industry subordinates.

The governmental rationale for support

While the Whitlam Government rushed to support remote incorporated Aboriginal groups with funding on the basis of its self-determination and Aboriginal land rights policies, in 1975 the DAA applied six criteria to assess eligibility to receive large developmental grants: precedents for government assistance, benefits to the community, consultation, implications of the request *not* being met, eligibility and economic feasibility. In Table 3.2, these criteria are presented (in bold); to illustrate

11 Rowley, ‘Aboriginal Land Fund’, 259.

their operational meaning in regard to the Gurindji, I have quoted the responses to each of a DAA Project Officer regarding the Gurindji's Muramulla Company.

Table 3.2: DAA 'Report on Application for Funds', 1975, Aboriginal cattle project funding assessment, Muramulla Cattle Company.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Precedents for Government Assistance: The Government has previously supported pastoral projects for Aboriginal community enterprises e.g. the Murin, Unia and Yugal cattle projects. In addition, the Government has accepted the Gurindji claim to the land and has promised to support the project; 2. Benefits to the community: The project will provide both regular and substantial employment and also provide significant long-term financial benefits, [such as] improved services for the community, resulting from the generation of funds from the pastoral project; 3. Consultation: Departmental officers have been in close liaison with the Daguragu Community, and the proposal is in accordance with the desires and ambitions of the community; 4. Implications of the request not being met [emphasis mine]: If the government did not provide funds to develop this area, the community would be most disappointed and perhaps even feel betrayed. There would undoubtedly be national publicity; 5. Eligibility: The Muramulla Company has nine Gurindji people as directors, each holding a one dollar share in trust for the Muramulla Gurindji Association, which represents the full Aboriginal community at Daguragu. Thus the Muramulla Company is eligible to receive assistance from the government; 6. Economic feasibility: The area involved was formerly part of the Wave Hill Station and this country is suitable for a pastoral property. Wave Hill Station has operated successfully for a number of years and the only factor that would vary the viability of the Muramulla Gurindji project from that of Wave Hill Station is its size. ... The fact that the Department has divided Wave Hill Station lease may be construed as indicating that they consider the Muramulla Gurindji lease as being sufficient for a viable pastoral project.

Source: NAA E460, 1975/137.

The project officer's responses suggest a Whitlam Government predisposition to support the Gurindji's Muramulla operation on flimsy or assumed grounds, as we see below:

1. **Precedents for government assistance:** The use of government assistance 'precedents' to justify the provision of further government assistance is largely self-supporting.
2. **Benefits to the community:** The 'benefits to the community' perceived by the DAA are listed without any evidence. They are apparently justified by the assumption that a private company (Muramulla) should or could legally fulfil a (municipal?) service provision role within a 'community'.

3. **Consultation:** Records show that prior consultation by departmental officers had not reflected ‘close liaison with the Daguragu Community’, and neither had it successfully identified the actual nature of ‘the desires and ambitions’ of the ‘community’. Instead, extremely rushed consultations conducted in 1973 had focused on determining whether the land sought by the Gurindji might possibly be converted into a conventionally managed, profitable cattle station.¹²
4. **Implications of the request *not* being met:** While Wattie Creek had been the object of the ALP (Australian Labor Party)’s remedial intentions for eight years (1967–75), the bureaucracy was under pressure to resolve the Gurindji’s situation as quickly as possible.
5. **Eligibility:** In light of the intergenerational tension affecting many Aboriginal groups in the period (discussed below), any claim that an organ derivative of the elders’ Muramulla Company (or any other incorporated body) was representative of a ‘full Aboriginal community’ is highly suspect.
6. **Economic feasibility:** The claim that the Gurindji leasehold was ‘suitable for a pastoral property [because] Wave Hill Station has operated successfully [on it] for a number of years’ fails to take into account both the larger size of the station and the variability of country within a financially viable pastoral lease. The area excised by the Vestey company for the Gurindji comprised the poorest pastoral country of Wave Hill Station.

The origins of many ACEs’ misfortunes can be gleaned from the DAA’s justification of the Muramulla Company’s initial funding. In 1975 the government believed that the use to which the Gurindji would put their lease had already been decided by the Gurindji and the government, and that this understanding had been developed with the Gurindji’s full knowledge and participation. By such means, pronounced contradictions and elisions characterised ACEs’ structure and operations.

The government’s confidence that the Gurindji knew what they wanted and that the government could provide it matched the new rhetoric of self-determination policy, but it was disingenuous to claim that the legal and financial terms of the Muramulla ‘proposal is in accordance with the desires and ambitions of the community’. While it was true that the entire

12 ‘Visit of AACM Representatives ... to Wave Hill Station, Libanungu and Daguragu’, 13–16 June 1973, NAA F985, 1972/1049.

Muramulla Board had signed a statement requesting ‘a big station ... same as other people have got it’, there is no evidence that the full financial management, property development and corporate governance implications of such statements had been explained to this group of Aboriginal elders; nor is there evidence that the Gurindji grasped the extent to which the industry itself had changed in the decade since they had terminated their routine employment in it.¹³ In conversations with the Muramulla proponents, DAA and Australian Agricultural Consultancy Management (AACM) staff had proposed a conventional pastoral station business model, yet these conversations did not include the time-consuming, expert-facilitated process required to develop a shared understanding of what this might mean for the Gurindji.¹⁴ Wishing to minimise perceptions of financial indiscretion and profligacy, the Whitlam Government and its successor had also promoted a mainstream ‘non-Aboriginal’ model of animal husbandry. In 1973, DAA staff had opined that ‘the manner in which the Gurindji [operate] the project will ... *depend on the terms of the Government* making finance available for securing the lease and establishing the project [emphasis added]’.¹⁵ For such officials, consultation about ACEs’ ‘manner’ of operation was ultimately unnecessary. According to its internal reasoning, the government could create an ‘Aboriginal’ project for the Gurindji simply by giving that label to a project designed on the government’s terms. Further, according to the DAA:

The basis of costing and income estimation are [sic] determined as for a non-Aboriginal project. It is probable that the income of an Aboriginal-operated project will be less and the costs greater if professional management is not provided [emphasis added].¹⁶

By requiring that the Muramulla enterprise be supervised by two literate, management-experienced, pastoral industry advisers, the government imposed a ‘non-Aboriginal project’ model on the Gurindji and other groups. For the DAA and the various governments that would deal with ACEs, financial accountability and profit-maximisation were paramount. How these were achieved and the extent of Aboriginal management was functionally unimportant.

13 Committee of Muramulla Gurindji Company to Managing Director of Vestey, [12 December 1970], Oke Personal Collection.

14 ‘Visit of AACM Representatives ... to Wave Hill Station, Libanungu and Daguragu’, 13–16 June 1973, NAA F985, 1972/1049.

15 ‘Muramulla Gurindji Co Pty Ltd – Directors Report’, 1 June 1977, NAA F1, 1975/4091.

16 ‘Muramulla Gurindji Co Pty Ltd – Directors Report’, 1 June 1977, NAA F1, 1975/4091.

Unarticulated and contrasting Aboriginal visions

In addition to lacking financial and governance knowledge, the Aboriginal leaders of ACEs pursued goals at cross-purposes with, and sometimes unknown to, government officials. They intended that any of their language group who sought food and/or an income from their cattle operations would be provided for, yet the companies they ostensibly managed were designed to employ fewer than a dozen individuals on each station, with negligible profits. Anthropologist Gillian Cowlshaw describes a common situation: the government-employed cattle adviser and consultant working with the Jandi cattle company at Jimboingal near Katherine were ignorant of the aims, priorities and social structure of the Aboriginal group that nominally led the enterprise.¹⁷ Officials were more indifferent to Indigenous cattle goals than the rhetoric of self-determination policy purported them to be, and it is questionable whether governments would have regulated ACEs more flexibly and/or subsidised them more generously had they known Aboriginal cattle aspirations better.

As board members of proprietary companies, Aboriginal elders were required to contribute to organisational governance, but their past experience had not equipped them to provide financial oversight. The implementation of self-determination policy therefore required apparent mistruths and elisions from them, solicited by those working in their name and resulting in implausible 'Directors' Reports', which included statements from old Indigenous stockmen, lacking formal education such as the following:

The Directors submit the accounts of the Company and report as follows: [We have taken] reasonable steps, before the profit and loss statement and balance sheet were made out, to ascertain what action had been taken in relation to the writing off of bad debts and the making of provisions for doubtful debts [etc.].¹⁸

For such statements to be true, their signatories would have required training in English literacy and business. Rather than explain matters to Indigenous board members, non-Indigenous members of the enterprises'

17 See Cowlshaw, 'Blackfella Boss'.

18 'Muramulla Gurindji Co Pty Ltd – Directors Report', 1 June 1977, NAA F1, 1975/4091.

advisory, funding, staffing and operational arms frequently attempted to retain their authority over what they perceived as their areas of operation. Very few individuals within the Gurindji enterprises or in the 'support' organisations of their interlocutors possessed the local, financial, entrepreneurial, pastoral, ecological and Aboriginal/social knowledge required, yet the sectoral need for such training was not acted on until the 1980s.¹⁹

Even in domains in which Aboriginal workers believed themselves to be highly skilled, such as the management of herds, there were conflicts between 'white'/'modern' and 'Aboriginal' approaches. Gurindji cattlemen, for instance, vowed that their enterprise would never muster by plane, despite sustained pressure from the Muramulla Company's funding bodies, often relayed through the consultant agronomist they had been forced to employ.²⁰ Their resolute refusal can be interpreted in different ways: as their failure to appreciate economic imperatives and as a public 'statement' affirming the elders' own abilities and their strong belief in the value of cattle work for their sons and nephews – whatever the cost. It is not clear whether the DAA's officers appreciated that the elders' true motives in 'running cattle' were more about the continuation of a certain culture of work than about the creation of a business enterprise.

Cowlishaw points out that the non-Indigenous protagonists of ACEs frequently failed to realise or underplayed the fact that conflicts within ACEs took place in a context of unequal power that '[was] created by, and effectively protects, the wider economic and political structures'.²¹ The conflicts that plagued ACEs were not, in other words, only 'between cultures, but between groups of people with different access to resources'.²² ACEs' non-Indigenous intermediaries either did not understand that they embodied Anglo-European governmental values or did not wish to question those values; rarely did they explain or question the regulations, statutes, social conventions and laws in which these values were encoded. Rather, the encoding of these cultural principles revealed to the Aboriginal people that their own values and knowledge were of limited importance. This recognition frequently hastened the withdrawal of Aboriginal people from what they saw as essentially 'whitefella' operations.

19 Lovegrove [DAA] to Muramulla, 3 March 1976, NAA E460, 1981/256, Part 2.

20 'Report and Financials ...', September 1978', NAA E629, 1978/7/7581.

21 Cowlishaw, 'Blackfella Boss', 68.

22 Cowlishaw, 'Blackfella Boss', 61.

In addition to being somewhat handicapped by their hybridity, ACEs could not control global beef prices or governments' policies and financial support. The Fraser Government (elected 13 December 1975) reduced funds to the entire Aboriginal Affairs portfolio, and a phase of increasing emphasis on profitability by funding bodies began.²³ This increasingly adversarial political and ideological environment was exacerbated when the Australian Parliament granted self-government to the Northern Territory in July 1978.²⁴ More challenging to ACEs was the federal Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign (BTEC), however.

Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign

BTEC required that all pastoralists in the nation would capture and test every beast on their land (a feat never achieved before), destroy any infected animals, and build any fencing required to properly manage their herd in the future.²⁵ Although the federal government assisted landholders with the costs of de- and re-stocking, the Commonwealth reported that, 'as the campaign proceeds into the difficult parts of northern Australia, the costs of eradication rise rapidly, raising doubts about the ability of cattle producers to meet these costs and remain viable'.²⁶ Experts described BTEC as 'undoubtedly the most significant factor to impact on the industry since World War II'.²⁷ At the time, one experienced consultant warned that it might 'destroy' the Aboriginal pastoral sector.²⁸ According to an expert:

BTEC's approach to disease eradication forced the modernisation of the pastoral industry, with disproportionate impact on the Aboriginal sector. The historical mode of pastoralism in the NT was deemed no longer adequate to meet the demands of the modern international cattle market. Until the 1970s, cattle control in Northern and Central Australia had been sporadic and incomplete. The owners of most properties had made their living from irregular harvests of what were essentially feral populations. Other stations

23 Lovegrove [DAA] to Muramulla, 3 March 1976, NAA E460, 1981/256, Part 2.

24 Jaensch and Loveday, *Under One Flag*, 5.

25 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 'Eradication Success'.

26 Stoneham and Johnson, 'Australian Brucellosis', 2.

27 Hanlon and Phillpot, *Rural Development*, 28.

28 Hanlon, 'Aboriginal Pastoral', 187.

had generally mustered once a year, with no expectation that all cattle would be accounted for. Very few stations had the yards, races and crushes needed for branding; stockmen lassooed the calves and pulled them to the ground. Even on company-owned stations in the most productive cattle country, there had been virtually no separation of different classes of cattle.²⁹

Corporations owning multiple properties had already modernised before the BTEC. According to Graeme Fagan, the manager of Wave Hill Station, by the early 1980s the station's wealthy owner had ensured that:

[Cattle] were mustered twice a year, regardless of BTEC. ... We did four rounds a year of branding and weaning. We had paddocks where we could isolate cattle – 'tail-tag' paddocks they were called. You could have three or four [such paddocks, and] cattle couldn't move out of them ... until you tested them.³⁰

Such standards remained far beyond the reach of the Muramulla Company and most ACEs. Instead, their board members were increasingly marginalised and alienated by the industry's growing, technologised managerialism – a characteristic of the 'new pastoralism' of which they had no previous experience.

Generally, the position of Aboriginal cattle operations in a marginal industry was more tenuous than that of their competitors. They were usually new and relatively undeveloped leaseholds, and were thus required to do more work to meet the campaign's requirements. Their proponents also had little or no experience with the financial aspects of long-term herd management on which they could rely to 'ride out' the effects of BTEC. Nonetheless, unlike other 'mandatory' conditions placed on pastoralists by the state, non-compliance with BTEC was not an option. The primary condition of an approved plan was that a lessee be able to reliably test their entire herd. When the lessee was unable to do so, the government killed untested animals and paid the lessee compensation for their loss.³¹ Unable to commit themselves to an approved disease eradication plan, all but three of the ACE leases in the Northern Territory were fully or partially destocked during BTEC.³²

29 Lehane, *Beating the Odds*, 230.

30 Graeme Fagan interviewed by Charlie Ward, September 2012, NTRS 3609, BWF 42, Northern Territory Archives Service, Darwin.

31 Lehane, *Beating the Odds*, 196.

32 Phillpot, 'Black pastoralism', 338–39.

We should not assume that BTEC affected all ACEs in the same way. Like the Daguragu lease, the holdings of the Puraiya Cattle Company were destocked under BTEC during 1980–83. By 1996 it had recovered sufficiently to achieve some commercial viability, albeit on the basis of substantial subsidies. According to Phillpot, while the terms under which the company was established and its leasehold purchased were inimical to the Anmatyere people's self-determination and self-management, the shareholders of the company (six Anmatyere families) received ongoing material benefit.³³ In contrast, the Ngarliyikirlangu Pastoral Company at Yuendumu met BTEC requirements. Despite this success, its variable funding arrangements, staffing issues and a lack of training combined with poor markets and climatic conditions to render it unviable by 1996.³⁴

Intergenerational dissociation

Regardless of the significantly 'European' composition of their cattle operations, ACEs' elderly Aboriginal leaders commonly intended to transfer the management of their enterprise to their descendants. Complicating this process was a combination of economic, social and technological factors that combined to hasten processes of intergenerational social dissociation, however. To understand how these disaggregative social processes impacted ACEs and other government-funded Aboriginal organisations, it is necessary to describe the clash between the structure and social norms cohering Aboriginal societies and the social policies of the Whitlam Government that were then integrating remote Indigenous Australians into Australia's economy. Increasing monetary income of Aboriginal people from wages and social welfare enfranchised and individualised them as consumers. Many remote Aboriginal people, especially the young, embraced aspects of this social change with enthusiasm, while the older cohort were commonly resistant.

A disaggregative impulse had been present within remote groups such as the Gurindji for decades. Anthropologists in the 1930s–50s observed that young Gurindji men and women were reluctant to fully participate in the ceremonial life valued by their elders.³⁵ Another significant source of intergenerational tension was the monopolisation of young women's

33 Phillpot, 'Black Pastoralism', 237.

34 Phillpot, 'Black Pastoralism', 280.

35 Berndt, *Women's Changing*, 63.

sexuality by older men, according to Aboriginal societies' systems of kinship. Polygyny was practised, and kinship systems – mostly as interpreted and enforced by male elders – determined which man a woman might marry. Anecdotal evidence and ethnographic research across remote regions of Australia suggest that, increasingly in the post-contact era, many young women harboured resentment towards male elders for forcing them into unwanted unions, and many young men likewise resented the same elders for 'taking' their potential partners.³⁶ Catherine Berndt believed such tensions were so widespread that she described 'young people who were enticed by the prospect of brighter lights and greener pastures' as the 'Trojan Horse' compounding the difficulties of older Aboriginal people in resisting what they saw as the damaging effects of their society's engagement with the settler mainstream.³⁷ Anthropologist Les Hiatt argued that the inequitable distribution of power within Aboriginal society made it 'vulnerable to external challenge and susceptible to internal collapse'.³⁸ Similar tensions within Gurindji society were paralleled in hundreds of other Indigenous groups across Australia.

Rapid dissociation among members of Aboriginal societies occurred in the 1970s–80s, exacerbated by the payment of award wages to Aboriginal male pastoral workers from December 1968. More jobs outside the pastoral industry were available in the 1970s, mostly in the new 'Aboriginal' organisations, and unemployment benefits were also easier to obtain. The increasing availability of cash had powerful equalising and destabilising effects on remote societies, which were unaccustomed to regular surplus. Notwithstanding the obligations of remote Indigenous people's kinship-based, demand sharing economies, this equalisation of income empowered young adults in relation to their powerful elders.³⁹ According to anthropologist David Martin, among the Wik people in North Queensland, 'having an independent income allowed individuals – if they so choose – to obtain basic necessities such as food outside the network of reciprocal rights and obligation of the Wik domain'.⁴⁰ These changes greatly facilitated young people's independence from their parents' generation and bolstered their ability to resist the demands of their elders regarding their employment and much else.

36 McKnight, *Going the Whiteman's*, xix–xxvi.

37 Berndt, 'Out of the frying pan', 403.

38 Hiatt, *Arguments About*, 98.

39 Sansom, *The Camp*, 254; Rowse, 'From Houses', 56.

40 Martin, 'Autonomy', 117.

Intergenerational transfer of leadership within ACEs was also undermined in other ways. Young Aboriginal men who worked or who may have wished to work in the industry found that mainstream cattle stations paid better than ACEs subsidised by the federal government's Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme. By the early 1980s, Muramulla employed their Indigenous staff via participation in Daguragu Council's CDEP scheme. Under CDEP arrangements, a subsidised allowance was paid to company staff via Daguragu Council, but even with 'top-up' from Muramulla, the amount was short of the award paid on mainstream commercial stations. In addition, Aboriginal youth, increasingly influenced by Western values and by their long-term occupation of housing, were less interested in pastoral work.⁴¹

Conclusion

In 1986, members of the Muramulla Board conceded privately that the Gurindji's cattle enterprise – and their property – was getting away from them. Muramulla remained a 'strictly European legal animal', and by the time governance training – its board members' first – was planned, cattle work had become an occasional, recreational pursuit.⁴² When Muramulla was liquidated in the late 1980s after being destocked by BTEC, the elders' most valued 'pillar' of Gurindji self-determination collapsed. Other ACEs also declined, as Phillpot describes. In 1980, 28 ACEs were operating in the Northern Territory; by 1988, there were 12.⁴³ By the mid-1990s, there were only six subsidised ACEs functioning in the Territory. In combination with drought, lower beef prices and BTEC, funding bodies' exclusive criterion of commercial viability made an increasing number of ACEs unviable.

Although ACEs were created to cater to the cattle-related aspirations of Aboriginal leaders, they were corporate entities built on unstable and incongruous foundations. ACEs were designed by government officers and their advisers to function, if need be, without the input or labour of their Aboriginal protagonists and intended beneficiaries. The regulatory and funding framework for ACEs differed little from that guiding their mainstream competitors. What distinguished ACEs from the rest of the

41 Graeme Fagan interviewed by Charlie Ward, September 2012, NTRS 3609, BWF 42, 110–14.

42 Eames [CLC] to Muramulla, 19 January 1977, NAA E242, K9/2/3.

43 Phillpot, 'Black Pastoralism', 350.

pastoral industry was their greater engagement with government, by virtue of their reliance on government funding. While governments intended to build Aboriginal capacity and accountability under self-determination policies, ACEs' often experienced government intervention as directly inimical of their own decision-making and authority. The social policies of the era and the internal dynamics of the remote Indigenous social order also forced the gerontocratic authority of ACEs' leadership into further decline.

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This text is taken from *Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia: Histories and Historiography*, edited by Laura Rademaker and Tim Rowse, published 2020 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

doi.org/10.22459/ISA.2020.03