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‘They Don’t Dance Corroboree Any More’: Youth Relations to Authority, Leadership and Civic Responsibility in a Remote Aboriginal Community

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What do you see as the future for young people in Ngukurr?

No future, they are all *munanga* [non-Indigenous people] types, growing in a house, with a fence and electricity. I didn’t grow up like that, I had a tyre and a tree for a hospital. They don’t learn Aboriginal way, it’s too hard for them. Everything you learn is hard, I see no future, they don’t dance corroboree, they don’t sleep around the fire. I want to see Aboriginal people be Aboriginal people. This is my purpose in life. (Edward, senior male, July 2015)

Introduction

This study of young people’s leadership aspirations begins with a corroboree, which was part of the initiation ceremony for three young boys. This was the final corroboree before the boys were to be circumcised the following day. Circumcision marks the end of a period of exclusion from the mainstream world, after which the boy is reintegrated into society as a man. During his period of removal, he has been taught

traditional law, and sacred objects and knowledge are revealed to him. Ivory (2009, 128), in his study of Indigenous leadership, explains that this rite of passage is 'vital to being considered an adult male and progression towards becoming a leader'.

At dusk, the boys and their families gathered at the small settlement of Urapunga, about 20 km from Ngukurr, and waited for the dancers from Numbulwar to arrive. This period was marked by uncertainty; the women said they were unsure about where to sit or what their role would be (and were in fact moved several times until everyone was satisfied). There appeared to be considerable unease about the timing of the ceremony's start; the men had said it would begin in the late afternoon, but nothing had been heard about the whereabouts of the dancers from Numbulwar by nightfall. Ceremonies such as this were infrequent in Ngukurr and this may have heightened people's anxieties about their ability to ensure that it was conducted properly. Such anxieties are not a new feature of Ngukurr society. In 1970, Bern described the hesitance of the Djungaii (managers) in the conduct of the Jabadurwa ceremony because they were 'unsure of their ability' (Bern 1970, 18).

As it got darker and darker, people became more and more anxious, and periodically the men would call out. Finally, their calls were answered with short bursts of digeridoo and song and a large, old, flatbed truck pulled up disgorging a surprising number of people, the men carrying spears and digeridoos. The little boys, who were about eight years old, sat at the front of a bower shade. The Red Flag Dancers from Numbulwar led the dancing, the men acting as though they were pushing the boys forward, the women as though they were trying to bring them back to their world with the actions of hauling in a net. These dances were followed by short explosive ones by small groups of men, appropriate to their own skin and clan. There was considerable reluctance from the local residents to take part in the dancing, some of the women said that they did not feel confident dancing in public, others practised tentative steps at the side of the gathering. Only a few older people attempted any public display, which was met by nervous laughter from the spectators. By 11 pm, there was no sign that the ceremony would end soon, and it was explained that the boys would be cut (circumcised) tomorrow after being kept awake all night by the singing and dancing. This ceremony was an important and highly anticipated community event, but, as the opening quote indicates, there was a feeling among older men that such ceremonies were no longer respected by many people in the community, particularly younger people.



Figure 3.1: Corroboree at Urapunga, July 2015.

Source: Photograph by Kate Senior.

For Bern (1979b, 120), the organisation and performance of such rituals 'dramatizes structural differences both among initiated men and between them and the uninitiated'. Rituals affirm older male authority over young men and celebrate their political power. Bern (1979b, 126) argues that, unlike women, who must be placated to assist the men in rituals, youth acquiesce because one day they will also rise to this position of power. However, his description of the organisation of a ceremony in Ngukurr points to a degree of ambivalence among the young men:

A more general factor was the increasing European influence, particularly on the younger men. This had a contradictory effect. On the one hand, the men were doubting the efficacy of totemic myths and questioning the relevance of ceremonial performance, while on the other hand, they were becoming increasingly aware of its being a unique Aboriginal possession. (Bern 1970, 18)

As mentioned above, the initiates at this particular corroboree were young, only about eight years old; their powers to resist the authority of the older men were, therefore, extremely limited. Older men, women and little children were present, but there was a conspicuous absence of youth, particularly young males. Edward's lament that young people don't dance corroborees anymore can be understood in a political context: the young men are not respecting the authority of their elders. Is this to

be understood as a lack of respect for all authority or are young people specifically questioning the ritual authority of the mature men of the community?

This chapter explores power, authority and responsibility in the secular realm at Ngukurr, paying particular attention to the experiences and aspirations of a group of emerging young male leaders. Youth and leadership are not considered to be mutually compatible categories in Aboriginal communities, in which political power is often considered to be the domain of mature men (Bern 1979a, 1979b). The mainstream literature demonstrates an increasing apathy towards civic and political involvement among young people generally (Youniss et al. 2002), caused in part by a range of structural barriers, such as access to employment, that prevent effective involvement (Bessant 2004). What, then, are the political motivations of the young men who do not attend ritual events such as that described above?

To address this question, we contrast the leadership efforts of older community members with those of one group of young men, under the age of 25, and ask how each cohort defines and enacts their political presence. The contrast we employ is provided by individuals from three generations of one family. The first is from an elderly male, Edward, who described himself as having been a leader for much of his life; the second is from his daughter, Edna (in her 40s), who tried but failed to become a leader; and the third is from their grandson and son, Edwin (in his early 20s), who is the focal member of a group of young men describing themselves as a gang. This chapter describes how these individuals rose to positions of leadership and the actions and values underlying their decisions.

In each generation, leadership was enacted in different ways in response to broader sociopolitical contexts. Edward was put forward by the older generation in the community (who gained their respect and authority from the religious sphere) to interact and engage in the developing bureaucracy of the self-determination era. He was placed in the intercultural spaces of community councils and government meetings that involved 'politicking' between the Aboriginal community and governmental and other outside processes. His daughter, Edna, played a similar role but in an environment that saw the devaluation of Indigenous self-management with leadership roles that had very little power. Edna's son, Edwin, has pushed away from leadership in the intercultural space of community management, instead

embracing a new style of leadership—one that takes in Indigenous culture and connection to land and community, but aspires to increasing mobility and globalised forms of expression.

Leadership and Authority

Studies of political organisation in Aboriginal societies have always been fraught, with debate ranging from the assertion that Aboriginal tribes had no formal apparatus of government (e.g. Meggitt 1962) to claims that political leadership was restricted to the religious sphere (e.g. Berndt and Berndt 1969; Elkin 1938; Strehlow 1947). In *Kinship and Conflict*, Hiatt (1965) summarised the different conceptualisations of Aboriginal leadership in the literature and argued that men's leadership has often been related to their courage, strength and force of character, but that their authority resides in the domain of ritual. The path to becoming a leader begins early in a young boy's life, with older men identifying particular characteristics and nurturing those who possess them. The process in Port Keats is described by Ivory (2009, 131–32):

From an early age a child's development is overseen firstly by their parents and then increasingly by their uncles and aunts. Others observe a boy's behaviour, demeanour, and decisions are made as to when they will commence the formalised rites of passage.

A process such as this is described by Myers (1976, 556) as 'looking after'. Initiation is the rite of passage that transforms the young boy into a man and a future leader (Ivory 2009). Post initiation, an individual's rise in status is largely determined by ceremonial attainment and a capacity for taking responsibility for others (Ivory 2009, 129).

Bern (1979a, 1979b) wrote extensively on the leadership and politics of the Ngukurr community. He describes the mature men's control of religion and ritual and, through it, control of 'the relations of production': 'Within the Aboriginal social formation religion is the determinate structure. The social formation has a developed political structure in which the mature men occupy the dominant position' (Bern 1979a, 131). During the end of the mission era and into the period of self-determination, leadership at Ngukurr required people to be active in the secular world. Bern, in 1970, described five councils or committees that required Aboriginal involvement. These included the station council, which administered the

general running of the community; the citizens club, which ran the shop; the entertainment committee; the school council; and the church council (Bern 1970, 11). Each of these provided opportunities for individuals to demonstrate leadership and develop individual standing, but they also required a range of different skills focused on mainstream education and cross-cultural communication. In Port Keats, Ivory (2009) showed how authority was deferred in some areas from older men to middle-aged men who had the necessary educational skills to perform the new roles. In the committees described by Bern (1970), membership was dominated by males over 40. Women were minimally represented in all committees (with the exception of the church committee). The only committee in which women achieved equity of membership with men was the school committee. Later, both the church and the school became important avenues for women to demonstrate leadership (O'Donnell 2007).¹

In his analysis, Bern sees secular power as something derived from religious authority and, because acquisition of religious knowledge is a gradual process (controlled by older men through initiation), only mature men can assume this power. There were situations, however, in which younger men were able to exert their influence on the older men. A key example is the Ngukurr strike (9 March – 6 April 1970), which saw Ngukurr workers leave their positions and take their children out of school until their demands for fair wages and control of their land were met. It is clear that, although older men were designated as the frontmen of the strike, it was the younger men who were most insistent on change. Bern (1976, 220) talks, for example, of the 'caucus decision by the young men to go on strike' and says that: 'The young men had taken the decision to strike based in their assessment of gains to be made, their world view, and their own propensity to oppose authority.' Although older men controlled the religious domain, the young men, on this occasion, exerted considerable political power, which the older men, at least initially, accepted.

1 Issues of women's leadership were largely ignored until Bell (1983) challenged the notion of women as second-class citizens and described their maintenance of a rich ritual life on which the sustenance of the group depended. Bell points out, however, that the change from nomadic existence to living in settlements disrupted women's power base due to men's classification as breadwinners and the head of households by outside observers.

A Changing Context for Leadership in Ngukurr

The period covering the lives of the three generations of leaders in this chapter encompasses a range of different contexts and opportunities. Edward's story begins when missionaries withdrew from the community and handed control back to the Northern Territory Government. His story coincides with increasing levels of Aboriginal activism and a commitment to self-determination. At a very young age, he was chosen by the elders to become a leader in secular affairs and the world of non-Aboriginal politics. This leadership was outside of the religious sphere and was dependent on Edward's skills in straddling Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains. The community was administered through a local community government council with representation from each of the seven clan groups, yet the community remained restricted in its capacity to make decisions. Outsiders, mainly non-Aboriginal people, occupied management, governance and skilled positions within the community and the council itself was administered by a non-Aboriginal town clerk. Notwithstanding Aboriginal leaders' expectations that they could make decisions about their community, their ability to do so was often undermined. For example, in 2001, the leaders initiated a carefully planned intervention to combat petrol sniffing in the town (Senior and Chenhall 2007). Through a series of public meetings, the leaders were able to mobilise the interest of the community and work collectively with it to develop a program that was acceptable. They were adamant that their decisions would be supported by the council:

Decision must come from the community, and then Council can act of it. River Town is number one sniffing community, what are people doing about it? The decision has to come through the community and then we will push it through Council. If the Council make the decision on their own, then the community may not like it. (Senior and Chenhall 2007, 320)

Regrettably, the efforts of the community leaders were not recognised by the largely non-Aboriginal staff representing the key agencies in the community, and the intervention failed to be supported.

Edna witnessed many of these events in her early adult years; however, by the time she was in a position to become a leader, the context had changed dramatically. The structures of the community government

council and the town clerk had been disbanded and the community had been amalgamated with others to become part of a 'super-shire', administered from Katherine, 300 km away. Shire representatives took over the running of various institutions and programs in the community. The health clinic, formerly run by the Northern Territory Government, became part of a regional health board, also administered from Katherine. These structures gave opportunities for Ngukurr residents to be involved in regional boards, but effectively removed decision-making from the local community (Sanders 2013). Superimposed over all these changes was the Northern Territory Emergency Intervention in 2008, which brought a range of new institutions, particularly those focused on infant and child care, and regimes, including income management and alcohol prohibitions, to Ngukurr (see Hinkson 2017). Out of this regime of control and regulation, a new form of leadership has been articulated by young people in the community—a style that distances itself from both religious and political authority and connects to a civic sense of duty and globalised forms of identification.

The View of the Older Generation

Edward is now confined to a wheelchair—we manoeuvred him with difficulty to the front step of his house to talk. Inside the house, the room was bare apart from a partially dismembered bullock that attracted a swarm of flies. His lifetime of prominence in the community had clearly not resulted in any obvious material gains. In 1999, when Senior (author one) first met him, Edward was a man to be feared; he was notorious for sacking town clerks and removing people's permits to enter the community. Even the sight of his Land Cruiser could strike fear into the hearts of meddling *munanga*. An encounter with Edward usually included a monologue on community issues and Northern Territory politics, but, on this particular day, he didn't recognise Senior: 'Ah my girl, that dress, I thought you were lady from the mission'. With the help of his daughter, he remembered and they fell into their usual conversation about political issues in the community.

Senior asked Edward to tell the story about how he came to be a leader. Edward said he was chosen by the men in the community. This was something about which he felt deep ambivalence. He was clear that this

was the decision of elders in the community and not one he made himself. Somehow, they were able to divine the intrinsic qualities of a future leader in him when he was still an infant:

When I was only six years old they pointed at us and made us a leader—'you are going to be a leader of this place'. I didn't feel good, was just a young fella, then in 1959, I was voted a leader, I was only 13 years old, it was very hard for me, I used to call meetings every month, not a *munanga* thing, an Aboriginal thing. When I became 15, I became a strong leader, in 1961 they built a big office; the Council Office and they put me in there.

Edward's story resonates with Myers' (1976) concept of 'looking after', in which young males are nurtured by older men and, through this, are made into leaders (see also Ivory 2009, 127). It is clear that the authority of the elders remained, while the 'young fella' was sent in to deal with secular affairs and non-Aboriginal politics. Edward's achievements in this world are significant: for example, he was a driving force in the Aboriginalisation of the school in 1978, when all the non-Aboriginal teachers were removed and trained local teachers took over responsibility (Senior 2003):

I said to teachers, this is no good, go to Sydney to Melbourne, get out! But they disobeyed my orders. Then I took their permits away from the teachers. I told them again, 'get out!' Then they galloped!

He was also a driving force behind the community strike in 1970 (Bern 1976), which was an effort to achieve fair wages and recognition of Aboriginal ownership of the land:

I said to them, 'we'll go on strike, take all the children out from schools'. They thought I was joking. 'You've got to pay us and then we will work for you'.

A commitment to self-determination is clear throughout his narrative:

I wanted to see Aboriginal people in charge of everything. Aboriginal people should be the people you consult, Aboriginal people should run the meeting.

Did you achieve this?

I achieved it, I reckon, people would say 'He's right that old fellow'.

Edward's narrative is punctuated by conflict; he characterised his life as being one in which he constantly had to fight to get things done. These fights were both internal (with other senior men in the community) and with outside authorities. He also admitted that there were times when it all became too much and he would leave the community and live in the nearby outstation of Urapunga. By the time of our conversation in July 2015, he considered that there was very little left of his legacy. His daughter had tried to become a leader, but became exhausted by 'being bullied by the men'. In Edward's view, no one else was motivated enough to fight for changes in the community:

Do you think there is much of what you achieved left?

Nothing, it's falling apart, council doesn't work, we don't have elections, I feel down hearted and I feel no good inside because I feel like people will fall down. Now no one knows where they are going, while I'm still alive people have to change, they have to own this place, make sure they get the jobs—they can do it, but they are too lazy.

Edward's leadership was clearly very different to the ritual authority discussed by Hiatt (1965), as his efforts were largely directed to governing the non-religious sphere of the community and included managing both Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents. However, his selection as a future leader at an early age by the older men resonates with the traditional practices of 'looking after' described by Myers (1976), Keen (1994) and Ivory (2009). His influence was wide and the extent of his influence outside the Ngukurr community was made very clear at his funeral in 2015, which was attended by the Northern Territory chief minister as well as the police commissioner.

The Middle-Aged Leader

Edna, Edward's daughter, has also been active in community leadership. She was an elected member of the community government council, which was the key decision-making body for the community until 2007, and is a member of a range of community advisory boards. She is respected by her family and thought to be an important role model in the community. When Edna's daughter spoke about her, she said: 'This is my mum ... she is a strong woman. I would like to be like her and go to school and study.'

When she was in her mid-20s, Edna was pushed forward by her father to take part in a community research project. During that time (1999–2004), she became the editor of the local community newspaper and was increasingly involved in local politics. She was also the deputy leader for her tribal group on the council and a member of the local school board. In 2005, she became a member of the local community-controlled health board and, in 2007, became the deputy council leader. This central role of a woman in the intercultural affairs of the council and community business, traditionally the realm of men, was a significant shift. In 2008, the Northern Territory Government decided to create 'super-shires' and Ngukurr became administered from Katherine. Positions with real authority within the local government organisation were no longer available; however, Edna remained a representative on the Roper Gulf Shire and the Stronger Futures Committee. She felt uncertain about her roles within these organisations; she was unclear about what they were and how much authority they afforded her. Ultimately, and despite numerous opportunities to be involved in structures of governance within the community and, later, the shire, sometimes in roles that offered significant opportunities for leadership, her participation did not result in meaningful involvement and, in most cases, decision-making remained controlled by a non-Indigenous person.

Edna continues to be sought out by outsiders as an important person to talk to about community issues. She acknowledges that, although women often have such status, they are rarely considered to be leaders in the same way as men. Similar to descriptions of female leadership in other remote communities, Edna was chosen by her father to become a leader for the community on the basis of her having completed high school. However, she found that while she was often consulted, she had little authority to make decisions. She explained: 'They see me as a leader, but leadership is still a men thing.'

Edna talks about leadership as a struggle. This struggle became particularly acute when the administration of the community shifted from the local government council to the Roper Gulf Shire. Sanders (2013, 48) describes the difficulties that community representatives face within such structures, especially the requirement to consider policy and structural issues rather than advocating for change in their communities. Edna saw her role as a councillor in terms of having to learn to do things 'the non-Aboriginal way': 'Me, I've been struggling, learning both ways. In the other way you have to work with white people, understand how they work.'

Ultimately, Edna was exhausted by her efforts and her perception that she was being constantly undermined by older Aboriginal men and non-Aboriginal people in the community. Her source of leadership was connected to her father's generation. She was selected by her father to take on a leadership position and the role of mediator between the community and outside agencies. However, her being a woman was problematic, not only because of the very dominant place men hold over public forms of leadership, but also because of the increasing governmental regulation and lack of power installed in various official roles.

Edna considered that young people in the community were apathetic about taking on leadership roles, despite the fact that they were a well-educated generation: 'There is nothing for young ones. They are just bored, rely on drinking and smoking as their hobbies and then when opportunities do come up they are not interested.' She constantly remarked on the need for what she described as 'governance training' for people in the community, and particularly young people, so that they could be better equipped to take responsibility for decision-making within the community.

Youth Leadership and Civil Participation

Ivory (2009), in his research on Aboriginal governance at Port Keats, says that a study of how power is acquired, distributed, wielded and sustained is fundamental to a study of leadership. We argue that it is also necessary to consider how power is recognised and acknowledged. Young people's efforts to exert power in Aboriginal worlds are largely invisible to the outsider and often to older people in their own community, unless such efforts are characterised by violent and destructive acts. At Wadeye, for example, youth power was exerted through gang behaviour (Ivory 2009). In their study of youth leadership, Youniss et al. (2002, 124) pose the question:

Are young people being well prepared to take on civic responsibly in this new, changing global reality? Ultimately, we will be placing the world into young people's hands. Will they be prepared and what can be done to facilitate their preparation?

Despite the importance of young people being prepared to take on such roles, they are often characterised as having limited commitment to citizenship (France 1998, 97). However, this may not be due to

disinterest. The interest and willingness of young people to be involved in civic responsibilities in their own communities is hampered by their lack of rights and by the structural barriers they encounter when they try to attain positions that may afford them some decision-making capacity. As France (1998, 108) explained: 'Young people's willingness to undertake certain forms of responsibilities both within the local community and in the labour market has been undermined by experiences of exclusion and exploitation.'

According to Bessant (2004), considerable governmental efforts have been made to encourage the leadership of young people and to ensure they are exposed to participatory and democratic processes via the development of forums such as youth round tables and youth advisory groups. However, Bessant observes that forums such as regional youth committees and round tables that aim to inform policymaking in Australia face important limitations that may result in young people's continued cynicism about their roles. Youth are aware of the tokenistic aspect to their participation, in which participation and opinions are heard but not treated as serious contributions:

Unless young people are confident that their opinions will be treated with respect and seriousness, they will quickly become discouraged and dismiss the participation process as ineffective with all the implications this has for the confidence in the democratic processes as they grow into adulthood. (Bessant 2004, 400)

Bessant also points out that youth forums are rarely initiated by young people themselves and that young people are not elected representatives, but are appointed to their positions. Further, even once involved, young people have 'minimal opportunities for agenda setting' (Bessant 2004, 400). There are also equity issues to be considered, such as which young people are selected and whether they are equipped to influence policy (Bessant 2004, 401; see also Augsberger et al. 2017). Young people from remote Aboriginal communities may occasionally have roles as youth representatives on local health boards, but they are very unlikely to be selected as members of youth round tables at regional or even national levels. They may have developed strong leadership skills and be respected by their peers for taking on leadership roles but remain unnoticed outside of the Indigenous domain.

The View of the Younger Generation

Edward's grandson and Edna's son, Ethan, has been constantly exposed to community politics from his childhood, watching both his grandfather's and mother's leadership efforts. His memories of his mother's experiences of being bullied and marginalised are particularly acute. Educated to Year 11 at boarding school in Darwin, Ethan is now in his early 20s and has a wife and a baby daughter. He has made a conscious decision to move away from what he described as 'the cultural side' of life in Ngukurr, which means that he avoids participation in ceremony.

For Ethan, and many other people in Ngukurr, ceremony is linked with sorcery. Reprisals using sorcery were of particular concern after the death of a relative:

We all got sick from thinking about sorcery after our father died. They blame everyone and families tell us more. It makes us more crazy, making us feel sad all the time and it makes us sick.

This move away from the 'cultural side' is effectively a move from the only recognised structure within the Aboriginal domain that provides opportunities for the demonstration of leadership.

Edward's perception of Ethan's apathy and laziness, and Edna's lack of opportunity, stand in marked contrast to Ethan's own account of his civic activities with a group of friends—a group they call a gang or 'crew': the 'Bad T Boys' or 'Bad Ts'. Youth gangs are common in remote Aboriginal communities and have been described as a form of emergent leadership by Ivory (2009, 295), who explains the rationale for gang formation in Port Keats in the following way:

By rebelling, creating sub structures and causing mayhem they were not only forcing their own community to take notice of them, but they were also creating a form of resistance against the dominant society represented to a large degree by the church, something which they believe their fathers in embracing the church had not done.

The gangs described by Ivory are characterised by their belief in violence and destruction, but also by their respect for tradition, particularly in the areas of kin and kinship obligations and affiliation to country (Ivory 2009, 302). Edwin's account of his gang articulates a very different underlying

philosophy, one directed towards non-violence. The commitment to some forms of traditional knowledge are similar between both groups. Numbering between six and 13 at various times, the Bad Ts are all in their early 20s. All were schooled in Darwin, although none completed their education. At the time of this study, all were unemployed, although some had had short-term, part-time jobs. Most were married with young families. One member had spent a considerable period of time in jail. All were members of prominent Ngukurr families whose fathers and grandfathers were known leaders in both the secular and religious spheres.

The Bad T Boys expressed doubts about adult leadership in the community; in their opinion, the older men spent too much time deferring to a range of non-Aboriginal people, such as shire representatives. Here again there are resonances with the situation described by Bern in 1970 and with the rationale provided for the development of gangs in Port Keats (Ivory 2009):

The few leaders left are weak, only do things that are good for their families. One of the things about jealousy is that there is jealousy of people who have the ear of the whitefellas. Then the other leaders get jealous.

We were able to observe elders' lack of authority in the non-Aboriginal sphere on several occasions, such as the failure of community leaders to implement a petrol-sniffing project due to a lack of support from the non-Aboriginal community described above (Senior and Chenhall 2007). More recently, an elder was engaged to meet with a group of youths to talk about issues affecting their lives, such as jealousy and domestic disputes. This meeting was considered to be of utmost importance by the young men involved. However, on the day of the meeting, a shire representative arrived unannounced and required the elder to meet with him. The young men commented that their needs were 'pushed aside' so that the 'whitefella' could be accommodated.

Issues of youth leadership were a particular focus of our research at Ngukurr in 2014–15 and we conducted a series of in-depth interviews with adult leaders and young people. During this time, we also asked young people to participate in a photovoice project. Photovoice, developed by Wang and Burris (1997) and Wang et al. (1998), is a participatory qualitative methodology that aims to support grassroots action. For our project, participants were asked to take pictures of 'things that were important for

young people in the community’. The photos were then collaboratively interpreted, and narratives developed to explain the relationship of the photos to the research theme. The young men who participated in the photovoice story ultimately produced their own book, which described the history and aspirations of the gang, or ‘crew’, and its members. Some of their photos were simply of each other, assuming gangster-like poses, but many expressed the values that underpinned their activities, such as helping old people and providing food for them. Such values also include participation in Aboriginal culture, with an emphasis on going to the bush and hunting and fishing for bush tucker. They talked about the importance of children learning about such things, as well as values such as sharing. For example, a picture of three children with bottles of soft drink and packets of salty plums was not a statement about nutrition, but one about the importance of children learning to share highly valued goods (see Figure 3.4).



Figure 3.2: The Bad Ts. ‘This is my gang, my crew. We look after each other. We are a famous crew in Ngukurr.’

Source: Photovoice project, Ngukurr, 2015.

The young men took this photograph (Figure 3.2) to illustrate the leaders of their gang and show their mastery of gang-like poses and attitudes. They talked about the formation of the gang while they were still at school and the strategies they developed to be recognised in the community:

There were a lot of 12–13 year olds back in those days, but the gangs were 16–17 year olds. We were the first ones to make a kid's gang. We said, 'We are a pack, call us the Woody T Boys'. We thought let's go to the Disco, we can go and get dressed and walk in as a gang. We had no tattoos or nothing, so we made a dance instead. We practised all day. We all dressed like gangstas and went down to the rec hall. It was packed with people. Not so much anymore. We went home, relaxed a bit and then went to get dressed. Went to disco and made a dance group. It went well and all the crowds said: 'We didn't know you boys could dance. Have you ever heard of krump?'

Yes, I have.

We first invented it. Nobody dance krump here before. We put it to the new generation in Ngukurr. No one danced like that. I seed it on video. We invented it in Ngukurr. Famous, went all the way out to Numbulwar. Famous, we famous crew in Ngukurr.

Without access to the visible trappings of gang identity (e.g. tattoos or distinctive clothes), the group decided to differentiate themselves through their knowledge of youth culture, which had been made possible for them by spending time away from Ngukurr at school in Darwin. Other elements of consumerism and youth culture were also important for their identity; for example, one member's gang name was 'Rusty T' because of his Rusty-branded cap (again purchased in Darwin), which was obviously a treasured possession. Once they had achieved recognition in the community, they met to decide how to make the most of their fame:

So, what happened then?

We were all about love, respect and families, being a good person, talking to old people. We had a talk at the hill over near the school and we made a pact. We said, 'We are famous now, everyone know us.'



Figure 3.3: ‘This place is important, because this is where we go to talk and make decisions.’

Source: Photovoice project, Ngukurr, 2015.

Figure 3.3 is taken from the small hill on the edge of the community. The young men described this as ‘their place’, saying that it was the place that they went to go to talk and make decisions. This photograph symbolises the processes that the young men associate with leadership, including attempts to represent the ideas of the group and voting on appropriate courses of action and the leadership structure of the group.

The gang has had three different leaders since its inception in 2004. The current gang leader, Ethan’s cousin and close friend, talked about the responsibility he felt when taking on the leadership and the values that he brought to the position:

It was me then after the second boss got married. Respect was from when W was the boss, I continued the same rules when it came to me. No fighting. He [W] questioned us: ‘Are you going to be like other gangs with fighting?’ We taking care of community. It’s a pretty big community, but we are strong. It was in my head, not to fight, to go fishing for the old people, talk to old people, learn culture. We do respect white man law and black man law and mix it all together and make it strong. Everything comes easy to us. We give people a lot of things.



Figure 3.4: 'It's important to teach children to share, we teach them that.'

Source: Photovoice project, Ngukurr, 2015.

A driving factor in the formation of the Bad T gang's identity was a commitment to non-violence. They were also clear that they were not going to be involved in drug dealing, unlike many of the other gangs in the community. The actual activities of the collective were not as clearly defined, but involved an idea of doing things that were of benefit to the community, drawing on what they defined as key values, which included an ethos of sharing and looking after people, both of which may fairly be described as quintessentially Aboriginal values. Figure 3.4 was taken to illustrate the importance of 'children learning how to share'. Another key value is the maintenance of some (non-religious) cultural knowledge, such as hunting and gathering bush foods. The most important function, however, appears to be the mutual support that gang membership provides for its members.

The young men in the Bad Ts said that they wanted to avoid violence in the community. However, this was not always the case, as one young person spoke about being sent to jail in Darwin for domestic violence:

I was in there (jail) for three months.

Could you tell me what you did?

Yes ... I threw a bottle at my wife. It hit her on the head. It was a half-bottle of Coke. It was my last warning, I was on good behaviour. They put me in for three months. When I came out my son is gone and my wife is gone. Since I get out I got to be a man, strong.

The loss of his son is a particular source of grief for this young man. The rhetoric surrounding the values of the gang is all about 'doing good for families and our children', but this individual never sees his child. The fear that his gang members would think he had let them down added to his anxiety. Ethan said that he did let the gang down, and that they were 'sad and upset' because he was the 'boss' and was expected to set a good example:

How did it feel for the gang?

Ethan: Everyone was sad and upset, he was the boss.

Gang Leader: When I came out of jail, I spent time with him ... He said, 'If you have worriness, come down to me, I give you a feed.'

Gang members talked about the importance of closely monitoring an individual's behaviour before they allowed them to become a member of the gang. For example, in the following story, they mention such things as ensuring trust and exerting dominance by getting the younger person to buy things for them. At the same time, they also talk about checking up on the potential gang member's education, which echoes the 'looking after' ethos that is part of male nurturance of initiates:

Then there's J, we call him Boney Man. He's a real skinny fella. He joined in 2006, we started the gang in 2004. He came up to us and we made a pact. We tested him to see if we could trust him. He's been good, buying things for us, we seen to his education as well. Checked that his education is alright.

Internal social capital is high within the group. Members talk about looking after each other and watching for symptoms of 'worriness' or depression:

We call him the A-Train, because he smokes like a train. He's been through stuff. His wife left him. He's got mental health stuff, depression. We try to help him, we talk to him. He is back to where he was. We always talk, spent all day with 'im yesterday. That's how we took the darkness from him, talk to him, hang out with him, tell him who he was, that he belonged to family and to Woody T. Tell him: 'If you don't see love from your parents you see love from us'. He's 'bin thinking, thinking and then he said 'I know who my boys are'. A-Train has been alone for a long time, he's a good man, a good fella. He's back now.

The Bad Ts' form of leadership is different to that of preceding generations. This is partly the result of the lack of leadership opportunities in the community described earlier; however, these young men have also turned away from both the religious authority of their grandfathers and the form of leadership taken up by their parents in the intercultural domain of community governance. Instead, their leadership is relational, drawing on non-religious aspects of culture to engage civically within their community. Underlying this is a connection to globalised forms of culture centred around their gang, albeit in their own local form.

J, a gang member, painted an optimistic view of the future in which their kids would assume positions of leadership and continue to respect culture. Ethan had a more nuanced viewpoint. He considered a range of external influences that would impact upon his children's future (see Figure 3.5):

What do you think the future will be like for them (the children) in Ngukurr?

J: We'll be old! (Laughter). I think if we teach them, teach them cultural stuff, kids will be good leaders when they are our age. Ngukurr will be a great place, our kids will be leaders like us. Gonna be strong, gonna be there for his kids, I think our kids will be like us.

Ethan: I see it different.

How do you see it?

Ethan: Things are making it hard, the Government, the Intervention, drugs ...

J: But it makes a big difference if you are strong like this.



Figure 3.5: ‘Our children’s futures: our kids will be strong like us.’

Source: Photovoice project, Ngukurr, 2015.

Discussion

Edward, the male elder, provided an extensive history of his role as a leader. He described acting alone and in opposition to community views. His story is one of constant conflict and struggle and periods of exhaustion and withdrawal from the community. His story is also one of recognition of his power and his capacity to enforce change in the community, albeit sometimes reluctantly, from non-Aboriginal people and government authorities. Edward was a leader during the era of self-determination after the missionaries left the community—a period of assertion of Aboriginal rights and an emerging knowledge that leaders would have to be active in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains. In 1969–70, there were five councils or committees within Ngukurr, each composed of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people (Bern 1970, 3). However, Aboriginal autonomy was restricted to the religious sphere and, even within this sphere, male participation was influenced by non-Indigenous values, particularly from the conflict some people felt between their adoption of Christianity and ritual participation (Bern 1970, 18).

By July 2015, Edward considered the community's future to be bleak. He saw no young people with the skills to take on future leadership positions. His daughter Edna was experienced in the processes of representation and decision-making and had received considerable encouragement to take on positions of leadership in the community; she held numerous positions on both community and shire-based structures of governance, but her level of authority was limited. Uncertain of the authority she had to make decisions, she usually found herself deferring to a non-Aboriginal person. As a woman, she felt that her various leadership roles were not respected by the men in the community. By 2020, however, significant changes were taking place. Edna had significantly more leadership opportunities, which she attributed to local government structures taking responsibility for activities, such as the Community Development and Education Program (CDEP), which were formerly administered by the shire.

Both Edward and Edna tried to work within the system and to forge relationships with non-Aboriginal structures of authority. Despite some wins, which included the decision to make the community alcohol free in 1969 and the Aboriginalisation of the school, they were repeatedly reminded of the difficulty of sustaining interventions, or, as in the situation exemplified by the community decision to address petrol sniffing (Senior and Chenhall 2007), to ensure that their interventions were recognised beyond the Indigenous domain.

Disillusioned with the leadership of adults in the community, Ethan's generation have adopted and Aboriginalised another Western form of leadership—the gang. Their leaders have arisen from the collective. The Bad Ts are motivated by the failure of adult leaders to adequately protect Aboriginal interests and what they see as the constant deferral to non-Aboriginal authority. Importantly, the Bad Ts stand in contrast to the gangs in Port Keats and other youth gangs in Ngukurr who fight, destroy property and take drugs. They say that they place a high value on the preservation of Aboriginal culture and traditional knowledge. Because the gang is not defined by violent or destructive acts, their existence and actions are not visible to authorities outside the community. The rhetoric of the gang leaders emphasises respect for other people and culture and places importance on democratic processes: the youths meet and vote on decisions. They say that they play a significant role in 'taking care of the community', but it is difficult to ascertain how influential they are in this space. Certainly, community members talk about them and describe

them as ‘good boys’, but there are few examples of what they actually do. Mutual assistance appears to be a characteristic of the group. This was indicated in stories about helping others get through difficult times, such as going to jail, the break-up of relationships and mental health problems. Their values of ‘looking after’ each other extend to their care of their own wives and children and their relationships within the community.

This form of leadership aligns with descriptions of ‘youth leadership’ that emphasise the importance of group processes and collective action rather than models that highlight the personality and qualities of specific individuals (see Dempster and Lizzio 2007). Significantly, this relational leadership has been described as emerging in post-industrial globalised contexts (Houwer 2016). An adaptive form of leadership, it emphasises collaboration between group members who work together with strong moral and ethical grounding (see Haber 2011). It has been described by Clarsen (2019) as existing among the young men depicted in the film *Black As*—a self-made documentary about four young Yolngu men on a hunting trip. As the young men move through their country, they embrace certain elements of modernity, evidenced through their fixing and modifying of vehicles, and reject other elements of a post-industrial society, evidenced through their humorous recreations of commercials of ‘Aboriginal’ bush products. Citing Marcia Langton, Clarsen (2019, 161) describes these young men as embodying the ‘new permissiveness atypical of the old tradition’.

This is true for the Bad T Boys presented in this chapter. The young men articulated their strategic approach to becoming recognised as a unified gang. They capitalised on their connections to a globalised youth culture, which were made possible by spending time away from the community in Darwin. Access to a branded cap or knowledge of a new dance style may seem trivial to outsiders, but such things have significant currency in a community where access to a globalised youth culture is minimal (Chenhall and Senior 2009). Although such strategies may have resonance with local youth, they are unlikely to affect strategic decisions in any wider context. Unlike Edward and Edna, the gang operates purely within the Aboriginal domain (see Trigger 1992). Their actions are not likely to be noticed by non-Aboriginal people. But their participation in the Aboriginal domain is limited by their avoidance of ceremony. Instead, they have constructed their identity by drawing upon some aspects of traditional culture including values of caring for each other and maintaining traditional skills such as hunting. These values have been

combined with their knowledge of a globalised youth culture and access to highly valued material goods. They are less exposed to the conflict of non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal domains that affected both Edward and Edna, but their ability to enact any change is minimal. Beneath the bravado of their rhetoric—'Our kids will be strong leaders like us'—a more thoughtful commentary indicates that they feel powerless to address many of the major issues influencing the community, which they see as coming from outside: 'the intervention, drugs'. Despite developing some political and management skills, including knowledge of democratic processes and being motivated by a principal of community development, these young men are unlikely to be noticed as potential representatives for youth round tables or forums, or to be seen as the next generation of leaders in their community. Their actions are doubly invisible because they live in a remote community and because they are young within a system that recognises age as an important prerequisite for leadership. Their ethos of non-violence will not even provide them with the notoriety associated with the Port Keats gangs.

Conclusion

Contrary to the mainstream expectations of young people and the expectations of their own families, the group of young men presented in this chapter are not apathetic with regard to leadership and civic responsibility. Nor are they ignorant or dismissive of traditional culture, which appears in their values and decision-making, despite their avoidance of the performative aspects of culture, such as ceremony. Rather than submitting to a situation in which cultural knowledge is controlled by older men, they have decided what aspects of cultural knowledge are important to them, and what aspects they can avoid.

They have not been thrust into their roles by elders; rather, they have reimagined and enacted such roles for themselves. They have embraced a key set of values to underpin their activities and they emphasise the importance of democratic processes. They could be supported and nurtured to become influential voices in their communities. But they face an identity issue: from the perspective of outsiders, young men in remote Aboriginal communities, if they are not recognised for their sporting prowess, are often defined by their problems, their criminal activities, their violence, their use of drugs and alcohol. From the perspective of elders in

their own communities, young people may be recognised as agitators, but older people are those who take responsibility and ownership of decisions. However, what is clear from this study of three generations of leadership is the continuity of structural determinants that place Aboriginal people in positions in which they have very limited authority and opportunity to make decisions about own their lives and communities. Since mission times, various structures have existed to encourage participation, but these were never entirely within the Aboriginal domain. The only sphere in which men have autonomy away from non-Aboriginal direction is the religious domain, and yet, even in this area, people's capacity has been greatly affected by non-Aboriginal beliefs, particularly those of Christianity.

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