

Missionaries, Mercenaries & Misfits

*Service relations in the administration
of remote Aboriginal communities
in the Western desert region
of Australia*

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Abstract

This thesis develops a conceptual framework for understanding service relations in the administration of remote Aboriginal communities. Historically, in the Western Desert and elsewhere in Australia, domains of White administrative power and Aboriginal religious authority have been distinguished conceptually as two distinct spheres of social interest and concern: as 'whitefella' and 'blackfella' business. Anthropologists have generally found this distinction useful in explaining resistance to change, particularly in the management of organisational finances, where many remote Aboriginal communities depend heavily on non-Aboriginal service agencies for administrative support.

A central challenge for government service agencies and Aboriginal organisations over the last two decades has been to find a satisfactory accommodation between Indigenous cultural traditions and the role corporate organisations play in representing community interests to government. However, in some anthropological accounts there has been a definite tendency to align 'non-Aboriginal interests' (or Whites, or some other diacritic of European identity) categorically with forms of administrative power opposed to Aboriginal social interests and cultural autonomy. While this approach has proved useful in advocating Aboriginal rights to self-determination in bureaucratic contexts, this study suggests concepts of value and autonomy should not be aligned too closely with identity politics, as what is valued from a cross-cultural perspective cannot always be adequately explained in racial or essentialist terms.

By examining service relations and administrative practice from a cross-cultural and interactionist perspective, this thesis presents ethnographic analysis of power relations in two remote settlements in The Great Victoria Desert region. Its central argument is that non-Aboriginal service agencies pose no perceived threat to Aboriginal cultural autonomy where employees tailor their work practices to accommodate Aboriginal interests and social priorities. In the same spirit, the thesis poses two subsidiary questions relevant to understanding power relations in the settlement context: namely, what mode or type of service delivery is likely to promote Aboriginal self-determination, and what points of articulation exist between Aboriginal and administrative domains at a local level?