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Cash, Commoditisation and Authenticity: When do Aboriginal People Stop Being Hunter-Gatherers?

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Both in the popular and academic literature, Aboriginal people in many of the remote communities of the Northern Territory of Australia are still referred to as hunter-gatherers yet they are encapsulated within a modern nation-state, dependent on the market for food, the Department of Social Security for income and have abandoned hunting and gathering as their mode of subsistence. It is this situation of complete dependence on benign state support that Robert Paine has referred to as welfare colonialism [1977:3]. Such dependence on the state either directly, or indirectly via state subsidised missions, has existed for many of these populations since the Second World War, and even longer in some cases. Continuing to refer to these people as hunter-gatherers could, therefore, be seen as just an anachronistic reference to their antecedents: on the other hand it could be because they are still perceived as remaining hunter-gatherers in some way. If it is still possible to consider these people as hunter-gatherers then it suggests that the nature of the impact of cash and commoditisation on such societies is much more problematic than has generally been assumed. It also suggests, on the face of it, that social relations and cultural constructions have a considerable degree of autonomy from the processes of production and distribution.

Although cash and commoditisation have been widely seen as inimical to the social relations taken to characterise small scale communities based on mechanical solidarity, setting off a one way process leading to the destruction and replacement of indigenous practices and beliefs by those of the encapsulating society, it is increasingly clear there is no single set of consequences. Murphy and Steward in their classic paper [1956/1968] on the introduction and impact of commoditisation on such societies based their predictions on situations that began with mercantile relations in frontier contexts: fur trading in northern Canada and rubber production in the remoter parts of Brazil. Such relations were largely unconstrained by the state and centred around individualistic transactions with traders. By contrast the history of many Aboriginal people in the remote communities of the Northern Territory is quite different. Not only did most of them have nothing to produce for exchange but their contact with non-Aboriginal people since the war has been either with humanitarian agencies that have acted as arms of the welfare state or the state's own agencies directly.

In this paper I will argue that it is not inappropriate to continue to describe the

inhabitants of some Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory as hunter-gatherers despite all the changes. I will begin with a brief discussion of the background to the introduction of cash and commoditisation in the Territory. I will then look at the impact of commoditisation on Aboriginal religious painting, almost the only good produced for exchange; then at some evidence on the nature of Aboriginal involvement with money; and subsequently at the commoditisation of labour and of land. I will conclude with a general consideration of the social relations underpinning the contemporary Aboriginal economy and some suggestions as to why cash and commoditisation have led to only limited transformations.

BACKGROUND TO THE INTRODUCTION OF CASH AND COMMODITISATION

Production for exchange was widespread in Australia prior to European arrival but just how this exchange should be typified has been the subject of some dispute. On the one hand it has been seen as ceremonial exchange [STANNER 1933-34; THOMSON 1949] driven by the desire to establish and maintain social relations and on the other hand it has been argued that there were more utilitarian desires involved as well [BLAINEY 1975]. To the extent that there was trade, it appears certain to have been barter as there is no evidence of any indigenous money. It is also evident that the great majority of items exchanged are what might loosely be called durables rather than consumables. Tools, ritual objects, ceremonies and songs were the focus of exchange rather than food, which while widely shared with close relatives seems not to have been traded. The main consumable exchanged was undoubtedly indigenous tobacco (so called *pituri*) followed by material such as ochre.

There is little doubt that almost all populations, if not all, could support themselves locally which suggests that a history of commoditisation and its consequences begins with a history of pure desire, however quickly such desire led to needs. Just as artefacts dominated internal exchange so they also dominated the exchange with the Macassans traders from Indonesia: the durables were canoes, axes, pipes, metal and cloth and the consumables tobacco and alcohol. Little of this was exchanged for labour [MACKNIGHT 1976] but some for sexual access to women. However given the limited duration of the visits, during the wet season and the movement of the Macassans along the coast there were no possibilities for long lasting consumer dependencies to arise.

The Macassans did not use money in trade with Aboriginal people but they did introduced the notions and words for money (*rupia*) and buying through the transport of Aboriginal people to the Celebes (see MacKnight [1976]). Interestingly the indigenous term adopted for to buy or to purchase, *malli* [THOMSON 1949:51], refers in a traditional context to the non-material manifestation of something.

The history of the impact of cash and commoditisation in the Northern Territory has yet to be written but even a cursory survey suggests that its impact has been in inverse relationship to people's distance from the towns of Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Alice Springs. Generally speaking the people of full descent, whether in towns, on pastoral properties or in the former reserve areas (now Aboriginal land trust areas) were largely divorced from the cash economy and paid in kind while people of mixed descent tended to be assimilated into the paid workforce whether around town or on the cattle stations. In 1953 most Aboriginal people of mixed descent became citizens fully incorporated into the cash economy and eligible for the direct receipt of social security payments. Those of full descent remained wards of the state and continued to receive cash payments that were only a fraction of those paid in the wider community (less than 20%) living off rations supplemented by hunting and gathering. It was not until 1968 that social security payments were paid directly to them or that they became eligible for award wages on cattle stations (see Peterson [1985]). It was not until 1973 that the payment of award wages became compulsory and not until the end of the 1970s that most people living in remote areas started to receive unemployment benefits. Thus, broadly speaking it can be said that there was institutionalisation and assimilation in the towns, an exploitation of labour on the model of internal colonialism on the cattle stations and peripheralisation on the reserves (see Peterson [1985]).

Today the 35,000 people who classify themselves as of Aboriginal descent in the Northern Territory, live in one of four principal situations. Several thousands live on outstations (alternatively known as homeland centres) in the Aboriginal land trust areas in small groups, usually numbering less than 50, subsisting by a combination of hunting, fishing, purchase of carbohydrates and the sale of some artefacts. Such outstations are the most isolated communities and their inhabitants reproduce values and social relationships that are most strongly divergent from main stream Australia (e.g. see Altman [1987] and Meehan [1982]). The largest Aboriginal groups live in what are now Aboriginal towns but were formerly missions and government settlements in the isolated Aboriginal land trust areas. They range in size from 250–1,500 people and again are geographically, socially and economically remote, for the most part, from the Territory's main urban centres. In these urban centres there are town campers (also called fringe dwellers) who until very recently usually lived in temporary self-constructed accommodation generally around the margins of the towns (see Sansom [1980], Collmann [1988] and J. Taylor [1989]). Also in the urban centres are Aboriginal people living in standard European housing in the suburbs who in a material sense are largely assimilated. The attention here is focussed on people living in the first three situations.

COMMODITISING RELIGIOUS ART

Classical sociological thinking on the impact of cash and commoditisation would lead to the expectation that the high volume selling of sacred religious

painting, which has inevitably led to their wide circulation and public display, would have a negative effect on the religion and lead to considerable secularisation. However, Howard Morphy has shown why this has not happened (see Morphy and Layton [1981]).

Although Aboriginal people have sold their labour and sexual services with varying intensities in different regions of the Territory since the arrival of Europeans (see below) they were largely paid in kind outside the towns until the 1950s and in cash and kind up until the 1960s. Since 1968 about the only production for exchange has been art and craft. Today there is a flourishing art and craft industry worth over 3.8 million in local sales in 1988 and possibly double that taking the nation at large (see Altman [1989:72]).

The industry has always had an incipient dichotomisation between the production of cheap tourist items such as carvings, tools, weapons and suitcased sized art and a more prestigious fine art production of large paintings. Until the last ten years this fine art production has been dominated by paintings on bark. These paintings are drawn from those used in religious life where many are secret and have only limited circulation among all male cult groups. The fine art market has always sought these paintings and valued them highly.

Each Arnhem Land clan owns a limited set of paintings which relate to the most sacred objects owned by the clan and to its territory. The paintings are used in the system of male initiation which is under the control of the senior men. While a number of designs are publically displayed during the circumcision ceremonies, and in mortuary ceremonies, particularly on the coffins, bone containers, skulls of the deceased and bodies of certain relatives others are restricted to all male ceremonies and not publically displayed. The rights to paintings may be exchanged with other clans and even sold to other clans in certain circumstances [MORPHY and LAYTON 1981:58] but the original owner(s) retains the right to use the paintings. Since the use and control of paintings is integral to the ownership and control of territory the exchange of paintings is a highly political matter.

As the art market has developed it has been the restricted paintings that have come to be most highly sought after by collectors. Thus the sale and display of such paintings poses problems for maintaining the integrity of the religious system and the place of art within it. As Morphy points out the Yolngu of northeast Arnhem Land quickly realised that the purchasers were not particularly knowledgeable about Aboriginal art and although they were aware of a category of secret art they were not clear about its primary distinguishing feature. The market has tended to see sacred painting as those which can be identified with a specific clan and have an attached story whereas for the Yolngu the primary feature is their almost completely abstract nature. The most important of the four responses the people have developed for dealing with this demand for restricted art is to selectively increase the figurative content of the secret paintings. The commercial paintings of one clan, for example, have 20 times the figurative content of their secret art [MORPHY and LAYTON 1981:59]. By substituting images of animals,

people and objects for geometric designs, the paintings are made to look less like sacred designs and the complex ambiguity of the abstract designs is replaced with a specific fixed meaning which allows the painter to conceal the real complexity and layers of meaning. Europeans find the figurative elements in the painting aesthetically pleasing and important because they substantiate the story. Thus as Morphy says, the people have in effect created a mock sacred art which allows them to maintain full control over the clan's restricted art [MORPHY and LAYTON 1981:60]. The second solution adopted by some clans is to restrict the range of mythological topics dealt with in paintings. Although this works against the economic interest of the clans that take this decision, because it results in too many similar paintings on the market, it protects the sacred designs. Thus one clan in 1957 took a decision to produce paintings that only related to one of their less important ancestors, so although they opened up some knowledge they completely protected the more important mythology. The third solution was taken by a clan in competition with another over land when they decided to release a small range of secret painting related to the disputed land in order to assert their rights to it. Thus in this case the paintings were released for internal political reasons. The fourth solution is rather different and relates to secret paintings that have become public in a number of ways including being used in a syncretic religious movement, appearing in anthropological monographs and being used to decorate a church altar. In these cases, Morphy comments [MORPHY and LAYTON 1981:62] it is emphasised that knowledge of the form of the painting is different from knowledge of the meaning.

There have been other changes in the artistic system which include some women being involved in painting, something they did not do before [MORPHY 1980:89] and even including assisting in the painting of circumcision initiates in the case of two clans [1980:90]. Morphy links these changes to the opening up of restricted knowledge but argues that there has only been limited redistribution of knowledge to women and that there have been no major changes in the structural relationships between the different sectors of society [1980:90]. The clan leaders still maintain a close control over the artistic system and the specific paintings produced and they still hold ceremonies in which this restricted art plays a central role.

Thus the Yolngu have largely diffused the effects of commoditising their religious art because they have self-consciously played a part in ensuring that the market's scale of values almost completely reverses their own scale.

This analysis of the situation, however, was written before Aboriginal art had come to be widely accepted by Australian art elites. Largely under the impact of the bicentennial celebrations and the high valuation given to anything distinctively Australian, Aboriginal art has become increasingly acceptable, as indicated by the appointment of a curator of Aboriginal art at the National Gallery in 1984, the rapid build up of gallery holdings and the huge increase in the number of private art galleries holding exhibitions of Aboriginal art (see Altman [1989]). With this increase in interest has gone a great increase in price so that over the last five years

the value of paintings has increased by a factor of five. As prices have risen the market has started to become increasingly differentiated with the emergence of 'name' painters whose works are more widely sought than those of others. Further the marketing strategy has been to fit Aboriginal art into the European marketing model. It is not clear as yet what impact this is having although Luke Taylor [1987:65] records that among the Gunwinggu it has led to more personalised styles thus creating the potential for artists to reject claims on the design made by others who might traditionally have had rights in art painted by the artist and it seems quite likely that it may ultimately lead to privatising bodies of art that are currently collective clan property, with the possibility of alienating a selection of the designs from collective ownership.

While younger artists may achieve higher prices than their elders, this market valuation does not translate into greater social prestige or recognition [L. TAYLOR 1989]. There does seem to be a trend among these people, however, for the internal significance of the art to be devalued but this may have to do with the decline in the importance of the ceremonies in which they play a part, rather than the commoditisation. He further notes a contrast between the Aboriginal town of Oenpelli where younger artists are relatively unconstrained in what they paint and the outstations where such painters have a much more restricted artistic response in keeping with past practices, than older people [1989:131].

No detailed study has been made of the distribution of cash from sales although the general demand for sharing among close kin undoubtedly ensures considerable redistribution of the funds and that many people have access to the capital goods bought with them (e.g. four wheel drive vehicles). The fact that disputes are not infrequent among the artists over the system of payment (see Dussart [1988]) suggests that the commoditisation of art is not without its problems. The disputes are largely concerned with people asserting a right to income from paintings because of traditional rights they have in the religious life of the clan of the painter or from the paintings actually having been produced cooperatively but being sold by a single person to the art dealers and the seller not always sharing the funds appropriately.

The last ten years has seen the dramatic emergence of a new commercial art movement in central Australia which like the Arnhem Land art derives from the corpus of restricted religious art. It too has been influenced by commoditisation but the paintings have not ended up simply being the product of European taste (see Megaw [1982] and Myers [1989]). Fred Myers argues that the most popular desert art, painted by Pintupi speakers, has evaded domination by European forms and demands for two reasons: the Pintupi's own concern with the authenticity of their paintings which in this context means that they are seen to be truthful because they genuinely relate to the Dreamtime; and the schematic nature of their art which Europeans evaluate in terms of beauty. As Myers says, It is a happy historical circumstance that the beauty of visual organisation in the forms themselves is one that speaks to contemporary Western tastes. This has matched or reinforced and

elaborated indigenous aesthetic conventions. Hence, despite the commercialisation of the paintings, both a capitalist art market and a countercultural community of whites continue to be interested in Pintupi art. While Pintupi and Western aesthetics are based on quite different aesthetic systems, there is a circumstantial convergence in interests that has encouraged a vital continuation of Aboriginal forms and concerns [MYERS 1989:192]. Thus the commoditisation of restricted religious art from both the desert and Arnhem Land has not resulted in destructive secularisation and the loss of meaning as might be predicted.

THE ASSIMILATION OF MONEY TO INTERNAL PURPOSES

Even among the town campers of Darwin where people are surrounded by an entirely commoditised world and are themselves dependent on cash, Basil Sansom has documented the way in which the people there assimilate money to their modality of exchange, resisting what he calls, 'monetisation of the mind' [1988]. As long term town dwellers these people are very familiar with the value of money which they use to purchase all their survival needs. But he shows that when money enters the internal economy of transactions between Aboriginal people the face value alters because it is related to the past history of the people involved in the transaction, the nature of their social relationship and the use to which the money is to be put. He provides several examples. One factor influencing the revaluation is the daily, weekly and seasonal variation in the availability of money. There are pay-weeks and off-pay weeks and there is a season of work (the dry season) and there is a lay-off time during the wet. The recovery of a loan made in the flush of the dry, during the wet season lay-off period, may mean that for the original \$A 100 a mere forty or fifty will be accepted as discharging the debt.

Sansom argues that a second aspect of the assimilation of money to internal purposes, relates to the performative nature of Aboriginal kinship. People rendering a specific service on request may be paid but any other cash a person has may be protected from claim by declaring it dedicated to a specific valued social purpose, such as 'for my children.' Or where somebody has done a important or high quality service for some other person in time of need (a situation of ultimate reference) a special bond can be created that subordinates any simple formal economic calculus for long periods subsequently. In explaining this situation Sansom points out that the people live in a situation where uncertainty prevails and rationality dictates that participants are gamblers and so should hedge their bets.

Although one of the most common uses of money in Aboriginal communities is in gambling, few detailed studies have been made of the economic aspects. The best case study by Jon Altman [1985] documents gambling at a small Arnhem Land outstation far removed from the urban fringes of Darwin. He recognises two forms of gambling: gambling as a leisure activity marked by the use almost exclusively of silver coins and gambling as business marked by a money pool of between 200 and 1,000 dollars. Business gambling follows the flow of large sums



Photo. 1. A group of close kin playing cards for money at an Arnhem Land outstation. The group is made up of three married couples, each couple playing from the same pool of money. The four men are brothers. Photograph: Jon Altman.

into the community as a result of social service back-pay, after shopping had been done. The average time spent in gambling in three separate months was 7.3%, 20.8% and 16.0% of the daylight hours and on some occasions a game lasted over two weeks because there was no outlet for the cash which just circulated within the community. Like Sansom he records that winners were faced with problems in taking their money out of a game because they were required to give the losers a chance to win back what they had lost and that the same strategies for removing money from claims by others were adopted. People would announce before the game that their purpose in playing was to secure funds for a particular objective such as a shotgun, bicycle or cassette recorder. Altman instances the case of a man who won 200 dollars, set aside eighty for the shotgun he had announced he intended to buy and then continued playing until he had lost the remaining 120 dollars. Alternatively a big winner may simply redistribute to kin or let themselves be persuaded to rejoin the game. While items bought with gambling winnings are recognised as private property this does not remove the pressure to share their use with kinsmen. Gambling has provoked an increase in disputes and violence but only limited interference with subsistence production and has not engendered any substantial capital accumulation. Kinship obligations and demand-sharing (see Peterson [n.d.]) make it virtually impossible for people to accumulate beyond target saving for particular items of material culture, the most significant item of which is four wheel drive vehicles. Younger kinsmen remain within the control of their older siblings and parents who could recall them to games if they tried to sneak away with their winnings and all who felt the winner had obligations to them could

make demands (see also Turner [1974:179] on Groote Eylandt).

Outside of social security payments, artefact production and wage labour a source of income for some Aborigines is royalty payments derived largely from mining on Aboriginal land (see under commoditisation of land below). Most of the information about the impact of royalty payments remains anecdotal and informal but in the Aboriginal town of Oenpelli, Susan Kesteven has made a study of the impact of royalty money where she records that it has gripped the imagination of the Aboriginal people [1984:92].

She writes that a few Aboriginal people have been able to position themselves in such a way that they have access to more royalties than other peoples and are thus considerably better off in terms of income. She comments, however, that:

Those who are rich do not manifest this wealth in better clothes, cleaner houses. They instead have more rubbish, since they go through purchases faster: broken toys, broken cars, broken household appliances collect in the yards. They do have more call on vehicles (i.e. better access) plane charters. They also have more household appliances, especially status goods such as video sets. But these are not... cherished and preserved [KESTEVEN 1984:75].

Significantly she also says of the same people that:

They also appear to have more kin than poor people. This works both ways: they have more kin and so have a greater resource base to become powerful; they are powerful and so attract a greater number of people claiming kin links of a close nature [1984:30].

Interviews with 32 people, both male and female, indicate that they have a limited practical understanding of money, but no general understanding. They have no idea where money comes from, no involvement in budgeting, no knowledge of investment, interest rates, inflation nor a concept of affording, the closest people came to this concept being that they were not 'ready to buy something, but wanted to buy it' [KESTEVEN 1984:108]. Since people save money to buy the sorts of things they are already buying there is really no involvement with saving. Price is not a major consideration in purchasing and women often expressed no clear ideas of what they might do with money beyond buying a car and clothing for the children, although Kesteven frequently observed them buying household goods such as saucepans, mattresses, electric grills and frying pans [1984:380]. Like the men they well understood the use of money as a means to satisfy wants, to gain status and as a way to influence others by indebting them. It is also used as a compensatory mechanism, as for example, in the case of people paying a relative who had rights to their hair when they had had a hair cut without that relative's knowledge or permission.

Asked what they spent money on they gave the following ranked listing: food, clothes, alcohol, tobacco, tapes, petrol, house things, fishing lines, bullets, bank, ceremonies, church, rent. Omitted here is that in another context over fifty percent

of royalty beneficiaries said that they used some portion of their income on financing ceremonies (cf. Altman [1983:113] for Groote Eylandt). A different group of Aboriginal people from the same community listed what they thought white people bought (also in order of frequency): food, clothes, kitchen utensils; vehicles, bed, tape recorders, house, soap, fans, boat, stove, fridge, motorbike, alcohol, land, fuel, tools, table/chair, shopping, caravan, washing machine, books, necklaces, perfume [KESTEVEN 1984:132, 196].

The overall impact of royalty payments in the Oenpelli region was, in Kesteven's view, increased stress, bad feelings and accidents. Most of these effects were not, however, the results of the money itself but because of the uncertainties associated with the way it was allocated, administered and distributed. Changes in the nature of interpersonal relations were not qualitative, in the sense of increased depersonalisation but if anything an intensification of personalisation, in some case, and an extension in others.

COMMODITISATION OF LAND

Until 1977 Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory did not own any land as Aboriginal people. Following the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* the land that had been reserved for the use and benefit of Aboriginal people, approximately 18% of the Northern Territory, passed into Aboriginal hands and has subsequently been supplemented by a further 15% of the Territory as the result of land claims. Such Aboriginal land is inalienable and so it cannot be sold, further it is held collectively so there is no individual ownership although people may lease land and the traditional owners of particular areas are



Photo. 2. The male traditional owners present evidence at a land claim hearing for the Mt. Allan pastoral lease to convert it to inalienable freehold in 1982. At least 378 Aboriginal people were recognised as having traditional interests in this 2,332 sq. km. area.

privileged in a number of ways including having a controlling say in the kind of development that does or does not take place on the land and receiving some portion of any royalty monies that arise from activity on it.

Thus while Aboriginal people are not in a position to sell the land there are financial incentives to agree to its development, incentives that do not exist for the non-Aboriginal population of the Territory. A full analysis of the impact of these rights is beyond this paper but a general picture is clear. Many Aboriginal individuals and groups have been strongly opposed to mining in the past and have consistently refused the right to explore on their land but increasingly people seem prepared to accept mineral exploration and mining, provided sacred places are safeguarded and they receive adequate returns. In the Central Land Council area, roughly the southern half of the Territory, royalty receipts in 1988–1989 were \$A 3,561,012 of which approximately three million was paid out and the rest invested [CLC 1989:47].

The most profitable mine on Aboriginal land in central Australia at present is a gold mine in the Tanami desert. This is an extremely arid and harsh area traditionally occupied by Warlpiri speakers at an estimated density of one person to 90 square kilometres [MEGGITT 1962:32]. In desert Australia named places are linked together in a complex network of so-called dreaming tracks. This network is said to reflect the routes of travel of the heroic ancestors at the time of the creation of the landscape. Many of the routes, which criss-cross each other, stretch for hundreds of kilometres setting up ceremonial ties between the people whose separate countries lie along the track, although people widely separated along it may not know each other or participate in common ceremonies. While the traditional owners of the gold mine, in the sense of the people who lived in the area and had direct ceremonial links to it would probably have numbered less than 50 adults in precolonial times, today over 500 adults are admitted to the list of royalty beneficiaries. Most of the ties are on the basis of having country that lies on the track of an heroic ancestor that passes through the area where the gold mine lies so that people whose own country is 300 km or more away from the mine site are being included in the payments. This, of course, dilutes the amount than any one person or group receives—not all people or groups receive the same amount—and spreads it very widely. Here as in Oenpelli, money has gripped the imagination and increased the level of disputation as well as consumption. Most funds are expended on four wheel drives and all money paid out seems to be spent almost immediately on consumption.

While mining is much the most profitable way in which Aboriginal people can commoditise their land and seem increasingly happy to do so as long as there are appropriate safeguards, tourism is another. Like most of the producing mines on Aboriginal land the four major tourist projects were all existing interests prior to the granting of land rights. Thus Aboriginal people did not initiate the projects themselves or agree to their establishment and may not have chosen to do so had they had the choice. However, as a result of coming to own the land on which

these four tourist projects exist—all of them national parks of one sort or another (Ayers Rock National Park, Kakadu National Park, Gurig National Park and the Katherine Gorge National Park)—Aboriginal people have come to have a say in their running and to income in various forms including rental (see Altman [1988]). Although government has often seen tourism like mining, as a vital factor in creating employment for Aboriginal people in remote Australia few Aboriginal people present themselves for regular employment. At Ayers Rock in 1986, for instance, Aboriginal men employed in the tourist industry worked for an average of 11 weeks over a 39 week survey period and women 17 weeks over a 37 week period and none were interested in travelling the 25 km from their village to take up menial jobs servicing hotel rooms, despite chronic under- and un-employment in the area [ALTMAN 1988:312].

In the Gurig National Park, which is Aboriginal land permanently established as a Northern Territory national park, hunting wild banteng cattle, deer, buffalo and pigs is a major tourist attraction for which the hunters pay up to two thousand dollars a kill. The four land owning groups take it in turn to host the hunters, thus sharing the income around. In addition they receive money from rent of the park from the Northern Territory Government, from leasing fees and from tourist operations amounting to \$A 131,500 in 1986 (see Altman [1988:240]). This is divided among members of the four land owning clans and shared by around 50 people giving an annual percapita income of about \$A 3,000 on top of other income of approximately \$A 2,500 a year.

At this stage there seems to be limited interest among Aboriginal people in sponsoring their own tourist projects or encouraging the establishment of other national parks on their land although this may change. A small tourist venture is run on Melville Island by Aboriginal people and entrepreneurial families in eastern Arnhem Land are seeking to establish jointly owned and managed enterprises with Europeans. The evidence suggests that people prefer indirect involvement, gaining income through rent or in the manufacture of art and craft.

The third area in which the commoditisation of Aboriginal land can take place is by running cattle stations. Since 1980 the government has purchased a number of cattle stations for Aboriginal people in the Territory. While the government agencies involved have always been aware that Aboriginal people had social and cultural motivations in approaching the government to purchase particular stations, their policy has been that such cattle stations should be run as economic enterprises. This seems to mean either that the stations are at least as economically profitable as they were under the previous European management or that they pay their own running costs. Such cattle stations, however, function in a quite different way from non-Aboriginal cattle stations. Often large numbers of Aboriginal people with attachment to the area move back live on it following purchase and set up, with the help of government funds, small outstations. As far as most of the Aboriginal people are concerned they want the station to run small killer herds from which they can supply themselves with fresh meat. The business of running a commercial

station and over-seeing the maintenance of bores and fences is left to professional management consultants who hire European station managers working to an Aboriginal board of directors. Frequently the stockmen hired for musters are not residents of the cattle station but from elsewhere. The most profitable of these Aboriginally owned cattle stations is said to be the one in which the man who sold it to the Aboriginal people remained the pastoral consultant to the purchasers for ten years afterwards.

In sum Aboriginal owners of these stations are not involved in the maximisation of profit, and even if they were the number of residents on the stations is many times the number of people who could be supported by the station at the sort of level European cattle station owners and workers would accept.

COMMODITISATION OF LABOUR

The main exchange between Europeans and Aboriginal people until well after the Second World War focussed on labour and sex provided by Aboriginal people in return for payment largely if not exclusively in kind. The focus of these relations was on the fringe of the towns and on the cattle stations.

The Macassans brought their own workforce with them to dive for trepang and pearl shell and so did not require Aboriginal labour. From the 1830s to the 1950s some desert people killed dingoes for their scalps to secure the bounty offered as an incentive to keep numbers down. Often they exchanged these scalps with itinerant Europeans 'doggers' for tobacco, flour, tea and other consumables but the numbers of people involved, the amounts of money paid to Aboriginal people or the quantity of goods exchanged were very small.

It was in the towns and on the cattle stations that the exchange of labour and sex was most intense. In the towns domestic labour was supplied largely by Aboriginal people resulting from the commoditisation of sex (see Bleakley [1929]). There is little evidence about payment for sex but it is likely to have varied at different times and to have included opium, alcohol, tobacco, food and possibly a limited range of consumer goods, as well as money. As far as town labour was concerned a 1925 report makes it clear that employees preferred Aboriginal people where there was a choice because they only had to pay them five shillings and keep a week rather than the nineteen shillings and threepence to Europeans employees (see Larbalestier [1988:28]).

On the cattle stations and in the isolated mining settlements Aboriginal people supplied the essential and regular supply of domestic labour within and around the homesteads, manual labour at mining settlements and much more importantly worked as stockmen. The payment of stockmen in kind was endorsed in the Bleakley report of 1929 as a measure to keep the costs to the industry down and because Aboriginal people spent money foolishly, very few of them understanding the, 'use of money or the value of articles' [1929:8]. When stockmen were given money it was as a sum at the end of the season that was usually blown on a spree in

town.

The work on cattle stations was intermittent. When people were not wanted the workers were rationed off into the camp and supported themselves with additional foraging. In the remote reserves where missions were established there was generally a policy of no food without work as the missionaries and the government sought to instill a European work ethic and regime [Rowse 1990]. By contrast with the cattle stations and mining settlements much of the work on the missions and government settlements was make-work with no productive value.

Outside the towns the full commoditisation of labour was held back by the state and the unions until the late 1960s. It was not until 1965 that the unions applied for Aboriginal stockmen to receive the same wage as Europeans. Typically no Aboriginal was called as a witness in the case and the pastoral interests mounted a strong argument about the inadequacy of Aboriginal workers, successfully seeking a slow-worker clause in the agreement that would allow them to pay non-award wages to people so classified. The Arbitration Commission agreed that Aboriginal people should receive award wages but in order to allow the pastoral industry time to adjust to the payment of such wages, they allowed them to be phased in over three years. By 1968 the numbers of Aborigines both living and employed on pastoral properties begun dropping rapidly. Cattle station owners decided to no longer use Aboriginal labour not only because of the increased cost of wages but also because of the requirement to supply them with standard housing, yet many remained living on the stations. This they were entitled to do because of a reservation in the leases in favour of Aboriginal people, allowing them to live and hunt there. However at this time Aboriginal people became fully integrated into the welfare and cash economy with a decision by the Federal Department of Social Security to make social security payments direct to the recipient rather than to some person on their behalf.

The effect of the pastoral award and Department of Social Security decision combined with the passing of a referendum that allowed the Federal government to make laws covering Aboriginal people in the states, led to a rapid increase in the rate of payment to Aborigines on settlements and missions. This came first in the form of a training allowance which increased the previous cash payments by a factor of three to 62% of the minimum award wage (see Altman and Nieuwenhuysen [1979:243-244]). With the election of a Federal Labour government in 1972 it became mandatory to pay award wages to Aboriginal people everywhere including those employed on missions and government settlements. With a constant wage budget this meant that there were many fewer jobs for Aboriginal people and the end of the previous make-work practices under which all people who offered themselves for work were guaranteed work. The great majority, upto 90% of the eligible workforce in many settlements, became unemployed living off social security payments. Almost the only employment in these remote communities was and is self-administration and servicing and even here educational attainment is such that for any kind of professional work people

from outside the community have to be employed.

As the cost of living in remote Australia rose during the 1970s along with political pressures to improve the lot of Aboriginal people in the remote towns, it became clear that more money had to be placed in Aboriginal hands. In the absence of employment the only solution was to allow the payment of unemployment benefit (or sit-down money as it is known in Aboriginal English) to Aboriginal people in these communities. This, paradoxically left the communities awash with money, relatively speaking. Because consumption levels had been kept so low for Aboriginal people up until the arrival of the full cash economy and because the expenditure was and is almost entirely on food, clothes, cars, petrol, luxury good (so-called transistors, record players and lately televisions) and alcohol with minimal or no expenditure on housing, utilities and insurances, even with few people working, aggregate levels of income were adequate to meet peoples needs. Gambling and sharing gave people access to money or goods they did not have. The influx of new social security monies precipitated greatly increased involvement with alcohol and removed the last vestige of conventional economic sense from the daily lives of the people. In part to deal with this, the government designed the Community Development Employment Scheme (CDEP) under which communities could choose to receive the total amount due to individuals in the community as unemployment benefit as a lump sum. Community members then work at community designated projects to earn up to the amount they would have received if they had received direct payment. Part of the idea was that people would only work to get as much money as they needed, thus avoiding windfall surpluses often frittered away in individually and communally destructive drinking bouts¹⁾. In many ways then, this scheme is a return to the no work no pay philosophy of the ration system and like that system it faces essentially the same problem: it can only offer most people make-work, even though it is much more flexible in allowing the Aboriginally controlled community councils to determine what will be classified as work. Thus for instance clearing a site for a ceremonial ground is likely to be paid work, and many bush airstrips have a number of maintenance workers when really only one is needed. This scheme is, then, an ambiguous commoditisation of labour and certainly not one that would either be accepted or recognised in the conventional labour market: but that only serves to underline the fact that much of remote Aboriginal Australia lies outside the workings of the mainstream economy.

STILL HUNTER-GATHERERS?

The legitimacy of referring to some Territory Aboriginal people as hunter-

- 1) The details and ramifications of this scheme are complex and the actual way in which it works highly variable from community to community. It is currently about to be reviewed to see if it should be continued and what, if any, modifications are needed should it be continued. One benefit of the scheme, not mentioned above, is 20% additional payment for capital works and equipment that goes to communities involved in it.

gatherers in the 1980s, raises the issue of the grounds on which practices and social arrangements may be described as continuous with the past. It is apparent that in terms of the mode of subsistence Aboriginal life has been radically transformed even though hunting and gathering remains a highly valued activity which is carried out quite regularly with the aid of a range of contemporary technology, including guns and cars. Further attachment to the land remains important not just at a personal level but as a principal element in the constitution of social identity, even in the Aboriginal towns where people are remote from their land and may, indeed, never have seen it. But it is not in terms of these aspects of life that a persuasive claim about the continued applicability of the term hunter-gatherer can be made but rather it is in respect of social relations and their significance for contemporary economic life.

Francesca Merlan [1989:5-6] suggests that the problem with arguments about the degree of continuity with the past is that a number of basic theoretical questions are rarely addressed: what are the theoretical and empirical bases in terms of which one may specify practices as continuous or discontinuous? How does one deal with the changing inter-relations among practices and their recontextualisation? And why are some practices more resilient than others? Simple dichotomies between past and present and traditional and non-traditional which take the constitution of tradition as unproblematic (and uncontested) have to be avoided. Further if a case is made for appropriately referring to some Aboriginal people as hunter-gatherers what implications does this have for conceptualising their relationship to the wider Australian society?

The case for arguing that some Territory Aboriginal people are reasonably described as hunter-gatherers is based on the evidence that they are still reproducing sets of values and social relations that structure distribution and consumption, and to a lesser extent production, in distinctive ways that are much closer to the pre-colonial pattern than they are to the structure and workings of the mainstream economy. These differences include aspects of sharing, consumption, gender roles, attitudes to accumulation, egalitarianism and the continuing significance of kinship.

The continuing significance of kinship relations in the face of cash and commoditisation is a measure of the extent to which the supposed entailments of the market economy—secularisation, technical rationality and individualism²⁾—have not been realised. Obligations to kin still appear to provide the context in which economic decisions are made and money used, and to take primacy over maximising individual use and control of cash. Most Aboriginal communities are made up entirely, or almost entirely, of Aboriginal people and all on uniformly low

2) Brian Turner has argued that the relationship between capitalism and individualism is complex, contingent and changing and that four different kinds of individualism are confused. There is a need to distinguish between the emergence of the individual in Western culture, individualism as a doctrine of rights, as an aesthetic theory of individual uniqueness and individuation as a bureaucratic process of surveillance [TURNER 1988].

incomes, running at around half the national average. It might be argued therefore that the perpetuation of personalised relationships is not unrelated to this poverty. Such poverty may reinforce sharing and reciprocity, because they play an important role in ensuring that individuals have access to the basic requirements for daily life which are in generally short supply. Kesteven's observation that the better off Aborigines at Oenpelli have more kin would support this view as does the way in which the weakest kin and ceremonial links are made more load bearing in the claims by people to be included within the groups receiving royalties. The significant point is that these extended claims are recognised rather than repudiated.

Murphy and Steward argue that the emergence of the economically self-sufficient household is one of the main impacts of the capitalist economy on self-sustaining economies [1956/1968]. It is apparently paradoxical, therefore, that in the precolonial economy, the household or a cluster of 2-3 households (see Peterson [1976] and Altman [1987]) was the basic unit of production and the primary unit of consumption. While the introduction of the cash economy has affected Aboriginal household economic organisation, it appears to have broken it down as an economic unit rather than strengthened it, in many situations, because of ideas about relatedness and gender roles. Kesteven's survey of who money is received from and lent to at Oenpelli hints at this. Of twenty people, only one nominated their wife as somebody to whom they would give money (unfortunately there are no figures on giving to husbands); commonly people give money to or ask money from their parents, siblings, maternal uncles and 'cousins' [KESTEVEN 1984:183]. This non-affinal organisation of borrowing and lending militates against the emergence of the household as an economic unit and correlates with the reports that social security money paid to women is seen as women's money with which they are expected to feed the children, while the payments to men, whether wages or other, are seen as basically their own money to do with as they please rather than spend on the family (see Ross [1987:42-43] and Hamilton [1972]). Further much money is paid to widow or widower pensioners and single parents with a wide range of ramification, including many women choosing not to remarry once they become widowed or divorced (see Bell [1980:262]). In the past such women would have been organised into new marriages by their male relatives. The general impact of this change is limited, however, by the fact that the women involved remain living in the community with all their kin and social obligations so that while some increase in individual autonomy may be experienced by them there is nothing to suggest any radical transformation of their social position nor any greatly increased ability to accumulate cash or direct it to new ends. Indeed it may well be the case that such women with independent incomes are put under increased pressure, given the high levels of unemployment in these communities, since the older women seem to live frugally and are treated as ready sources of cash in times of need, particularly in off pay week, by their close younger relatives.

This failure of kinship ties to dissolve is often described as Aboriginal people having subverted the impact of money. Subvert is an active term implying clear

intentionality. It suggests an awareness of the problems money poses to kin based relations and that active steps have been taken to overturn its effects. Save, perhaps, in the case of the commoditisation of the art, this level of self-awareness does not seem to be an accurate representation of what is going on. Even though many Aboriginal people are poorly informed about the nature and sources of money, their understandings and constructions of money work for them. They use money effectively within their own cultural and social contexts, putting it to ends they value or which seem not greatly inconsistent with the kin based economy. Subversion is not then the right term. A more accurate description might be assimilation: that is to say most people have assimilated cash and commoditisation to their existing cultural understandings and social purposes and in so doing defused the depersonalising aspects. There are several important reasons for this, not least because money has not become an end in itself and started to serve production [SIMMEL 1978:232].

Money is used entirely for consumption. The egalitarian tendencies in Aboriginal society which detach people from property and the inequalities it produces, prevent accumulation and the conversion of cash into capital. Capital still inheres in social relationships and, for those over forty, at least, in the accumulation of religious knowledge. Such relations are maintained by the circulation of money, goods and the judicious sharing of knowledge, not by husbanding them.

All this is not to say that money has introduced no changes. The fact that Aboriginal people acquire all the necessities of life from the market and that money arrives in fortnightly payments, in most cases, has greatly increased the velocity of exchange and sharing and intensified social interaction for many, as in the case of gambling where the attraction seems to be being-where-the-action-is. Money has also introduced new rhythms to life built around the pay days of the social security system.

The discussion of the commoditisation of land and labour underlines the crucial role played by the state in mediating their impact, both deliberately and inadvertently. Until the last ten years money has always been in short supply in Aboriginal communities. Initially this was because wages were not paid to Aboriginal people: outside the reserves the state cooperated with capitalist interests to ensure cheap labour for urban domestic service until 1953³⁾ and to the cattle industry until 1968 (see Larbalestier [1988]). On the reserves there were other reasons: it was much cheaper for the state to pay people in kind especially because there was frequently little or no work available that produced exchange value. Further the perception of Aboriginal people was that they could not handle cash because they lacked the mathematical skills, a belief still prevalent in the 1960s, would be cheated in financial transactions and would misuse it on alcohol⁴⁾.

3) The labour of urban Aboriginal people of mixed descent had to be paid for at standard rates from 1953 when they were made citizens (see Peterson [1985]).

Paying Aboriginal people in kind maximised European control and reduced costs but by keeping money in short supply the state was inadvertently underwriting the economy of sharing and the idiom of kinship. The political decision to pay award wages in 1972 only served to intensify the process of sharing since it reduced the number of people employed at the same time that it increased rates of pay, thus increasing the uneven initial distribution of income.

The *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976* explicitly removes Aboriginal land from the market by making it inalienable and in consequence largely removing its value as collateral. The reasons for this are complex but relate to the north American experience with termination in the 1950s, when many native Americans were given individual title to their land and ended up selling it, quickly leaving them as badly off as they had been before. Further it made sense politically because the massive transfer of land to Aboriginal people was in the form of group title for collective benefit which avoided it being seen as enriching individuals. Only the defacto veto on mining, which is the basis on which Aboriginal people can levy royalties, and the leasing of land, allow the land to be commoditised directly. But even here there are interesting contradictions between providing Aboriginal people with an asset that can be the basis for economic advancement and enshrining modified precolonial forms of Aboriginal relations to land.

Two principal factors led to this enshrining in Australian law of a version of Aboriginal relations to land. The land rights movement in the Territory had partly grown out of the concern of many Aboriginal people about the damage to sacred places by prospecting and mining coupled with popular sympathy for respecting and protecting the mystical ties of Aboriginal people to these places: it was felt appropriate that the law should include some specific recognition of these ties. Secondly the court case to establish whether or not Australian law recognised Aboriginal rights in land (known as the Gove Case but properly *Milirpum* and other versus NABALCO and the Commonwealth of Australia) had been built around a particular construction of precolonial land tenure in which the classical anthropological model was consolidated to fit legal arguments.

The consequents are that a system of land tenure derived from precolonial times has received added significance for it is in terms of these ties that people can secure access to royalty payments. This added significance is not just in respect of external relations but internal relations as well. Ties to remote areas of land, often never visited by the younger generations, that were dissolving into relationships with key places, have suddenly been revived. The preparation of land claims and consultations on land-use are playing a crucial role in the reproduction of social relations and cultural knowledge of areas that were, in some communities, on the wane.

4) These arguments were explicit in the debate over whether self-service style supermarkets should be introduced in Aboriginal towns. The first such supermarket did not appear until the mid 1970s.

CONCLUSION

Aboriginal people living in the Northern Territory are no ordinary hunter-gatherers yet neither are they common or garden members of the proletariat. A proletarian is one who serves the state not with property but with offspring or labour. While Aboriginal people in these remote communities are producing offspring at a much higher rate than the community at large, there is unlikely to be much, if any, demand for their labour in these remote location. It is a population that will be dependent on the state, rather than a reserve army of labour, for the foreseeable future. If this divorce from production were as a result of the appropriation of their land, then it would be the ultimate form of capitalist exploitation, however these Aboriginal people are not landless. Not only are many of them living on the land they and their ancestors owned prior to colonisation but collectively they have freehold title to over thirty-three percent of the Northern Territory and receive approximately twenty million dollars a year in royalties.

It might be argued instead that they are members of an underclass. Such a class is conventionally described as being made up of welfare dependants, petty criminals, high school drop outs and drug addicts who together differ from the poor in the degree of self-destructive psychological problems, social disorganisation and intransigent poverty immune to conventional welfare programmes [AULETTA 1982]. While it is important not to under play the extent to which there are social problem, particularly associated with youth and substance abuse, in even the most remote communities, the situation is very different. The Aboriginal people in remote Australia are members of communities, not segments of urban populations. Their structural location within the Australian nation-state, their histories, their internal organisation, their distinct languages, their social relations and their world view all differentiate them from the urban underclass. Further the members of the urban underclass suffer from an overwhelming sense of relative deprivation, while Aboriginal people in the remote communities do not appear to do so yet, although they may come to do so in the not too distant future, particularly under the impact of television.

They have also been protected from domination by their radically different consciousness and social practices, reinforced by their late history of contact with Europeans and their structural situation. Initially most Aboriginal people in remote areas were catered for by missions, minimally subsidised by the state because it was cheap (see Peterson [1985]). The general poverty of these institutions meant that they provided little infrastructure to the people and often encouraged the continuation of hunting and gathering. While the institutions exercised some petty discipline, people were free to return to the bush at any time and often did so, and they led remarkably separate lives from the mission staff even in the context of a mission or government settlement (see Trigger [1986, 1991]). With the arrival of a policy of self-determination and the intergration into the cash economy at the beginning of the 1970s, Aboriginal autonomy greatly increased.

The injection of resources this brought was periodic and unequal, fuelling consumption and requiring people to do a great deal of 'social' work to ensure access to funds. This included drawing on all the ties and links they had to others to be able to claim a share of the income. This in turn gave and gives added significance to existing social relations, rights, beliefs and practices, although they are no longer associated with any system of production, and results in their reproduction.

Change in the short term seems unlikely because there are too many factors distancing these Aboriginal people from the nation at large. The geographic isolation reinforces the social, economic and political isolation from Europeans and facilitates the maintenance and reproduction of cultural practices and understandings. Racism, which has always thrown Aboriginal people together and kept them separate from Europeans, except in well defined and limited areas of activity, remains as powerful as it ever was. Further the relations between these communities and the welfare state fall outside conventional class relations, as the land rights legislation makes clear, just as the relations within the communities fall outside the social relations typical of the encapsulating society⁵). It therefore seems justifiable to continue to refer to these people as hunter-gatherers at present, although for how much longer is a moot point.

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