

The Ayapathu People of Cape York Peninsula: a case of tribal resurgence?¹

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The Ayapathu people of central Cape York Peninsula have, at best, received only passing mention in anthropological accounts.² This appears to have been the result of colonial impact on the region and its associated socio-cultural disruption. Whilst neighbouring groups faced similar disruption, in the case of Ayapathu-speaking clans it appears to have been great enough to result in the disappearance of an Ayapathu identity in the region for many years. However, with the recent shifts towards self-management and self-determination in northern Queensland, an Ayapathu identity appears to have re-emerged as the focus of land-holding groups. This paper explores this suppression and re-emergence of this 'tribal' identity in the region, what it reveals about Aboriginal responses to the colonial and post-colonial eras and contemporary Aboriginal territorial groupings.

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1. The research on which this paper is based took place mostly in and around Coen, far north Queensland in 1996 and 1997, and was supported by a Study Abroad Studentship from the Leverhulme Trust, a Research Grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, the Emslie Horniman Fund of the Royal Anthropological Institute and the University of London Research Fund. I am immensely grateful to Francesca Merlan and the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the Australian National University who provided me with an office whilst I worked on the manuscript, in addition to extensive earlier support of my research. This paper also draws on my work as a consultant on the Mungkan-Kaanju National Park land claim for the Cape York Land Council, on behalf of Aboriginal claimants, including the Ayapathu 'tribal group' and benefits from numerous discussions with colleagues, notably Bruce Rigsby, David Martin, Athol Chase, Louise Goodchild and Peter Blackwood. It draws heavily on the historical work of Ros Kidd, for which I have attempted to provide an anthropological reading. Bruce Rigsby's comments on a draft of this paper proved immensely valuable. I am indebted to the Ayapathu people living in the Coen region and elsewhere in writing this paper, and in particular to Phillip Port, Lukin Harold, Joan Creek, Jim Campbell, Doris Harold, Ralph Rokeby and Nicholas and Barbara Ahlers for their willingness to share their knowledge with me and their patience with my more than occasional lack of understanding.
 2. They are absent, for example, from the *Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia* recently published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (Horton 1994).

The history of an Aboriginal 'tribe'

Ayapathu is one of a number of indigenous language varieties associated with central and eastern Cape York Peninsula. As such, both in the anthropological literature pertaining to the region and in the exegesis of the region's Aboriginal population, it is also used to denote land-holding groups in the area or areas primarily associated with this language.

In the classical - that is pre-colonial - system of social organisation in the region, these were exogamous land-holding groups formed within a process characterised by patrilineal recruitment. The groups thus constituted, referred to by anthropologists as 'clans', held interests as corporate entities in an area of land and an associated series of tangible and intangible assets - the clan's 'estate'. Part of the intangible property of each clan was its ownership of a particular language (usually in common with one or more other clans), which was held to have a relationship with the creator beings ('Stories') who shaped and remain within the estates³ within which these Aboriginal people lived.

Whilst these groups held the title to land within the region's Aboriginal society, they did not, in any simple sense, form its land-using groups. The latter groups, which anthropologists have generally called bands⁴, are perceived to have typically had a core of members associated with one or more of the clans on whose estates they camped and ranged. In addition they had other members - including spouses and short and longer-term visitors - who camped, hunted and foraged as band members. Nonetheless, as Peterson and Long have demonstrated, there did remain a direct - albeit complex - relationship between clan and band composition, notably within processes of schism of and succession to estates.⁵

The earliest mentions of Ayapathu people in European Australian records come in the reports of Parry-Okeden⁶ and Smith.⁷ Parry-Okeden was the State Commissioner of Police who made an expedition to the Peninsula to investigate pastoralists' complaints of the inefficiency of the Native Mounted Police in defending them against Aboriginal attacks, and to defend his Native Police force against a recent critical report⁸. He recorded a 'Kokoaiabito'⁹ (i.e. Koko Aiabito) group, numbering around 400 people, inland from Princess Charlotte Bay. In the same year Smith, the Acting Sergeant of the Musgrave Native Mounted Police Station recorded a camp of 'the labitha tribe' at Port Stewart at the mouth of the Stewart River.

3. In the inland region there is a direct correlation between a clan's totemic Stories and the Story Places found within their estate. This is not the case for neighbouring coastal and pericoastal areas on the west coast (see von Sturmer 1978).

4. Rigsby 1999: 1 makes a similar distinction between land-owning and land-using groups, but suggests the need for distinguishing between a number of different sets of land-users and land-use activities.

5. Peterson and Long 1986. The earlier anthropological confusion of land-owning and land-using groups, unified under the model of a local, patrilineal 'horde', e.g. Radcliffe-Brown 1931, also suggests this.

6. Parry-Okeden 1897.

7. Smith 1897. I am indebted to Bruce Rigsby for this reference.

8. That of Archibald Meston, who became Queensland's Southern Protector of Aborigines shortly afterwards. See Loos 1982: 175.

9. Mistranscribed - as Tindale 1974: 142 notes - as 'kokoaiabilo'.

The use of the term 'tribe' here must be treated with caution. The term is anthropologically contentious,¹⁰ although it is one that European commentators, including anthropologists, have continued to use in reference to Aboriginal social life. In reference to the social system encountered by whites in the early years of colonial far north Queensland, the general consensus is that 'tribe' is a label best applied to all those primarily associated with a particular language (e.g. the sum of all clans owning the Ayapathu language)¹¹, earlier commentators assuming this implied a degree of social cohesion or corporateness. However, from a contemporary perspective it has become apparent that 'tribes' of this kind were not corporate social groups. Although some 'tribal areas', for example Cape York Peninsula's northeast coast, seem to have manifested a degree of social solidarity, particularly regarding major ceremonies¹², 'tribe' was an ideational rather than a corporate social entity and one more predisposed to appear (and to appear corporate) in European conceptions of Aboriginal society than indigenous ones.

I have not located any further mention of an Ayapathu group or groups in European-Australian records until the intensive period of anthropological research in the region in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Although none of the three anthropologists associated with the central Peninsula region during this period – Thomson, McConnel and Sharp – worked with groups they identified as Ayapathu¹³, all of them mention Ayapathu groups and worked with in neighbouring areas with 'tribes' who held traditional links with Ayapathu people in the classical system. For example, Thomson, who worked on the east and west coasts between 1928 and 1933 recorded

Koko ai-ebadu. A tribe whose language I believe is allied to that of the Yinchinga with whom it was formerly friendly ... They are disorganised, like all the tribes of the Peninsula, having come into contact with prospectors, miners and cattle men, in the days of the Palmer Goldfield rush. There are [a] fairly large number still living, their headquarters being about Coen and Ebagoola... Their camp at Coen is on the side of the natives' camp facing their own territory, as always.¹⁴

Ursula McConnel also conducted anthropological research in the region, in 1927–28 and 1934. She maps an 'Aiyaboto' tribe south of Coen, in the vicinity of Ebagoola and the headwaters of the Holroyd River, neighbouring the 'Kandyu' (Kaanju)¹⁵ to the

10. cf. Hymes 1968 and Fried 1975.

11. As Chase 1996 notes, Tindale 1974 uses language names and associated territories as the basis for his tribal model, although his work on the east coast of Cape York Peninsula in the late 1920s focused on marital patterns. See also Rigsby 1999: 8. Thomson, also working on the Peninsula at this time, considered tribes to be defined by a common language (see also Rigsby 1999: 9) but his work points towards an emphasis of social orientation towards neighbouring (not necessarily linguistically identical) clans, rather than towards the 'tribe' per se (see Thomson 1972: 1).

12. See Chase 1980: 142–4, 72–5 and Thomson 1933. See also Dixon 1976, for suggestions that 'tribes' were bounded, corporate entities in the rainforest areas near Cairns.

13. Although it is apparent that McConnel intended to do so. In a letter to Professor Radcliffe-Brown, head of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, McConnel wrote that 'I may turn back after visiting the Munkans [to] take in the Aiyaboto wh[o] are nearly extinct & the Kanchu wh[o] are most friendly and communicative' (McConnel 1928).

14. Thomson 1929: 5–6.

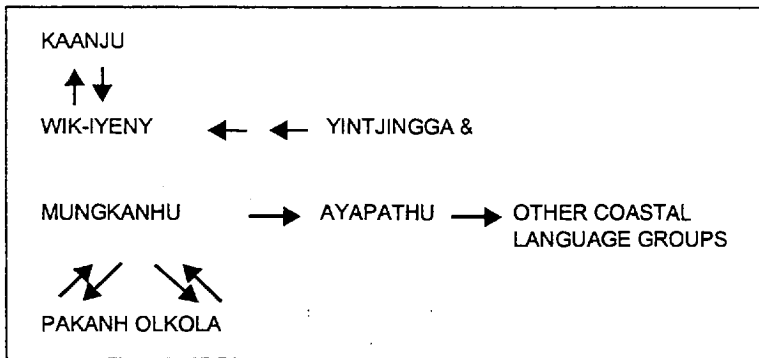
15. Here I follow McConnel's spellings with those in current use (i.e. as used by myself and other anthropologists in Chase et al. 1998).

north, the 'Koko-olkola' (Olkola) to the south and the 'Wik Iany' (Wik-Iyeny) and 'Bakanu' (Pakanh) to the west. She describes how the 'Kandyu'

met the Wik-munkan on Rokeby cattle-run, the Wik-iany of the Kendall-Holroyd Rivers on Pretender Creek, and the southern Aiyaboto (Sharp: Ai'abadu), Bakanu (Sharp: Aiabakan) and Koko-olkola of the upper Holroyd, Edward and Coleman Rivers on Ebagoolah cattle-run.¹⁶

Here it becomes apparent, as Sharp - who conducted an anthropological survey of the Peninsula between 1933 and 1935 - makes explicit,¹⁷ that the inland Ayapathu-speaking clans formed part of a regional block which included other peoples whose primary land and language identity lay in surrounding areas.¹⁸ An 'Ayapathu-centric' view of the relationship between the Ayapathu language-associated area (i.e. its constituent estates and the groups ranging across them) and surrounding language-associated areas is shown in Figure 1 (below).¹⁹

Figure 1 Classical ties between Ayapathu and surrounding language areas



Although the information for the inland Cape York region is sparse - as a result of limited anthropological research in the early twentieth century, and the rapid impacts of colonialism, which removed both a large proportion of this population and the incentive for the involvement of these anthropologists²⁰ - it is possible to make some assumptions about forms of social organisation in the classical region. Alongside the

16. McConnel 1939: 58.

17. Sharp 1938-39: 268.

18. Such ties included affinal ties between clans and associated regional cultural forms, such as the use of named moieties, even where these were not part of the core body of practice associated with these clans. McConnel's recording of the use of such moieties by Wik Iany (Wik-Iyeny) people on the Kendall and Holroyd rivers 'in contact with their southern neighbours' (McConnel 1939: 64) - i.e. Ayapathu and Pakanh people - illustrates this practice.

19. In this region of inland Cape York Peninsula, languages to which clans primarily affiliate occur in contiguous blocks. However, this is not the case for the east and west coastal and peri-coastal regions neighbouring the inland Ayapathu area. In the latter areas, languages, including those occurring in contiguous blocks inland (e.g. Wik-Iyeny in western coastal areas and Ayapathu in Princess Charlotte Bay coastal estates) are affiliated with discontinuous estates (see Rigsby 1992, Sutton 1995).

available records of the region, notably those identified by Kidd,²¹ these allow us to chart the transformative impact of colonialism on local Aboriginal society.

The ranges of inland bands were focused around a number of main campsites. Contemporary Aboriginal people living in the Coen region say that Polappa, a place to the south of Coen which includes several large, perennial water sources, was '*the main camp for Ayapathu people*'.²² It appears that Polappa was associated with dry season camps, a larger wet-season population and ceremonial performance. Dry season activities were based around such main camps, with smaller groups ranging across surrounding estates in order to utilise resources there, visit areas with which they had personal connections and perform 'increase ceremonies' to ensure the proper cosmological management of their '*country*'.²³ People also moved between camps across the wider region, attending initiation ceremonies, arranging marriages, trading and visiting kin. In the wet season the bands drew together in larger camps, limiting their movements until the change in season returned the possibility of ranging more widely for social, economic and ritual activities.

The Ayapathu-speaking people of the inland Peninsula appear to have had close ties to both other inland groups to the south, west and north and to coastal groups to the east. As Chase²⁴ notes for the 'kaantyu' (Kaanju) peoples to the north of the Ayapathu, such inlanders

were in a central geographical and social position, and they extended relationships both ways into the eastern coastal areas and the western flatlands or *mungkan* territory. From the available evidence, those ... estates bordering the eastern coastal estates looked to the coast for ceremony and inter-marriage, while those removed further inland looked westward, following the large western-flowing drainage system.

Such bi-directional ties appear to have occurred in the Ayapathu region also. Here ties are most apparent with '*Mungkan-side*'²⁵ groups to the west of the Ayapathu area, Olkola- and Pakanh-speaking groups to the south, and Yintjingga and other coastal peoples to the east as well as to neighbouring Kaanju-speaking clans. As with the Kaanju-speaking peoples, we can surmise that those clans whose estates lay on the east-flowing riverine areas adjacent to estates of coastal groups 'boxed-up' (joined together) with these groups, whilst those whose country lay on western-flowing waters had their

20. Sharp, for instance, suggests that much of his survey was of an 'unsatisfactory nature' due, in part, to 'the demoralization of native life which has so swiftly followed the introduction of European and Oriental culture traits into so many parts of the region' leaving many 'tribes' extinct, whilst many others 'have undergone foreign and inter-tribal acculturation' Sharp 1938-39: 254.

21. Kidd 1996.

22. Here, and afterwards, I use italicised lettering in single inverted commas to indicate terms or phrases used by the Aboriginal people of the region.

23. See Thomson 1933: 501-4, 513 on increase ceremonies. Thomson drew the term from the earlier work of Spencer and Gillen.

The term '*country*' refers, broadly, to areas of peopled landscape within which Aboriginal people hold particular knowledge, rights (including property rights) and responsibilities. This landscape is itself held to possess agency. See also Chase et al. 1998: 37 and Arthur 1996: 119-21.

24. Chase 1980: 201.

main ties in this direction. However, it is also apparent that neighbouring easterly- and westerly-oriented Ayapathu groups also boxed-up. In the case of the western groups in particular, in common with the other groups of central Cape York, there appears to have been a strongly riverine emphasis in social organisation. In these areas, the orientation of box-up groups, and the interlinked flows of trade and marriage, appear to have been up and down the region's major rivers. From McConnel's association of tribes and rivers, and the siting of campsites along riverine systems²⁶, we can see that rivers provided a major focus for both land-owning and land-using groups (clans and bands respectively) in the inland area.

As a result of Rigsby's fieldwork, it has become apparent to anthropologists working in the region that a number of coastal clans (including the Yintjingga with whom Thomson worked in the late 1920s) spoke language varieties similar to the inland Ayapathu ones. As Rigsby²⁷ has written, the Ayapathu language

had been thought in the past to be restricted to the inland, centering around Ebagoolah and extending north towards Coen along the [Great Dividing] range, but some knowledgeable older Aboriginal people have told me that it was also the language of several clans whose estates were situated along the coast from Running Creek to the Stewart River. These clans have died out, and rights in their estates passed to descendants whose primary 'tribal' identification now is as Port Stewart Lamalama people ... Only a few older people remember the prior Ayapathu clan and language presence in this coastal area.

Nonetheless, it seems that the clans that owned these coastal 'Ayapathu-speaking' estates were, to some degree, differentiated from the inland Ayapathu people. Rigsby notes Thomson's record that an 'atmosphere of mutual fear and distrust' existed between inland Ayapathu peoples and the Yintjingga.²⁸ The former were identified (ethno-territorially) as '*kanichi*' or 'inside people', whilst the latter were '*pama malngkanichi*'²⁹ or 'sandbeach people'. But it was not only these social orientations of the two sets of people that were markedly different (one primarily oriented to the inland/riverine west and south, the other to other coastal groups). There were also differences in linguistic identification, territorial organisation and economic practice between inland and coastal Ayapathu-speaking groups.

Thomson, for instance, whilst noting the linguistic similarities of the two dialects, wrote of them as two distinct languages, identifying the inland one as 'Ayapathu' ('Aibadu') and the coastal one as 'Yintjingga'. However, the implicit suggestion that the coastal dialect has not been labelled as Ayapathu in indigenous exegesis is contradicted

25. The use of the term 'Mungkan-side' by Coen people, including the Ayapathu people resident there, denotes those groups and people - in particular clans and 'families' (i.e. contemporary cognatic descent groups - see Sutton 1998) - from 'country' primarily affiliated with Wik-type languages (see von Sturmer 1978) and in particular to the inland Wik-Iyeny or 'Mungkanhu' language. These people and groups, along with (inland) Ayapathu people, form the easternmost part of the 'Wik nation' or 'Wik peoples' who are claimants in the current Wik Native Title Claim.

26. See my discussion of Kidd 1996 below.

27. Rigsby 1992: 357, see also Rigsby 1999: 119-20.

28. Thomson 1934: 240-1; Rigsby and Chase 1998: 213, footnote 18.

29. In the coastal Umpila language.

by more recent fieldwork. Bruce Rigsby (pers. comm. June 2000) notes that at least as far back as 1972 a number of older Lamalama people identified the coastal Ayapathu-speaking clans as such, whilst Thomson's group name 'Yintjingga' is only used by contemporary Port Stewart people as a place name for a particular site and associated area at Port Stewart, at the mouth of the Stewart River estuary.³⁰ A similar identification of both inland and coastal dialects by both Aboriginal and white people appears to have been made throughout contact history.³¹ This perhaps indicates an indigenous distinction between the two groups of language-owners that was as socio-political as it was conceptual.³²

Differences in the regional territorial systems of the two sets of clans are similarly apparent. As noted above, the primary territorial orientation of the coastal Ayapathu clans was to coastal and coastal hinterland sandbeach estates, whilst inland Ayapathu people formed a regional territorial block with their Ayapathu and non-Ayapathu neighbours, focusing on west- and east-flowing riverine systems.

Nonetheless, there also appear to have been similarities between the inland and coastal forms of Ayapathu territorial organisation. Unlike more southerly non-Ayapathu speaking coastal clans with country south of Goose Creek, but in common with both inland Ayapathu³³ and more northerly coastal clans, including those speaking Umpila, the language-associated estates of coastal clans were not characterised by a 'mosaic' structure in which the estate area was fragmented and where linguistic affiliation of country was discontinuous across the area.³⁴

Similarly, the economic practices of coastal Ayapathu-owning clans were strongly sea-oriented, in common with the other coastal people.³⁵ These economic practices formed part of a body of common cultural traits, the basis for what Chase (following Peterson) has identified as a common 'culture area'.³⁶ Whilst the coastal and inland Ayapathu groups spoke similar dialects, their social organisation, both in form and in orientation, was markedly different. When the patrilineal descent lines of the coastal Ayapathu-speaking clans died out, the primary marital and descent ties that permitted the process of succession to their estates to take place were held by other coastal groups, notably including members of the group now identified as the 'Port Stewart Lamalama'.³⁷ As a result, the identification of Ayapathu as an inland language was further reinforced and, as Rigsby³⁸ notes, its common use in terms of group identity is for

30. Rigsby further notes that he was only able to identify Thomson's Yintjingga kin-terms as Ayapathu in 1990 in the course of linguistic work with Rosie Ahlers, a now deceased Wik-Iyeny woman who was the last fluent speaker of Ayapathu living in Coen.

31. See Rigsby 1999: 15, footnote 14, Rigsby 1992, p. 357 and Smith 1897 cited in Rigsby 1992: 357 for details of these.

32. See Rigsby and Sutton 1980-82 on the social and political dimensions of language differentiation and Rigsby 1987 on the variable differentiation of 'dialect' and 'language'.

33. The general consensus is currently that inland estates in the Coen region formed distinct, homogenous blocks. Some older people are able to provide 'boundaries' for these (see Land Tribunal (Queensland) 1995), though not always unambiguously.

34. Bruce Rigsby, pers. comm., June 2000. See also Rigsby and Hafner 1994: 137 (in Sutton 1995).

35. See Thomson 1934, Rigsby and Chase 1998.

36. Chase 1980: 204.

37. See Rigsby 1999: 10, 16 footnote 15, and Rigsby 1992: 357.

38. Rigsby 1992: 357.

the descendants of the inland Ayapathu who now live in Coen³⁹. For this reason, this article will deal primarily with this inland group, and the term 'Ayapathu' can be considered as referring to the inland Ayapathu clans and their descendants unless otherwise noted.

The movements and activities of the inland (as well as the coastal) Ayapathu people within the 'humanized landscape'⁴⁰ of the region were rapidly transformed by the impact of colonialism. The 1872 gold rush on the Palmer River to the south of Ayapathu country led to more northerly exploration, and to gold rushes in the areas of Coen – where the first miners found payable gold in 1876⁴¹ – and Ebagoola(h), first gazetted on 2 January 1900.⁴² These areas are at the core and the northern reaches of inland Ayapathu country respectively. The gold rushes, in turn, brought the expansion of pastoralism to the central Peninsula. The first cattle station in the Coen region – Lalla Rookh – was founded at Station Creek (in Ayapathu country) about 20 kilometres southeast of the present township of Coen in 1882.

These cattle stations and camps took over important environmental resources – in particular major sources of perennial water – and the cattle station 'runs'⁴³ similarly occupied and transformed surrounding country, spoiling waterholes and disrupting the local ecosystem. White settlers, fearful of Aboriginal attacks on cattle and on themselves, killed or drove Aboriginal people away from areas of European residence and land use. At the same time, diseases (including venereal disease) added to the effects of malnutrition and violence, causing a sudden drop in population and a rapid decline in birth rates. The effects of this period were so drastic that, by the 1890s, Coen miners and those at other European centres began to seek a 'conciliation' with the bedraggled remnants of the Aboriginal population, 'letting them in' to the new European centres of townships, mining and cattle camps.⁴⁴

These places, often on the sites of previous Aboriginal main camps, became new major Aboriginal camps for the Aboriginal people of the regions surrounding them. In this way the mining townships of Coen and Ebagoola and the cattle stations and outstations at places like Polappa and Rokeby became the focal sites for Ayapathu people in the central Peninsula's colonial era. Through 'coming in' to the Aboriginal camps at these sites, Ayapathu people began a process of adjustment to the white presence and its economic and social forms. Most notably, Ayapathu people, in common with the

39. Similarly, 'Yintjingga' is no longer used as a group name in the region (see Rigsby 1999: 14, footnote 8).

40. I borrow this term from the work of Bruce Rigsby (see Rigsby 1982). Rigsby (pers. comm., June 2000) recalls that he took the term from the work of Charles Rowley, but cannot recall the specific reference.

41. de Havilland 1989: 525–6. The first Coen gold rush (for alluvial gold) began in 1878. Reef gold was first assayed in 1878, but apparently remained unworked. The first reef mining opened up in 1887 and, as a result, by 1889 Coen had developed into a recognisable township with a hotel, store and butcher (Chase et al. 1998: 25).

42. de Havilland 1989: 515.

43. The areas over which the stations ran and worked cattle.

44. See Parry-Okeden 1897: 9 and Kidd 1996: 15. Bruce Rigsby (pers. comm., June 2000) notes various observers' comment on large numbers of Aborigines still living on Cape York Peninsula at this time, and that a 'flu epidemic in 1919 was the probable cause of major depopulation.

other Aboriginal people of the region, began to be incorporated into the cattle industry, providing a necessary (and necessarily inexpensive) labour force for the region's pastoralists. With the introduction of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (1897), the Ayapathu people became further incorporated into the region's new society as indentured labour under the control of local policemen in their roles as 'Protectors of Aboriginals'.

At the beginning of this period, Aboriginal people remained – both socially and physically – at the periphery of European Australian enterprises. Work agreements were in no way the totality of Aboriginal experience, and work for the most part involved such activities as fencing, carrying and collecting sandalwood and animal pelts in return for food, clothing and blankets. Records from 1906 note the existence of 'several large camps' in the vicinity of Ebagoola, Yarraden and Coen,⁴⁵ but the Ayapathu-focused bands (alongside others in the case of Coen) who would have constituted these camps would have continued to move between the camps and the surrounding country at this time. The lack of European control and surveillance of these surrounding areas is apparent in the lack of records from this time until the 1930s.

From this decade, the use and control of Aboriginal labour from the camps became increasingly systematised, and the younger generations raised there became more fully incorporated into the new rural industries and a developing inter-ethnic aspect of Aboriginal existence.⁴⁶ Aboriginal people begin to appear as named individuals in increasingly comprehensive administrative records, reflecting their incorporation and control within an emergent inter-ethnic domain.⁴⁷ The names that appear in these records mark the establishment of a system of European-style naming including Christian names (for the most part biblical – the incorporation included a religious dimension) and surnames. The latter were typically taken from European 'bosses' or the European names for areas of traditional association that, alongside the associated Aboriginal population, had become embedded in cattle runs. Thus two contemporary Ayapathu families bear the surname 'Ahlers', the surname of an early manager of the cattle outstation at Polappa, whilst another family took (or was given) the surname 'Ebagoola' after the mining township that occupied part of their clan country. Large numbers of people were 'removed' in this period – not only from their country to towns or coastal missions, but also from these new centres to places outside of the Peninsula, notably the punishment settlement of Palm Island⁴⁸. Nonetheless, as the records demonstrate, there still remained some freedom of movement, and the continuation of camps outside of European control. Records from this time⁴⁹ include:

45. Kidd 1996: 18, cited from 'Natives of the Soil', *Croydon Morning Herald* December 1906.

46. Smith 2000a discusses the generation of this inter-ethnic dimension to Aboriginal existence in greater detail.

47. Here I follow Rowse 1992 and von Sturmer 1984 in my use of the term 'domain'. As Rowse explains, von Sturmer's 'Aboriginal domain' is constituted by those places or contexts in which 'the dominant social life or culture is Aboriginal, where the system of knowledge is Aboriginal, where the major language is Aboriginal; in short where the resident Aboriginal population constitutes the public' (Rowse 1992: 19). Similarly the inter-ethnic domain in Coen, the context of which is social action between Aborigines and whites, has its own social life and culture, system of knowledge, language(s) and inter-ethnic public despite its incorporation of a marked racial hegemony.

- 'several large camps' in the vicinity of Ebagoola, Yarraden and Coen (1906)⁵⁰
- a camp at the Holroyd River (1933)⁵¹
- the antecedents of several contemporary Ayapathu families living at Coen (1936)⁵²
- an Ayapathu man amongst a group of Coen people who 'strenuously object to being removed to Lockhart River Mission'⁵³, the administrators of the region's Aboriginal population deeming this removal a sensible option (1936)⁵⁴
- a number of elderly Ayapathu men and women who had been living in the Coen district 'for a great number of years' (1936)⁵⁵
- 'active natives' subsisting by hunting and gathering in the (Ayapathu-associated) Ebagoolah and Bamboo areas (1936)⁵⁶
- several Ayapathu men whose country lay in the Polappa/Ebagoola area deserting Lockhart River Mission, to which they had been recently removed, for Ebagoola (1937).⁵⁷

Towards the end of the 1930s, the Aboriginal people remaining in bush camps in the Ayapathu area were mostly elderly. The younger population was all but absorbed into cattle work. Whilst World War II⁵⁸ appears to have seen an increase in bush living, its close (and the concurrent collapse of the region's mining camps) saw great efforts being made to 'bring in' all remaining bush-living groups. The records from this time⁵⁹ indicate:

- regular movement of elderly Aborigines between Ebagoola and Coen and blankets being issued at Coen police camp in 1936, 1937 and 1938 to 'some of the aboriginals supplied with relief recently at Ebagoola' (1938-39)⁶⁰

48. Detailed records of such removals are available, in many cases, in the Queensland State Archives (QSA) and the Community & Personal Histories Section of the Department of Families, Youth & Community Care, both in Brisbane. The reasons for removals ranged from fights and (intra-Aboriginal) killings, to 'giving cheek' to local whites. Mixed-race children with parents 'under the Act' were, in general, also removed to enable their better assimilation into European-Australian society. Such children were common in the fringe camps at mining settlements and, to a degree, at cattle stations, both of which were less segregated than the township of Coen. Due to the early and predominant white presence in the Ayapathu area, it can be imagined that there were many such removals of such children from Ayapathu mothers. The first known removals from the central Peninsula were from Ebagoola - within Ayapathu country - in 1910. Five Aboriginal men, Jimmy Douglas, Jimmy Nichol, Jack, Toby Platt and Romeo, were removed from Ebagoola to Barambah Reserve (later known as Cherbourg) under suspicion of the murder of an Aboriginal man called 'Baker' or 'Jimmy Dummy'. Rigsby (1995: 25-6) notes that '[w]ith respect to native affairs policy and practice, Queensland has one of the more distinctive and racist histories of Australian States, and from about 1898 up to the early 1970s, following the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (1897) and its successors, the State Native Affairs Department carried out internal deportations and removals of Aboriginal people from their home areas to reserves and from reserve to reserve'. Rigsby estimates that these removals number perhaps 10,000 in total, and that he has not been able to check the computerised records of removals for several periods.

49. The following records are drawn from Kidd 1996: 18-27.

50. Kidd 1996: 18, citing 'Natives of the Soil', *Croydon Morning Herald* December 1906.

51. Kidd 1996: 24, citing DAIA RK:37 22.2.33 - Coen Protector to Chief Protector of Aboriginals.

52. Kidd 1996: 25, citing QSA TR254 7A/10 3.2.36 - Coen Protector to Chief Protector of Aboriginals.

- a group of elderly people travelling from Coen to Ebagoola during the wet season, as they had the year before. 'They stated that during the wet season it was difficult to obtain tucker in the bush, as they are all old, and their main bush tucker is only growing, and they are not able to hunt like the younger aboriginals ... They further stated that they would only be remaining here in Coen until after the wet season, when they will be returning to their old camps in the bush' (1940).⁶¹
- The 'indigent relief' file from Coen in May 1940 'expands on Aboriginal movements between Coen and Ebagoola', 'these boys originally belong to the Coen area, but they drift back to Ebagoola and the stations thereabout during the dry months ... the ages of the majority would be between 60 and 70 years'. The Aboriginal men interviewed stated that they were unwilling to go to Lockhart River as many relatives removed there had died from sickness (1940)⁶²
- In the 1940s the annual Coen Races pulled in people camping around 'Ebagoola ... and the lower reaches of the Coen, Archer and Kendall Rivers'. After receiving rations 'most of the visiting natives returned to their usual hunting grounds' (1940).⁶³
- Local camps in the Coen Protectorate include Coen and Yarraden. There was 'considerable fluidity of movement in each area' (1942).⁶⁴
- An Ayapathu man working as a Coen police tracker, helps scour the Wenlock area, a former mining centre in Kaanju country, for Aboriginal people to remove to Lockhart River (1946)⁶⁵.
- The same Ayapathu man and two other trackers living at Coen police camp 'with their gins' (1946)⁶⁶

A lack of available records from the 1950s to the early 1970s obscures the movements and occupations of Ayapathu people in this period, but contemporary Ayapathu people recall that they spent it in cattle station employment. Men, women and their

53. A mission-settlement some hundred kilometres from Coen, at a remove from country and groups familiar to inland Ayapathu people in the 'classical' society of the region.

54. Kidd 1996: 26, citing QSA TR254 7A/10:1 6.8.36 Chief Protector of Aboriginals to Stephen Davis, Bishop of Carpentaria, quoted by Chief Protector of Aboriginals.

55. Kidd 1996: 27, citing QSA TR254 7A/10:1 6.8.36 Chief Protector of Aboriginals to Stephen Davis, Bishop of Carpentaria.

56. Kidd 1996: 27, citing QSA TR254 7A/10:1 6.8.36 Chief Protector of Aboriginals to Stephen Davis, Bishop of Carpentaria.

57. Kidd 1996: 27, citing QSA TR254 19A/6 December 1937 - Superintendent Rowan, Lockhart Mission Monthly Report.

58. In common with other areas of the Peninsula (see Chase 1980: 115-18).

59. These records are drawn from Kidd 1996: 28-36.

60. Kidd 1996: 28, cited from QSA TR254 7A/10 29.7.38, 24.11.38, 20.2.39 - Coen Protector to Chief Protector of Aboriginals.

61. Kidd 1996: 28, citing QSA TR254 7A/10:1 7.2.40 - Coen Protector to Chief Protector of Aboriginals.

62. Kidd 1996: 29, citing QSA TR254 7A/10:1 8.5.40 - Coen Protector to Director of Native Affairs.

63. Kidd 1996: 29, citing QSA TR254 7A/10 13.8.40 - Coen Protector to Director of Native Affairs.

64. Kidd 1996: 32-3, citing QSA TR254 1G/26 31.12.42 - Coen Protector to Director of Native Affairs.

65. Kidd 1996: 35, citing QSA A/44804 - Constable O'Brien to Inspector of Police, Cairns.

66. Kidd 1996: 35-6, citing QSA A/41231.

dependants were housed at cattle stations and outstation camps, with the working men away for several weeks at the time mustering cattle in the surrounding bush, occasionally meeting up for 'joint muster' with Aboriginal cattlemen from neighbouring stations. Such activities allowed the continuation of contact with traditional estates – the cattle station employees, initially at least, tended to be drawn from the Aboriginal people associated with the area of the station's run – and contact with kin working on other stations. This continuing Aboriginal presence and contact allowed the passing on of knowledge about the landscape and its associated cosmology, and the performance of ceremony and ritual, including increase rituals for managing country. 'Holidays' from the station, during lay-off periods, allowed the whole of a station's Aboriginal population similar contact with country.

Over time, the control of workers by white 'Protectors' increasingly dispersed the Aboriginal population. Many found themselves working on less familiar country, gaining knowledge and ties there rather than – or in addition to – their antecedents⁶⁷ estates. At this time workers' dependants became increasingly centralised, first at the main homestead and then on the Aboriginal Reserve in the township of Coen. One effect of this centralisation and the European schooling of Aboriginal children in the township was the deterioration of Aboriginal language skills.⁶⁸ With the introduction of equal wages for Aboriginal workers and social security payments to Aboriginal people,⁶⁹ the ability and willingness of the pastoral industry to maintain general Aboriginal employment collapsed. As a result most of the working-age population, as well as their older and younger family members, found themselves living for most of the year on the Coen Reserve.

Just before this collapse, Chase visited the Coen Reserve during the annual Coen Races, recording the Reserve's population and their 'tribal' identities.⁷⁰ This list, an historical document of great importance for Coen's Aboriginal population, is notable for the complete absence of an Ayapathu tribal identity. Nonetheless, a number of people present are identified by Coen people as being Ayapathu, and my own research confirms their descent from Ayapathu clan members, and their primary affiliation with Ayapathu country. Thus, at the same time at which Tindale published a description of

67. Here I follow Sutton 1998: 26 in distinguishing 'antecedents' (or 'forebears') from 'ancestors', the latter implying a common (landed) identity and interest. I am indebted to Bruce Rigsby for drawing my attention to this distinction.

68. As a result, most of those under fifty speak little of the region's former Aboriginal languages. The Ayapathu language has no remaining fluent speakers in Coen, the last having passed away in 1990. Although no younger Ayapathu people can either speak or understand their own language, loss of linguistic competence is not seen as changing the fact of their affiliation to Ayapathu country or the existence of an Ayapathu group. As Rumsey (1989, 1993) has noted for other 'language-named tribes' in the Northern Territory, the association of people with language is through the ties *both* share with country. Thus the loss of the Ayapathu language, although the cause of regret to contemporary Ayapathu people in the Coen Region, does not remove the fact of their ownership (under Aboriginal law and custom) of the language and associated country in the region.

Recent fieldwork at Pompuraaw by Hamilton (see Hamilton 1997) has found speakers with some remaining knowledge of the Ayapathu language there.

69. See May 1994: 160-73 and Bernardi 1997: 38.

70. Chase 1972.

an Ayapathu 'tribe' whose country lay over an area of some 4900 square kilometres,⁷¹ in Coen the 'Ayapathu tribe' appeared to have vanished as a local entity.⁷²

The suppression of a 'tribal' identity

This disappearance - or, as later events indicate, suppression - of the Ayapathu identity in Coen seems to have been due to a combination of factors. These included the depopulation of Ayapathu clans through deaths and infertility, the removal of significant numbers of Ayapathu people and mixed-race children from the area, the presence of two major European settlements and a number of cattle stations dominating Ayapathu country and the centralisation of Ayapathu families in Coen, a township featuring three major, otherwise identifying 'countryman' groups.

In 1977, Dulcie Higgins, a State Department of Aboriginal and Islanders Advancement liaison officer previously stationed in Coen, noted three 'tribal identities' there:

The Luma Luma [Lamalama], Carngue [Kaanju] and Munkin [Mungkanhu] ... They attend church when a visiting priest comes to town and the same night they will be down the river practising their old tribal way.⁷³

From Higgins' correspondence it seems that this 'tribal way' included the open violence of fighting, and the masked violence ('*quiet war*') of sorcery (or '*puripuri*') between the factions. It is apparent that these three 'tribes' were collectivities of Coen people, based on underlying links of association, kinship and neighbouring countries between constituent families, that had grouped together to provide mutual support within the town environment. As such, these 'tribes' were markedly different to the classic ideational language groups, bearing greater similarities to the 'countrymen groups' documented by Chase for Lockhart River.⁷⁴ These countryman groups were formed from those fam-

71. 'Ajabatha...alternatives: Aiabadu, Aiyaboto, Jabuda, Koko Ai-Ebadu, Ai'ebadu (with glottal stop), Koko Aiebadu, Kikahiabilo (presumably i=diphthong, l=typo for t)... ['Tribal area'] From north of Ebagoola, south to Musgrave, west to headwaters of Coleman and Holroyd Rivers, east to Dividing Range and Violet Vale' (Tindale 1974: 142). Contemporary Ayapathu people have described the '*boundary*' of their '*tribal area*' as running 'from just south of the main town at Coen, around Oscar Creek ... it runs west along Coen River (both sides), though Ayapathu mixed with Kaanju and Mungkanhu further north from here ... along Coen River to Catfish Lagoon, ... south of Coen river the boundary runs along the divides. A series of water systems flowing back into Catfish/Tadpole/Coen River from the divide are Ayapathu. These include Horsetailer, Crosstree (locally called Gorge Creek) and the Pinnacle Creek systems ... the divide in this area and the two flows of the water systems mark the boundary between Ayapathu country and the [Wik-Iyeny] 'Tablelands' country ... south of Catfish, Ayapathu areas include but are not limited to Heinemann Spring, Flying Fox Scrub and Shovel Creek ... the 'line' running south is demarcated by the divide and the water systems flowing off it ... the Ayapathu boundary runs south to the top part of Strathburn, including Pretender Creek. Snake Creek is inside the Ayapathu boundary ... western Pretender Creek is associated with the Shortjoe family, as is Bally Junction ... the boundary runs south (or southeast) down to Willie Yard near the Lukin River ... Lukin River to Strathburn boundary, then east ... from Willie Yard to Bob Spring Creek...from Bob Spring Creek along the divide to Old Bamboo ... from Old Bamboo to New Bamboo ... from New Bamboo straight down to Balclutha Creek (Ayapathu to about half-way down Balclutha Creek) ... then back (along the divide?) to Margaret Yard (also called Market Yard) ... from Margaret Yard to Seven Mile Lagoon ... from Seven Mile Lagoon to Joe Lagoon ... from Joe Lagoon to Red Ant-bed mustering camp, then straight down the divide to Little Stewart River ... from Little Stewart back to Oscar Creek, and along Oscar Creek to Coen River' (Smith, nd).

ilies who had previously shared large camps on or near their estates, and which continued as mutual support and social groups within the new environment of the Lockhart River Mission (and later 'Community').

Work on hunter-gatherer social organisation, in particular that of Joseph Birdsell,⁷⁵ has stressed the importance of 'magic numbers', recurring modal numbers in the composition of groups occurring widely across such societies. In the case of the Coen 'tribal' groups it appears that a certain minimum number of people⁷⁶ has been necessary for any social group to remain effective within the region's social life. For this reason perhaps, the few people remaining in Coen who were members of or descendants of Ayapathu clans may not have provided the numbers necessary to constitute an identity group. Colonial depopulation and removals, as is apparent from Ayapathu genealogies constructed in the contemporary township, must have hit Ayapathu people early and with great intensity even in a region where such impacts were generally traumatic. As a result, the numbers of Ayapathu people within the township and perhaps the longer-running bonds between those families that remained, may not have been sufficient to produce a separate Ayapathu tribal identity within the township that provided the necessary support against hardship and inter-ethnic antagonism.

The colonial transformation of the Ayapathu area may also have affected the ability to maintain (or produce) an Ayapathu identity within the township. Merlan has recently described a lack of clarity about the tribal identification of country in the vicinity of the town of Katherine (Northern Territory) and a process of ethnic re-identification of the town itself and of Aboriginal individuals living there. Merlan suggests such processes involve

the play of sustaining difference in a changing field of closer and more distant social relationship, in which territorial difference and relativity continue to be important.⁷⁷

This 'play of difference' has in turn combined with a 'particular history' of the town that 'offers impediments to the places within it in Aboriginal mythical terms'.

This situation has clear parallels with that of Coen and the Ayapathu families living there. Coen itself is now described as lying on the border of the Kaanju and Ayapathu linguistic areas, but for the whole of its colonial history was, in European accounts, asserted as being a 'Kaanju' place.⁷⁸ Parry-Okeden and Thomson,⁷⁹ for instance, both assert that the 'tribe' of Coen was Kaanju. Such attributions are likely to have reflected,

72. Nonetheless, Bruce Rigsby (pers. comm.) recalls at least four local men and women being identified as Ayapathu by others in Coen in 1972 and 1974. This suggests that the loss of Ayapathu was primarily as a group identity and/or that Chase's informants were themselves not inclined to identify people as such. These possibilities are discussed further below.

73. Higgins 1977, cited in Kidd 1996: 39.

74. Chase 1980: 219-21.

75. E.g. Birdsell 1953, 1958. For discussions of 'magic number' concepts - and in particular their relationship to Aboriginal Australian material - see Lee and DeVore 1968: 10-11, 245-8, 331-3; Peterson and Long 1986: 38, 137; Sutton and Rigsby 1982: 159-63.

76. Discussion of 'magic numbers' has tended to focus on reasons for the upper limits of group numbers in these societies, emphasising ecological rather than socio-cultural determinants of these number-ranges.

77. Merlan 1998: 140, 142.

and to have fed back into local white and local Aboriginal town identities.⁸⁰ An apparent intra-Aboriginal tendency to suppress the town's territorial identification, in order to ease inter-group tensions,⁸¹ is likely to have increased such impediments.

Further, the local Ayapathu families had diverse kin ties to the locally prominent 'tribal' groups. In the township context, rather than territorial associations (which had been devalued, in any case, by the apparently total dispossession of Ayapathu people from any actualisable control over country due to its white occupancy), what became most important was the definition of self-identity in terms of a local (countryman) group within the changed social field of township life. Territorial difference and territorial relativity continued to be important, but in the sense of a performative identity of group coalescence within the township, sustaining Ayapathu families within the social field of the town, rather than a sustained accuracy of language-identity based within links to clan estates in the town's hinterland.⁸² Such action sets (whether of shorter or longer-lasting duration)⁸³ fall within the category of groups referred to locally as 'mobs'.⁸⁴ In this way, Ayapathu people living in township coalesced and identified with either the 'Mungkan' or 'Kaanju' mobs living on the Aboriginal Reserve.

The earlier 'tribal' identities of those currently identified as Ayapathu people, as recorded by Chase (1972), illustrate this shift in identification. These individuals and their families appear as distributed between the town's 'Munkan' (Mungkanhu) and 'Kanju' (Kaanju) 'tribes' (Figure 2).

The ties through which such tribal identities were generated appear to include both affinal and subsidiary descent/filiative ties to these groups, but it is likely that another factor in determining the assumed tribal identity was the proximity of clan country to Mungkan(h)u-side or Kaanju estates, particularly along river-systems. Thus, whilst the Ayapathu tribal identity became subsumed within town-based 'countryman'

78. Athol Chase (pers. comm., July 1997) notes that older people he worked with in the region placed the Ayapathu/Kaanju linguistic boundary further south than its current location around the Coen township.

79. Parry-Okeden 1897; Thomson 1929.

80. One example, which I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Smith 2000a), is the identity of a 'King' of the Coen Reserve in the 1940s. The man, identified by contemporary Coen people as Ayapathu, was known by his king-plate (see Troy 1993) as 'King Tomny of the Kanjo (Kaanju) Tribe' to local whites.

81. See Smith 2000a.

82. Similarly, on Palm Island, Ayapathu families - whether conscious of holding an Ayapathu identity or not - appear to have amalgamated to the Kaanju 'tribal' group within the Island's Aboriginal domain (see Smith 2000b). The nature of such coalitions as primarily processual group identities rather than language-based identities linked to clan-estates is underlined by the amalgamation of Coen and Palm Island Ayapathu people to the 'Kaanju mob' in both settlements. As one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper noted, unlike Ayapathu and Mungkanhu/Wik-Iyeny which are linguistically close, the Ayapathu and Kaanju languages are notably distinct. There is, nonetheless, evidence that inland Ayapathu-affiliated clan-members have long formed groups - both in social action (e.g. bands) and perhaps also more formal land-holding groups - with Mungkanhu and Kaanju-speaking people. For instance, one senior Kaanju man described both the country and associated clan of land just west of Coen as 'half Kaanju, half Ayapathu'. Extension of clan interests to 'company' relationships including groups with both Ayapathu and Wik-Iyeny speaking members (see below) are also common in the region, and appear to have been so for some time.

identities, the importance of the region's classical territorial system continued as the basis of orientation to these new identity-forms. This is well illustrated by JA and his sister JT, whose father's clan country lay in close proximity to a Kaanju estate on the Coen River near the township.⁸⁵ As outlined by Chase⁸⁶, such neighbouring groups commonly organised marriages between themselves in the 'classical' system of the region. Thus the conjunction of territorial proximity and affinal ties in shared tribal/mob orientation in the township in the 1970s is unsurprising, marking developments based firmly within earlier (i.e. 'classical') practice.

Figure 2 Tribal identity given for Ayapathu people

Person(s)	Age/sex	'Tribal' identity	Tie to identity group
JT	Adult woman	(Kaanju)	(Father and mother Ayapathu) Mungkan-identifying husband. Brother (JA) identifies as Kaanju, brother married to Kaanju woman.
JA (and children)	Adult man	(Kaanju)	Kaanju wife. (Father and mother Ayapathu) Sister (JT) identifies as Kaanju.
AG (and child)	Adult man	(Munkanu)	?Mungkan-side wife. Family ties to west.
DA	Elderly man	(Munkanu)	Mungkan-side Z-in-law. Olkola wife. Brother (MA) identifies as 'Munkanu'.
MA (and children)	Adult man	(Munkanu)	Mungkan-side wife. Brother (DA) identifies as 'Munkanu'.
LH	Adult man	(Munkanu)	Mungkan-side wife. Olkola ties.
JC	Adult man	(Kaanju)	Kaanju/Ayapathu ties through father. Kaanju mother. Mungkan-side wife.

Source: Chase 1972.

Similarly, the clan-estate of DA and his brother MA neighbours the estate of a Wik-Iyeny speaking clan, and the contemporary family descended from these two brothers (and headed by MA's sons) remains in a close 'company' relationship⁸⁷ with a

83. Merlan 1998: 129-30 refers to them as 'time bound aggregations', the use of such designations being 'as much evocative, or performatively and selectively constitutive of social identification with respect to a present context as it is referential'.

84. See Jolly 1997: 236 and Merlan 1998: 129-30.

85. It is possible that this man's father's mother's clan-estate similarly adjoined a Kaanju estate further to the east.

86. Chase 1980: 160-1.

87. A term marking the sharing of land-owning interests, typically consisting of territorial overlap. It is related to, but distinct from, 'box-up' relationships, the latter term emphasising joint land-use.

Wik-Iyeny clan whose country is downstream along the major river running through both of their countries.⁸⁸ The location of AG's country is unknown, but his marital and family ties to the west, in particular Kowanyama, suggest it lay in that direction. LH's country is to the south, neighbouring Olkola country, but his Mungkanhu wife and inland orientation may have been the basis for his placement with the Mungkan group. Finally, JC's father and grandfather's clan-language attribution remains ambiguous, but it appears likely that his father's father's country lay on the border of Ayapathu and Kaanju areas where close marital and 'box-up' ties existed between the clans across this linguistic juncture.

At the time of Chase's report, there was a further set of Ayapathu descendants living in Coen, at a remove from the population of the Reserve surveyed by Chase. These were the Aboriginal families who had been de facto or de jure⁸⁹ exempt from the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (1897), had lived away from the Reserve in the township itself, and had been discouraged or prohibited (depending on their administrative status) from associating with the Aboriginal people who remained 'under the Act'. One of these families was of mixed Ayapathu/Lamalama/non-Aboriginal descent, but continued to identify with both their father's coastal country and their mother's Ayapathu country on the Great Dividing Range. Although prohibited from associating with those living on the Reserve, this family (and other families in similar situations) maintained knowledge of their interests in country and their forebears' identity, and knowledge of their relationships (both actual and classificatory)⁹⁰ with other Aboriginal people in the region. Where possible, in particular through station work, this family maintained relationships with other Aboriginal families, and their relative freedom allowed them greater opportunities to visit hinterland areas with their children in the 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, the Act created a degree of social distance and mutual distrust between those living on the Reserve and those living in the town that later efforts at reconciliation have not entirely removed.

Thus in the years following centralisation of Aboriginal life in Coen, despite contact with country through cattle work, a set of transformed tribal identities developed in response to the changed circumstances of township life. These allowed the coalescence of groups that provided a means of dealing with the new pressures and worries of centralisation within the Aboriginal domain. But it seems that they may have served another, external function. Life on the Reserve was subject to continual moral surveillance by whites, which extended to the surveying of tribal identity and the application of both an administrative and a white public gaze to Aboriginal life⁹¹. Tribal identities, removed from the core Aboriginal concerns of estate, clan and Story, provided not only

⁸⁸. This relationship is discussed at greater length in Sutton et al. 1991: 7, 16.

⁸⁹. The distinction here is between families who were officially exempt from the Act and those who remained 'under the Act' but were treated by local whites as trusted employees and allowed to live in the township in houses provided for them. Though not exempt, the latter group was generally treated as such by these whites, and discouraged from fraternising with the Reserve people.

⁹⁰. The region's system of kinship is such that all Aboriginal people will be determined to have a kin relationship to any other Aboriginal person they know or meet. Where the person is not closely ('really') related, a classificatory kin relationship will be determined through a mutually related person or persons.

a locus for town-based groups, but also a 'smokescreen' (or perhaps a 'mirror') preventing white surveillance from intruding into valued aspects of Aboriginal life. Sutton⁹² has referred to similar events, which he describes as 'undergrounding', amongst Aboriginal people in urban areas during the assimilation era. As with these groups, the post-classical period in the Coen region has eventuated the gradual ending of this undergrounding period and the renaissance of traditional forms of Aboriginal identity.

Nonetheless, this history of undergrounding and the conjoint emphasis on tribes in both Aboriginal and inter-ethnic domains of Coen life have led to a particular form of post-classical renaissance for the Aboriginal people of the township, including Ayapathu people.

The 'resurgence' of an Ayapathu identity

On arriving in Coen to commence fieldwork in January 1996, I spent the morning at the offices of the Coen Regional Aboriginal Corporation (CRAC) with its project manager. She outlined the groups represented on the corporation's board of directors and their landed interests in the hinterland of the township, emphasising the (CRAC-administered) outstations in these areas. Among the directors was one representing the town's 'Ayapathu' group, associated with an area south of the township including Station Creek, the site of the Lalla Rookh homestead. This was the proposed site for the development of an Ayapathu outstation, at which the Ayapathu director and his family camped sporadically during the dry season⁹³.

This apparent resurgence of an Ayapathu tribal identity in the township appears to have been contemporaneous with two other developments. These were the belated regional shift towards Aboriginal land rights in far north Queensland and the establishment of a local Aboriginal Corporation in a township in which local whites had previously owned all businesses, freehold land, pastoral leases and local political or representative organisations.⁹⁴ These factors led to a push to gain control, under 'mainstream' Australian legal processes, to areas of land in the region, and to the establishment of outstation camps in these and other areas from around 1990. The main focus of this push has been CRAC and the two corporations that preceded it⁹⁵. These corporations, alongside the Cape York Land Council (a regional organisation) and local repre-

91. Here I allude to the work of Foucault, e.g. 1979. A detailed application of Foucault's work in colonially-encapsulated Australian Aboriginal communities can be found in Morris 1989.

92. Sutton 1998: 124.

93. A period lasting from May to November every year. This outstation ('Punthimu') has subsequently been developed.

94. In particular the Coen Progress Association and the unfortunately named Coen Race Club, which organised the annual Coen Races. Membership of both groups and attendance of their meetings completely excluded Aboriginal people. Even after the formation of the Coen Regional Aboriginal Corporation, only white employees of the Corporation would attend the Coen Progress Association's monthly meetings at which matters of local interest, particularly relating to local infrastructure development, Shire Council schemes etc. were discussed and the position of the Coen 'community' forwarded to relevant agencies. This 'racialised hegemony', which encompassed local economic activity and local representative bodies near-totally until the mid-1990s, is discussed further in Smith 2000a.

95. Moomba Aboriginal Corporation and Malpa Kincha Aboriginal Corporation. See also Jolly 1997: 246-56 and Smith 2000a.

sentatives of state and national government agencies, in particular Queensland's native affairs department⁹⁶, have provided channels for the pursuit of land rights and decentralisation during this period.

For much of the region's Aboriginal population, this process has re-established a potential, for the first time in many years, for meaningful interests in country – that is, interests that involve some degree of actual or potential control over areas of land and places of importance in the Coen region. Similarly, it has provided the first opportunity for some twenty-odd years for many people to visit or live on this land in a substantial and meaningful way.⁹⁷ This has resulted in a shift of the articulation of Aboriginal identity from the township-oriented tribal identities of the Reserve years to encompass a greater articulation of identity oriented to areas of land beyond the township.

Such articulation, like that in the township before it, has commonly been in the form of 'tribes'. This is because the shift back towards country-articulated identities, like the tribal identities that preceded it, has proved inseparable from the inter-ethnic articulation of Aboriginal existence, both between differentiated Aboriginal groups and between Aboriginal people and whites.⁹⁸ The inter-ethnic aspect is particularly discernible in the local administration of outstations by white-run inter-ethnic agencies (albeit organisations designated as 'Aboriginal') and through the contemporary inseparability of Aboriginal relations to land from both classical Aboriginal land tenure and the mainstream system of ownership and use that now encapsulates, and in part constitutes, the Aboriginal landscape. It is essential to realise that any meaningful contemporary control of land by Aboriginal people encompasses both 'classical' and interethnic aspects of Aboriginal existence. Such control is articulated between Aboriginal people and between Aborigines and whites, as both of these groups (and the associated domains reproduced through this articulation) are fundamentally part of the existence – social, economic and cultural – of Coen's Aboriginal population.⁹⁹

Given this fundamentally inter-ethnic dimension to contemporary Aboriginal territoriality, it is unsurprising that tribes, long a feature of the Aboriginal articulation of their social organisation within the inter-ethnic domain, characterise the identities of land-owning and land-using groups in its contemporary manifestation. However, it is

⁹⁶. Which has had a number of names over the years of its existence: see Kidd 1997. At the time of writing, it was called the Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Affairs.

⁹⁷. Lack of access to vehicles, the enclosure of most of the country surrounding Coen within pastoral leases and the lack of Aboriginal employment opportunities on these stations, a reluctance to stress the importance of country to local whites and the anomie endemic amongst the Aboriginal population in the Coen township combined to inhibit such visits during this period. However, some families – notably those who had been de facto or de jure exempt from the Act and who possessed their own vehicles – continued to visit their country on a regular basis (cf. Smith 2000a for further discussion of these matters).

⁹⁸. Smith 2000a presents a detailed discussion of these forms of ethnic articulation in the region.

⁹⁹. The issues I have raised here have been dealt with in detail in Merlan 1998, in particular the no longer autonomous but 'still unequal' nature of 'intercultural production' of the inter-ethnic domain (Merlan 1998: 180-1 et al.). As one of the anonymous referees of this article noted, the 'intercultural' and 'interethnic' are not equivalent – indeed their interplay is at the heart of much contemporary interaction both between Aboriginal people and between indigenous and non-indigenous groups. These issues merit far more detailed discussion than is possible here and I intend to take up these issues at length in a forthcoming paper.

also apparent that the notion of tribes has similarly gained currency within the Aboriginal domain. As Rigsby notes:

In this current period when it's become possible for Aboriginal people to get some land back, I have had to recognise that tribal groups named after indigenous languages have emerged and operate as significant groups in land claims, purchases etc. ... These new groups are now important social groups in many parts of northern, remote Australia too. In the Princess Charlotte Bay and adjoining regions, they have developed during the transformation of the classical clan-based system of land tenure and use into the current system.¹⁰⁰

Many younger people in particular identify themselves and their country in tribal terms, with knowledge of the previous clan names and territories increasingly absent.¹⁰¹ Yet I would argue that this is not simply a 'loss of tradition'. Rather, as Rigsby indicates, it marks a contemporary manifestation of an ongoing system of territoriality, ownership and identity developing through the articulation of interests and identities within the changing situations of Aboriginal existence. I would suggest that not only in the case of territoriality, but more generally within the town-based existence of the past thirty years, Aboriginal life has become increasingly inter-ethnic, both in terms of living within a large body of ethnically different Aboriginal peoples and through living alongside and within, a dominant white socio-culture. Initially such a process, at least as regards whites, was resisted; a smokescreen was established to protect valued aspects of Aboriginal existence from white surveillance and interference.¹⁰² At the same time however, tribal identities emerged both as an aspect of this smokescreen and as identities of countryman groups within the Reserve's Aboriginal life. In time, aspects of town-based identities, inter-ethnic existence and the dominant white culture became increasingly valued. As a result, the smokescreen of tribal identity can be seen to have gradually gained its own substance. As Aboriginal life grew to encompass both Aboriginal and inter-ethnic forms of substantive identity, both became important aspects of social personhood incorporated within Aboriginal existence.

¹⁰⁰. Rigsby 1995: 25.

¹⁰¹. Merlan 1998: 92 reports a similar generation difference in the Katherine region of the Northern Territory.

¹⁰². This 'smokescreen' included the masking of important aspects of Aboriginal existence, e.g. much cosmological knowledge or the practice of sorcery, as well as Aboriginal attitudes towards whites. The division of the Aboriginal world of the reserve and the appearance of Aboriginal life to whites is well illustrated by Aboriginal participation in the festivities around the annual Coen Races (the last of which was held in 2000). Aboriginal people would perform some dancing, at the behest of whites, in the town. Afterwards, at the relative privacy of the reserve, the 'real' dance performances and competition took place. As Chase 1972: 5-6 notes, these included *taipu* (or Torres Strait-style 'island dance') and different *malkari* (or 'corroborree') dances, many of which portrayed scenes of post-contact life and cattlework. They included a '*whitpeller*' dance mocking a white man looking for his cattle, one example of attitudes to whites that would rarely, if ever, have been revealed in interactions with them. It seems clear from my fieldwork data and personal experience that an important aspect of the smokescreen was the masking of anger, bitterness and resentment towards local whites who were greeted with deference and muted accommodation when present, but towards whom most Aboriginal people harboured a deeply embedded enmity, both generalised and particularised.

The incorporation of a fundamentally inter-ethnic dimension of Aboriginal existence has had sociopolitical repercussions within the region's Aboriginal domain. Among the most notable of these has been the rise to political prominence of those Aboriginal people formerly living beyond the Reserve and de facto or de jure exempted from the provisions of the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* (1897) and subsequent similar legislation. The separation of these families from those living on the Reserve decreased, both physically and socially, with the repeal of the Act and the integration of both factions of the local Aboriginal population within the town's new Aboriginal housing in the early 1970s. From this time it is apparent that the closer ties of the formerly exempt families to the white population, and their greater familiarity in dealing with white socio-culture, positioned them in roles of 'brokerage'¹⁰³ between whites (both local and those from outside agencies) and the Aboriginal population. Their ties to local whites also allowed them to control and utilise important resources - in particular, motor vehicles - that formed the basis for increased political status and allowed them access to areas of land beyond the township with which they had ties. With the advent of the local Aboriginal corporations and the development of outstations, these ties to whites and to country and access to resources have put these families at the forefront of the territorial renaissance in the region.

Although many of the factors underlying this positioning are based within the historically recent circumstances of white colonialism and the resulting inter-ethnic dimension of contemporary Aboriginal existence, the contemporary existence of 'focal men'¹⁰⁴ in the region's territorial system is a manifestation of long-running socio-cultural patterns. Von Sturmer,¹⁰⁵ working with Kugu-Nganchara people in western Cape York Peninsula, has outlined the way in which certain men achieved political prominence as the focal men for camps in that region. For these men:

'gaining and maintaining [personal] control of an important [typically religious/ceremonial and/or resource-rich] site, typically one located near a naturally favoured camping area capable of sustaining large numbers of visitors' lay at the heart of ascendancy to political prominence. Such men 'made reputations as ceremonial leaders and, correlatively, as men of note in the public forum'.¹⁰⁶

A similar process marks the development of outstations within the Coen region. Such sites, as well as occupying places of importance within the region's Aboriginal landscape, allow the control of resources from the matrix of the encapsulating administrative 'environment'.¹⁰⁷ The role of contemporary focal men similarly extends to 'ceremony'. This is no longer the performance of the classical traditions of grand ritual, but the performance of ties to country in land claims processes, which seek to recognise,

¹⁰³. See Howard 1978.

¹⁰⁴. Such roles are, almost without exception, occupied by men. One woman who does hold such a role does so in a limited form, articulating her role against that of her similarly 'focal' brother. The reasons for this gendered bias in local politics are probably due to both 'traditional' factors and factors pertaining to expectations of white agencies dealing with the region's Aboriginal population, but these cannot be discussed at length here.

¹⁰⁵. von Sturmer 1978.

¹⁰⁶. von Sturmer 1978, cited in Hiatt 1996: 95.

¹⁰⁷. See Smith 2000a.

reproduce and regiment Aboriginal territoriality¹⁰⁸ within mainstream European–Australian legal frameworks.

In the case of the region's Ayapathu group, this has seen a descendant of the Ayapathu/Lamalama/non-Aboriginal family discussed above assert his Ayapathu identity and country-interest based in his ties, through his mother, to the Station Creek area. Through this identity he has also become the Ayapathu director in the local Aboriginal corporation and the focus for the landed interests of the wider group of Ayapathu people living on Cape York Peninsula. Such political prominence is unsustainable without the support of the wider tribal group. In this way, the role of the Ayapathu director, like that of other focal men, is maintained through the support or acquiescence of other members of such 'tribes'. In order to gain and retain such support, focal men have to ensure the continuing access of their 'tribe' to their country through outstations and similarly ensure that this group are informed about, and have 'their say' in, 'business' pertaining to their 'tribal land'. As a result, the role of a focal man is reproduced through the continual ferrying of information, people and resources between the inter-ethnic and Aboriginal domains, between the regional centre of Cairns and the township of Coen, and between Coen and his outstation in the township's hinterland.¹⁰⁹

The contemporary Ayapathu tribe is more limited, both in number and constituency, than its name might suggest. As Rigsby notes, the name generally pertains to 'a small group of people, the descendants of the inland Ayapathu who now live in Coen'.¹¹⁰

It is apparent that this group does not form a tribe because it encompasses the total group of people descended from Ayapathu clans known to its members, or because all of its members hold identical interests in an area of land associated with the Ayapathu language. Rather, their tribal identity is based in their amalgamation as a group or mob to pursue their interests in land as what Hafner has referred to as 'one mob for country'.¹¹¹ This amalgamation is based on ties of kinship and territorial closeness through their common cognatic descent from a number of inland Ayapathu-speaking clans that previously existed as members of a regional block or culture area, and through the members and descendants of these clans sharing a continuing history of living alongside each other 'on country', in the cattle industry and in Coen.

Within this tribal group there remain apparent, although not completely distinct, associations with particular areas within the wider 'Ayapathu tribal area'. These ties clearly maintain distinctions drawn from the classical clan estates of the region, with the interests held by particular families mirroring those held by the Ayapathu clan or clans from which they are descended. For example, the Coen-based Ahlers(1)¹¹² family has a particular interest in an area within the Crystal Vale pastoral lease through their patrilineal association with a key 'Story' and associated country located there. Senior members of the Port family have a similar association with the Station Creek/Punthimu

108. See Merlan 1995, 1998 and Rose 1996.

109. The relationship between mobility and focal men is discussed at length in Smith 2000a.

110. Rigsby 1992: 357.

111. Hafner 1995.

112. There are two distinct families in the region, both being Ayapathu descendants, who bear this surname.

area of Silver Plains through their mother and their history of association with this country from their childhood. These more particular associations are demonstrated in the relative authority of different Ayapathu people in different areas of Ayapathu country, a senior member of the family with such an association being the person seen as properly having the right to *'speak for'*¹¹³ that area. They are also apparent in close inter-family relationships based on long-running *'company'* ties between neighbouring (classical) clans and their descendants. This is illustrated by the company relationship of the Ahlers(2) and Shortjoe families along the Pretender Creek/Holroyd (or 'South Kendall')¹¹⁴ River system¹¹⁵. This relationship further underlines the flexible nature of contemporary tribal identification by territorial mobs. Whilst the clan language of the Shortjoe's antecedent patri-clan was Wik-Iyeny, their company interest overlapping Ayapathu country and their history of boxing-up within the Ayapathu-centric block has been the basis of their identification as 'Ayapathu as well' or 'Mungkanh(u)¹¹⁶-Ayapathu mixed' when involved in business pertaining to this area.¹¹⁷

However, beyond these more particular interests a conjoint Ayapathu tribal identity continues to be asserted in inter-ethnic *'business'* by the region's Ayapathu mob. This is almost certainly a function of the limited numbers of Ayapathu-identifying people in the region. As with the groups that formerly coalesced on the Reserve, a certain volume of people appears to be necessary to furnish the required social momentum for effective group action.

Interestingly, there are a number of families in the region recognised by the Ayapathu group as being of Ayapathu descent, but who they have dismissed as having any *'say'* in Ayapathu land. The reason offered for such dismissal is that these families have taken up interests in country other than the Ayapathu area, and have thus foregone their interests in the latter. Unvocalised, but apparently part of this dismissal, is the distance (both physical and social) effected not only between these families and the country of their Ayapathu forebears, but between themselves and the Ayapathu families who have maintained such association and reasserted such conjoint identity in the Coen region. Thus one family at a nearby former mission settlement was said to *'have no say in Ayapathu business'* because they had *'followed their mother's side'*, and apparently did little to maintain close kin ties with their Coen-based relatives.¹¹⁸ Another family, far removed on Palm Island since the mid-1950s, was held to still possess the interests

113. Assert control of or speak in the case of the area either in formal *'business'* like land claims, or informal discussions.

114. This is the river marked as the 'Holroyd' on most maps, but Aboriginal people from the region know it as the 'South Kendall', using the name 'Holroyd' for a different river entirely.

115. See Sutton et al. 1991: 7.

116. The 'Wik-Iyeny' language and clans are typically identified, from a Coen-Ayapathu perspective as *'Wik Mungkan'*, *'Mungkan-side'*, *'Mungkanhu'* or *'Aurukun-side'*. Such compression of more territorially distant identity-distinctions under regional identifiers is common in the region.

117. Similarly, members of this family have identified as 'Olkola' in representing their interests in more southerly country, acting in concord with the Olkola group who share interests in that area. Again, this demonstrates the role of language-names as processual identifiers for land-based groups, rather than primarily reflecting fundamental ties between language, country and people, despite the continuing existence of such ties.

of their Ayapathu forebears as they maintained contact with kin in Coen, occasionally returning to visit them.

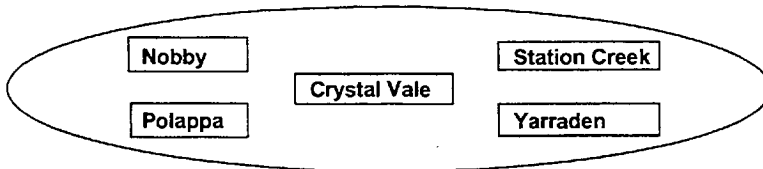
However, as land claims have seen the re-recognition of Ayapathu identity by a wider group and the increased likelihood of available title or control over areas of Ayapathu country has emerged, some of these families have begun to declare their interest in these areas. This process has been further developed by the actions of anthropologists and Land Councils in developing Ayapathu genealogies and locating the descendants of Ayapathu clans on Cape York Peninsula and beyond it.¹¹⁹ Palm Island in particular is both home to and the diffusion point for a number of Ayapathu descendants, many of whom remain unaware of their potential Ayapathu identity and interests. The contacting of these people and the passing on of information about their Ayapathu ties, such processes being common in land claims, is likely to involve them as parties to such Ayapathu business regardless of the perceptions of the 'local' Coen-based Ayapathu tribal group of their right to involvement.¹²⁰

Increasing numbers of Ayapathu-identifying people active in the region's business, particularly where such families have weaker ties to the Coen-based Ayapathu group, are likely to increase the level of 'intra-tribal distinction'. Similarly, an increase in areas of Ayapathu land available for claim under land rights legislation, or via purchase, will tend to produce the same effect. Both are likely to lead towards a process of fragmentation similar to that described by Altman at Maningrida outstations, where

band-sized outstation groups ... (began) splintering into nuclear/nuclear extended groups ... (resulting) in a very land extensive occupational mosaic.¹²¹

The incipient stage of such fragmentation is already apparent in the Coen region. Here however its current primary focus is in land-holding as well as land using groups.¹²² Discussing the links of Ayapathu people to Ayapathu 'tribal country' and plans for future use of this country with CRAC's Ayapathu director, he drew and described a number of potential outstation sites in the Coen region (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Potential Ayapathu outstations in the Coen region



¹¹⁸ In the last year this family has become more involved in Ayapathu business, and with their Ayapathu kin, demonstrating the processual nature of inclusion and exclusion from contemporary 'tribal' mobs.

¹¹⁹ Bruce Rigsby (pers. comm.) has pointed out the need for careful professional and ethical consideration of the degree to which such 'proto-descendants' (the term is mine) should be informed of these ties and under what circumstances.

¹²⁰ I discuss the articulation of landed interests between such 'local' and 'Diaspora' groups elsewhere (Smith 2000b).

¹²¹ Altman 1995: 1.

¹²² See Smith 2000a on the interplay of land-holding and land-using groups (in particular, outstation groups) in the contemporary Coen region.

These outstations would be occupied by families with particular interests in the areas in which they were sited, but would maintain a network of mutual support. Moreover, those living at the camps would move from outstation to outstation, living at the other camps from time to time to visit kin there and enjoy the surrounding country and its associated resources. The similarities to the classical social and territorial organisation in the region are clear – and noted by the Ayapathu director, who described the arrangement as being *'like before'* – a number of main camps, each with an associated population, but between which strong ties, including mobility and sharing of resources, are maintained, constituting a regional block. The nascent differentiation or splitting of the Ayapathu tribe¹²³ apparent within this conceptualisation of group-place relations makes it apparent that any judgements about the 'loss' of complex social organisation, and a one-way shift towards language-named tribes would be oversimplistic.

Rather, unlike models of a simple deterioration of knowledge leading to tribes replacing clans, there is an apparent spectrum – or perhaps a cluster – of potential organisational forms within the region's ongoing Aboriginal socio-culture. Embedded more in factors of group numbers and territorial availability than 'continuing traditionality' and 'acculturation', changes in the social, economic and physical environment of the region's Aboriginal population – including Ayapathu people – produce commensurate shifts between these forms.

Conclusion

The history of the Ayapathu 'tribe' of inland Cape York Peninsula reveals a number of historical group-forms that have developed in response to the contexts in which Ayapathu people have found themselves. Limited by the need for socio-culturally manageable and sufficient group numbers, this history has seen the transformation of the classical clan system into one in which 'tribes' play a prominent role, a shift initially driven by the organisational necessities of township life and articulation with an encapsulating colonial society. This shift included the temporary suppression of an Ayapathu identity in the production of these tribes (in the form of countryman groups) in the Coen township. But over time the development of inter-ethnic ties and the substantiation of such tribal identities has made them a core part of Aboriginal existence in the region. As Merlan writes for Katherine in the Northern Territory,

Recognition that even highly salient-seeming clan organization is only a particular kind of expression of relationships with country and is underpinned by much more general conditions and social orientations allows us to reject any simple equation of such organizational forms with 'culture' and thus also to reject any view that Aboriginal culture 'falls apart' when clan-level organization dissipates ... However, the dissolution of clan-level organization is a symptom of a much more general process: changes in the form of life such that landscape recedes in importance.¹²⁴

¹²³. See Sutton and Rigsby 1982 for a general discussion of nascent differentiation and group schism – particularly that associated with growth of group size allowing the formation of substantial subgroups – with regard to material from western Cape York Peninsula and Princess Charlotte Bay.

¹²⁴. Merlan 1998: 112–13.

The case of the Ayapathu tribe shows that such recession of the importance of landscape, and the dissipation of clan-level organisation are not necessarily mono-directional. The increasing numbers of Ayapathu people and the resurgence of potentially substantial interests in Ayapathu country have not only led to the resurgence of a local Ayapathu identity. With the continuing increase in numbers of Ayapathu descendants, the potential return of others with Ayapathu ties into the region's territorial business, and the increasing amount of land seen as potentially available for the assertion of such interests, the region has shifted towards the fragmentation of this 'tribal' group into smaller - although inter-linked - land-owning and land-using groups. This shift indicates that, rather than a degeneration of the system of local organisation through acculturation, or a one-way dissolution of clan-level organisation, the shift to forms of tribal organisation is potentially reversible as sufficient numbers of people and areas of country become available to the regional Aboriginal society and that society shifts its focus away from the town and back towards its hinterland.

The outcome of this shift currently remains in the balance. It depends, to a great degree, on whether conditions remain such that the Aboriginal people of the region are able to pursue their re-orientation towards 'bush' areas through outstations and regenerated title to land. If the current trend of supposed economic rationalism and political backlash against land rights continues, the underpinning of this process will be ripped away, once again collapsing the way of life and aspirations of the region's Aboriginal people.

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