Aboriginal sorcery and healing, and the alchemy of Aboriginal policy making

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Abstract

Sorcery and healing provide ways by which Wik people of Aurukun, western Cape York Peninsula, attempt through magical means to impact on individual behaviour and on the ordering of social relations. Aurukun has been the subject of intense scrutiny over recent decades because of its dramatically disintegrating social fabric. It exemplifies the kind of remote Aboriginal community about which social and political commentators have had much to say, and at which a whole raft of policies have been directed by governments aiming to transform them. This article uses the trope of magic in moving from a consideration of the magical and spiritual bases of Wik healing, sorcery, and certain forms of masculine power, to an examination of some of the underlying 'magical' assumptions in the writings of prominent proponents of market mechanisms in Aboriginal affairs. Just as the medieval alchemists, ignorant of the true properties of matter, sought to use magical means to transmute base metals to gold, so too do these proponents, as ignorant of the true nature of their substrate as any alchemist, seek to transmute Aboriginal people from the base nature of communalism and social dysfunction to the gold of autonomous economic actors.

Introduction

> Traditional culture has been stultified and degraded so that it has not moved from sorcery to the rule of reason, from polygamy to the equality of women with men and from 'pay-back' to the rule of law (Helen Hughes, Centre for Independent Studies).[1]

This article is designed for a collection on sorcery and healing, and its ethnographic account of these phenomena is drawn from my research
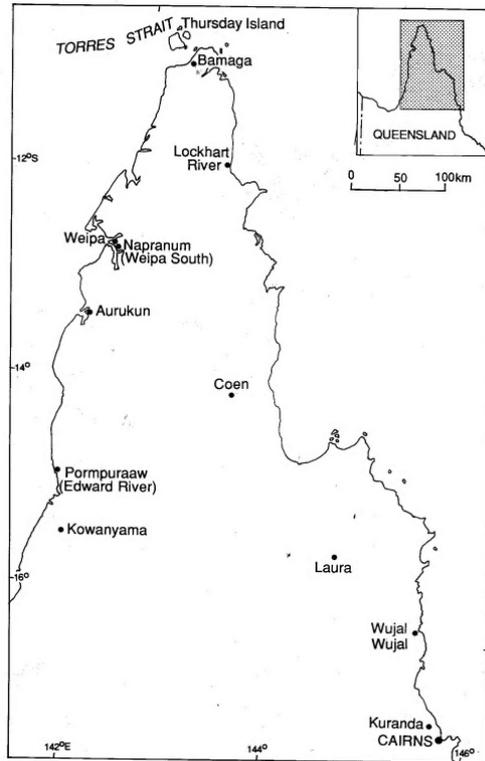
Map 1 General Location Map Cape York Region

amongst Wik people who live in Aurukun, on the western coast of Cape York Peninsula (see Map 1). Sorcery and healing provide means by which Wik people, through magical

measures, attempt to impact on individual behaviour and on the ordering of social relations. It struck me as I wrote this material that Aurukun has been the subject of intense scrutiny over recent decades because of its dramatically disintegrating social fabric, and is almost an exemplar of the kind of remote Aboriginal community about which social and political commentators have had much to say, and at which a whole raft of policies have been directed by governments aiming to transform them.

While the necessity for change in Aurukun is real, and even more urgent now than it was three decades ago when I first went there, many of the policy prescriptions seemed on reflection to have a quasi-magical quality about them—the causal connection between the proposed framework and the intended outcome was obscure at best, even mystical, certainly ideological. In this article, I use the trope of magic in moving from a consideration of the magical and spiritual bases of Wik healing, sorcery, and certain forms of masculine power, to an examination of some of the underlying assumptions in the writings of two prominent proponents of market mechanisms in Aboriginal affairs which I characterise as being akin to alchemy, the medieval precursor to science which aimed *inter alia* to transmute base metals to gold.

The two individuals whose writings I refer to are associated with two related institutions—development economist Helen Hughes from the Centre for Independent Studies, and Gary Johns, President of the Bennelong Society. The former organisation describes itself as "… the leading independent public policy 'think tank' within Australasia … (which) is

actively engaged in support of a free enterprise economy and a free society under limited government where individuals can prosper and fully develop their talents".[2] The Bennelong Society is a small lobby group in Aboriginal affairs established in 2001, which aims to "promote debate and analysis of Aboriginal policy in Australia, both contemporary and historical".[3] Both arguably have had a major influence on the public debates around Aboriginal affairs and policies, and not only during the Howard government era; their influence continues in many aspects of what can be discerned thus far in Federal Labor's policy framework.

The religious and magical underpinnings of mundane Wik life

Wik people do not understand their culture and society as resulting from the actions of individual creative human beings, but ultimately as having been 'left' by ancestral Heroes. While individual strategizing is a basic facet of Wik life, and is recognised explicitly at many levels, culture is represented as essentially unchangeable. The sources of European Australian culture are not clearly defined by Wik, but it too is seen as having been 'left' to Europeans, some suggest by God. General Australian law on the other hand, is said to constantly change, unlike their 'Law'. Wik themselves use the English word 'culture' primarily to refer to their various rituals, their origin and other myths, their totemic institutions, their relationship to land, and their languages—a usage that in fact corresponded rather closely to the lay general Australian one in its concentration on the exotica of a people's social practices and beliefs, rather than to more mundane life.

In referring to the more anthropological sense of culture as mores, manners and modes of behaviour, Wik talk in English of 'our way' or 'blackfella way', and contrast this with their perceptions of that of Whites. In *Wik Mungkan* itself however, both aspects are encompassed by certain linguistic usages.[4] *Aak*, whose core meaning is place but can also mean time, is one of a number of words that can refer to both of them; thus *aak thinth* can, depending on context, refer to either (or perhaps both) a close location or to an event soon to occur. Encompassing both senses however, and implicitly acknowledging the flow of time and the intimate importance of place in their social practices, *aak* is also used by Wik to refer to culture in its broad sense. *Aak ngant yimanang wunan*! (This is our way!) can be used in reference to such diverse domains of culture as the practice (and underpinning beliefs) of mortuary rituals on the one hand, or to how they saw themselves dealing with money on the other. These practices and beliefs are not explicitly seen as the product of individual creativity or will, but as reproducing and being linked through time to those of the preceding generations, *aak woyn wuut mangkantam*, and ultimately to the Creator Heroes.

Despite the fact that it is portrayed as essentially unchangeable, Wik cosmology however does not provide a seamless and unitary corpus of belief and explanation; in addition to regional diversity, especially between the coastal and the inland peoples, it is fragmented, discontinuous, and even individualized and idiosyncratic with conflicting versions and interpretations (Sutton 1978:131-54, 1987). Nonetheless, despite conflicting versions, the various ritual forms ranging

from clan totems, totemic and other sites, language, site based myths and rituals, localized totemic cults, women's *wuungk* rituals, and finally in the coastal zone the broader regional cults,[5] have established a loose hierarchy of ritual forms linked epistemologically through the 'history of origins' (Sutton 1978: 138) in which they, along with human society, are 'left'.

Initiations and male potency

Male initiations in pre-contact times would not appear to have been given the prominence in west Cape York that they are in many other areas of Aboriginal Australia. Nonetheless, the series of *uchanam* and *winychanam* initiations, and the higher and more restricted *unta-tich* rituals for advanced novices who had been through the first two stages, had provided the major formalized contexts in which young males are incorporated into adult manhood through processes defined by and under the control of mature men collectively. Accounts I was given indicated a relative absence of formal instruction in esoteric lore and so forth during initiations, in keeping with the general form of Wik pedagogy I have outlined elsewhere (Martin 1993, especially Chapter 1), but stressed their harshness, coerciveness and dramaturgical nature. Through them, the wilful expression of childish licence had been, to some degree at least, channelled into socially appropriate forms of adult independence. Implicit in Wik initiations had been a theory of personhood involving the directing of individual ethos through a traumatic physical and emotional regimen, diametrically opposed to that of mundane life previously encountered by the young initiate.

Furthermore, this radical process had been referenced in initiations to the ultimate legitimating power of a transcendent realm, that of the creation and maintenance, through the power of the Culture and Totemic heroes, of the world as it was then known. This power had been represented as underlying the ordering of social life as it then existed and the very constitution of individuals, although in a rather different and more fragmented way than does the "Dreaming" for many other Aboriginal Australian groups. It had been primarily through participation in the series of initiations that male ritual—and ultimately secular—potency had been legitimated. Male initiates, *yaayp*, were said to have been swallowed by the Rainbow Serpent Taipan (*Thaypan*)[6] during the course of the extended ritual, and the bough shelters in which they were confined for long periods were referred to as Taipan's belly. A euphemistic way of referring to the initiatory process was *iimpan ngoonychan*, entering the belly; see also McKnight (1975:93) and McConnel (1957:111-2). McKnight (1975:93) records that at the conclusion of the *uchanam* ceremony, the youths carried bow-shaped sticks which symbolised the Rainbow Serpent. These were stuck into the ground and the youths crawled through them, just as if they were passing through the Rainbow Serpent.

It was Taipan's power which was represented as having underlain the initiates' transformation by older men from mere boys into *pam komp*, young men. They were refashioned, distinguished from that time not just by the travails of the initiation process or by ritually potent knowledge they had

gained, but by the potency they had derived from being swallowed and regurgitated by Taipan.

As Wik understand it, an individual's *ngangk chaapar* (literally 'heart blood')[7] provides vitality and potency in activities in the linked domains of fighting, hunting and sexual relations. While idiosyncratic personality and differential force of character are recognised and in fact strongly emphasized by Wik, the ability to causally intervene in the flow of events is seen as arising in large part at least from tapping into externally located sources of power, in the past particularly those rendered available through initiations. Women and uninitiated men also have *ngangk chaapar* it is true, but through undergoing *uchanam* and *winychanam* that of adult men had been rendered the more forceful and potent. They accordingly collectively became at a certain level *ngenych* (ritually potent and dangerous) to women and to children McKnight (1975:95). "That *winychanam*, he draw woman, wallaby—that's what that *winychanam* meant for—but *achakumathiy* (ritually dangerous)!" an elderly initiated Wik man explained to me once.[8] *Ngeenwiy* sickness for instance,[9] characterized by stomach cramps and associated with Taipan or other totemic beings, can be imparted by these men to others (such as male juniors and women and children) if their power is not acknowledged, or is infringed even inadvertently. Older women with a large number of children also could, on occasion, impart *ngeenwiy*.

Intimately associated with *ngangk chaapar* is the spirit component *ngangk thanhth*, which gives the individual vitality and the ability to influence events and people in the world. The

ngangk thanhth was accordingly the more powerful for initiated men, and thus more dangerous after death. *Thanhth* at the surface level meant fat, as in the fat of animals, but is of considerable symbolic and ritual significance. In hunting, the game is always examined and the abundance of body fat commented on: "*Minh wachaman ey*!"—"The game is fat!"[10] Game which is not *wachaman* is referred to as "poor". It could be suggested of course that this is purely utilitarian usage. Fat figured however in major ("deep") swearing, as in *pu' thanhthathiy* (greasy vagina) and *kunych thanhthathiy* (greasy penis). A myth of the *ngalp-ngalpan* devil from *Waayang*, whose wife enticed a Titree man to have sexual intercourse with her, stresses her extremely greasy body and sexual organs; "That devil woman bin almost grease!" declared the elderly man recounting the story to me. A shining, oily skin is also an indication of health and physical beauty for Wik. Mothers frequently complete the dressing up of their younger children for important occasions by rubbing their skin and hair with coconut oil. In ritual matters, body fat can be used in sorcery, and the greasy fluid dripping from the corpse on its platform during the early stages of mortuary ceremonies, and during the cremation months or years later, had been a source of great ritual pollution.[11] As the fluids left the body, so did the life and vitality incorporated in the *ngangk thanhth*.

The spirit component *ngangk thanhth* and the psychological attribute *ngangk chaapar* can be seen therefore as individual characteristics relating to potency and vitality which had been rendered more powerful through the processes of initiation. This power is still seen as an intrinsic part of adult masculinity,

but in the past it had been reinforced by participation in the more esoteric rituals and knowledge of their associated deeper, less public meanings. It is seen as resulting in the valued male attributes such as courage, forceful character, fighting and hunting prowess, and ritual potency—although as Wik life has become more secular and the formal rituals apart from those associated with death disappear, men's ritual power accordingly has attenuated. While women's *ngangk chaapar* strengthens with age, it is not socially instilled through ritual intervention but rather individually achieved through the processes of bearing children. This potency can be realized in certain linked domains of mundane practices, where those that have it are referred to as *thup*. In a sense, the rendition of *thup* is encompassed by aspects of the semantic domains in English of 'skilful', 'forceful' and 'lucky'. A good fighter is *thup* or *thup-thul* as is a skilled hunter,[12] one adept at attracting the opposite sex is *maarrich-thup*, with *maarrich* referring to a lovers relationship, and in the contemporary situation a good card player is card-*thup*.

One's ability at hunting, card playing and attracting women is influenced by one's *ngangk chaapar*, and there are certain people with whom if possible one does not undertake these activities because one's "blood doesn't 'gree". Luck is associated with a concentration of mind, a single mindedness of purpose and a willingness to throw caution to the winds— being "one-hearted"—and can be changed for the worse by other people disturbing one. A common complaint of gamblers is that others, particularly children, demanding money during the course of a game ruin their luck, and people arriving back

from unsuccessful hunting or fishing trips sometimes complain that teasing children or a companion whose 'blood' does not agree with theirs has ruined their luck. Both men and women can be *thup*, but it is used of women skilled in activities such as fishing or card playing, specifically not of their success in gathering vegetable foods, where the term *ma'-mangkiy* is used. Significantly, *thup* is not used in relation to contemporary activities described as 'work'. While one can work energetically or lazily, with success or not, it is the mind and the body that are engaged, not the *ngangk chaapar*.

Initiations had continued into the latter years of the mission era, if in attenuated form; in fact, the long-time missionary MacKenzie himself had undergone at least some of the *uchanam* rites at *Penychanng* near *Yaanang*, on the south side of the Archer River estuary on which Aurukun is sited. The last initiation however took place in 1970,[13] not long after MacKenzie had left Aurukun. It is no accident that this period presaged an inter-related complex of major changes for Wik in Aurukun. One consequence of the removal of the dormitory system at this time and the system of control over sexuality which it entailed, was an expanding demographic base which has continued since that time and has profound implications for the control of younger generations by the older ones. With the introduction of cash, and from the mid-1980s of even more consequence alcohol, new and powerful symbolic forms have become available through which younger Wik men in particular can seek to establish autonomy, unmediated by senior generations (Martin 1993, 1995, 2001). The original transcendent realm from which initiation ritual drew its power

became increasingly irrelevant, and no longer informs and explained the objective realities of contemporary mundane life for young Wik men in any substantive sense. On the other hand, sorcery—or at least, accusations of it—continue as an intrinsic component of the endemic disputation and violence which have become such a dominant aspect of Aurukun life. I shall return to a discussion of Wik sorcery shortly.

For several decades now, that is, young Wik men have been growing to maturity in a world where older men play little direct part in rearing them, and where masculine power is no longer underpinned by a ritual domain which mature men control. In this world, Wik youths create their own worlds of meaning essentially independently of older Wik, centred on such practices as the destruction of 'community' and staff property, fighting, drinking, and conducting sexual liaisons; worlds where personal style and public presence increasingly define the self. Personal power and potency are no longer referred to a transcendent ritual realm, but are matters of image and presentation. To take one instance, during the late 1980s the Australian Army Reserves provided a prestigious contemporary route to a masculine identity for a number of young men joining. After their return from a few weeks basic army training—removed from their families and instructed in new and powerful symbolic forms in an almost completely masculine environment, suggestively paralleling the original initiations—the young men wore their khaki army fatigues and heavy boots on all possible occasions, moving with purposeful demeanour and self-conscious presence around the village.[14] This prestige was not only self-ascribed; individual prestige to

a degree became collectivized, so that the symbolic resource that these young men represented was used in the competition for status between wider groupings;

> At a mortuary ceremony for an elderly man who had served on Thursday Island during World War Two, the coffin stood under the mango trees outside his oldest daughter's house, draped with an Australian flag which the family had petitioned the army to provide. After *Apalach* and *wuungk* cycles had been performed by senior ritual leaders, the "army boys" dressed in their uniforms and with a grandson of the deceased as their "sergeant", paraded past the coffin, stood rigidly to attention, and saluted it (Martin 1993: 211)

If mortuary ceremonies had provided contexts for the competitive display of symbols "emblematic of territorialism" (Sutton (1978:149) then these 'army boys' were masters of the new contemporary symbolic forms, incorporating symbols not of territorialism as such but nonetheless still of *distinction*, whereby social space is constituted as a space of life-styles, organized by the logic of difference (Bourdieu 1984; 1985:730-1).

Healing

The Rainbow Serpent Taipan himself, whose power had underlain initiations as discussed previously, is also seen to be a powerful healer—"he Doctor too"—and one way of gaining the ability to be a 'Murri doctor' or healer (*pam nhoyan*) was to be swallowed and then regurgitated by Taipan (see also McConnel 1957:111, and McKnight 1982:499). Taipan's spirit familiar, the *komp kath*, who was his 'boss', would then collect

the bones and reassemble the person. In fact, in the past it would almost certainly have been the case that for men to become Murri doctors they would have had to have undergone at least the first *uchanam* series of initiations. I am not certain whether women could have become *nhoyan* in the past. I noted only one case in my time at Aurukun, significantly that of a woman in early middle age who had a large number of children, and who additionally was seen as being somewhat 'different', and who was from a family with some mildly intellectually or physically handicapped members. One of her male siblings was also reputed to be a *nhoyan*. Here again, a woman's ability to have power, and in particular to have ritual power, was dependent upon her having had children; that is, having undergone a change of status, a re-formulation.[15]

In contemporary Aurukun, with no one under the age of fifty having gone through even a rudimentary initiation, alternative mechanisms are spoken of as allowing younger men to become *nhoyan*;

> An *oony* or *minychalam*, (a bullock-footed devil) came to John at night at the house—not in a dream, it actually came to him. It took him down to the cemetery and right down inside a grave, near that of the missionary Mrs MacKenzie. There was a very long table down there, heaped with money, with *oparr* (magical substances, 'medicines') for attracting women, for gambling, and for killing and fighting, along with rusty knives, sharp knives—all kind of things. The *oony* asked him if he wanted to be a rich man, or did he want *oparr* for women, or to kill people, or did he want to become a 'Murri doctor' healer, a *nhoyan*. John said that he wanted to become a *nhoyan*. The *oony* took out John's

eyes, and put his own in John's eye sockets. With these eyes, he could then see right through walls and over great distances. Then he showed John tricks; he took his own head off, walked around, then put it back on—all sorts of tricks. The devil then took him out of the grave and they walked back together. When John subsequently healed people, his own spirit shade (*maany*) travelled in company with his *komp kath* spirit familiar to the sick person as they lay sleeping, but his bodily presence (*ngurrp*) remained. He is now half *minychalam* himself, with piercing eyes like those of the bullock-footed devil, and long ears.[16]

As with the original initiations themselves, the gaining of potency was seen here as involving the destruction and subsequent reformulation of the person. One could speculate in fact that this is one example of a wider principle of Wik social process, whereby the new was formed from the dissolution and reformation of the original elements of the old. Thus, the constant fission and fusion of residence and other groupings, and the role of violence and conflict in re-constituting new social realities, can be seen as realizing this same principle.

There are other sources of power indicated in the options offered by the *komp kath* however. John was offered money, or potent substances (*oparr*) to attract women, aid in fighting, or gain money through gambling; suggestively, precisely the linked domains of mundane practices previously discussed. For John as a young (and marginal) man in the contemporary society, it was no longer possible to gain personal potency through undergoing initiation; the *komp kath* however offered him an alternative route. Significantly, while framed in

culturally appropriate and appropriated terms, power is not to be gained through a collectively based practice as had been the case with initiations, but through an individually situated one.

The offer of *oparr* by the devil reflected this increasing individuation of Wik in other ways as well, because while the notion of potent magical substances which would enable a person to effect their will on others or on events had certainly been reproduced from the pre-contact society, by their very nature the knowledge of such substances and of their use is highly idiosyncratic. All manner of *oparr* for gambling are tried by people in the hope of gaining luck—crushed bark and leaves of various trees, perfumes and lotions from pharmacies in Cairns, even lucky charms such as rabbits' feet. Similar substances are used by both men and women to attract the opposite sex. However, while the use of *oparr* is idiosyncratic in nature, and nominally available to both men and women and to young and old, what is in common with the concept of male power inculcated through initiations, reproduced in the contemporary society, is the notion of an external source of power that can be tapped by appropriate and knowledgeable human action. That is, certain forms of causal intervention in mundane events are seen as being potentially effected by gaining access through ritual means to the external sources of power.

Sorcery

All Wik closely monitor the transactions of material and symbolic items between individuals and collectivities through which relationships and relative status are constructed and reproduced. While hierarchies do exist (such as those between the genders, or those based on age), there is a powerful ethos of equalitarianism (*picham karrp*, literally shoulders together, level) and stress on parity in such transactions (*ma' keelam*, being equal or equivalent) which pervade all dimensions of life. With social relations and forms being in large part created and reproduced in an immediate fashion through the interactions between persons, rather than being mediated through objective institutions, both personal autonomy and parity among individuals and collectivities can be maintained only through direct and personal action on others.

The refusal of positively valued material or symbolic goods—food, cash, alcohol, help, respect—or equivalently the proffering of negatively valued ones—insults, public shame, gratuitous references, injury, infringements of ritual or territorial property—is a denial of one's own or one's group's autonomy and status in a society where all assert they are equals. As such, a response is demanded, for to not seek redress is to accept inequality and compromise one's autonomy. This principle of retributive action in kind (*lex talionis*)—what Hughes in the quotation at the beginning of this article terms 'pay back'—pervades all dimensions of Wik life, from relations within the familial domain, to those between kindreds and other collectivities. Robinson made a similar observation of the Tiwi people of Bathurst Island:

> The talion principle is fundamental to processes of psychosocial response to aggression in Tiwi life.

This means that, where aggression leads to an attack on a member or part of the group, then individual, or sometimes collective retaliation in kind is the principle of redress, even in many cases where the wrong or injury is unintended. This aspect of Tiwi "law-ways" is fairly well documented. It is observable in almost any area of social life, including in family life, where it plays a fundamental part in the management of aggression by children (Robinson 1988:12).

At the same time, retaliation is itself amongst Wik a particular instance of more general principles, those of reciprocity and equivalence in the transactions of material and symbolic items, through which autonomy and equality are realized (Martin 1993). The *Wik Mungkan* term describing such reciprocal actions is *puth-puthangk*; to retaliate physically is *puth-puthangk piikan*, to reciprocate a gift of money or food is *puth-puthangk thee'an*, to return the verbal abuse and swearing of one's opponents is *puth-puthangk akan*, and so on. Wik see retaliation, (*wiinhthan* or 'payback'), as an intrinsic part of the way they have always dealt with the world; "This thing going to continue for ever. This payback, it part of our culture," I was told by one man. Like the flows of material goods, the symbolic exchanges of retribution serve to structure and reproduce not only the relationships between individuals but between collectivities. One woman stated this particularly clearly:

(Those fights at the beer canteen and so on) are from long before, from when they used to fight one another. They are not fighting just from immediate causes. They keep the anger in their hearts, or in their minds. (... This is what you call 'payback' in English.) They would say to one another, "Don't be

open and friendly with that person, he hurt our relation." They would tell the families as they grew up about the grudge, and that next generation carries it on, just by word of mouth, not by writing as you do, and keeps it in their hearts and minds.

(Why do we take part for our families?) Because that is the Aboriginal culture, from the old people who went before. Don't treat that particular person well, eventually they will pay you back. It is like a will given to that family, passed on ... because that person ensorcelled one of our relations. So stick together and speak as one. So then all the relations—siblings, mother, uncle, sisters' children—keep aware, keep their eyes open, and then the anger builds up for talking as one. Because that is the custom that was left us. It is from way back, from the beginning. White people are different, they just look out for themselves.[17]

From infancy, Wik children are encouraged to retaliate physically against real or imagined wrongs. Denials of demands for food or money often lead to violent retaliatory action by young men against (in particular) female kin or partners. The rebuff of requests for alcohol from other male kin frequently results in severe retributive action. The refusal to allow kin to use a tractor, car or boat regularly leads to heated arguments and fights. A young man whose sister has become involved in a *maarrich* lovers' relationship will often retaliate by fighting her lover and his kin, and sometimes seek to establish sexual liaisons with that lover's sisters in retaliation. Sexual infidelity in the past (particularly by a woman) had invited severe sanctions, including ensorcellment, physical violence and even death, and in contemporary Aurukun still risks violent

retribution. Swearing or gratuitous references to an individual or group almost inevitably results in vehement arguments or physical retaliation.

Retribution, Wik say, can either be undertaken openly (*mee' kaa' yoon*) through fighting, or it can be done secretly through sorcery, *purriy-purriy*.[18] Suggestively, to ensorcel is *pekan* whereas to fight is the reciprocal form *pekwunan*; to fight openly by definition is to have mutual engagement of protagonists, whereas sorcery is practiced in secrecy and unilaterally. Explanations for illness and death are almost always couched in terms of mystical agency; through *ngeenwiy* sickness caused accidentally by senior men (see McKnight 1981b), through infringement of ritual taboos such as those relating to 'poison' country, or through sorcery (see Hiatt 1965, who made a similar observation regarding sorcery for northern Arnhem land peoples).

The attribution of blame for deaths to the work of sorcerers had featured prominently at the cremations of the mummified corpse which had been the culmination of the complex of mortuary ceremonies before the missionary McKenzie had stopped them. Accusations of sorcery together with the raising of past grievances would lead to formalized conflict and fighting between opposing groups which often ended in serious injury and death (see also Sutton (1978:149). Among Wik of the coastal floodplains at least, cremation grounds were always associated with nearby fighting grounds at which these almost ritualized 'payback' confrontations took place.

Only men can be sorcerers (as McKnight 1981a also observed of the Lardil of Mornington Island). To become the victim of a

sorcerer is to 'get caught'. The sorcerer (*ma' wop* or *ma' menychan*) uses a variety of magical powers to attack his opponent. Most dangerously, he finds his target alone or asleep and places him or her in a trance. He then operates on his victim, making an incision and withdrawing blood (the *ngangk chaapar*) and then placing it in a small container— nowadays a tin, in the past a parcel of paperbark tied with vines. He leaves a small opening, because like its owner, the blood has life and must have air. The sorcerer then hides the parcel, perhaps in the side of an antbed or by burying it in sand. The victim awakens from the trance, but is unable to tell others of what has happened. Nothing out of the ordinary in the victim's demeanour or health is immediately apparent.

However, the sorcerer, malevolent and cruel, will secretly return to where he has hidden the blood and heat it over a fire, or place hot stones on it. As he does so, the man or woman will writhe in pain. The sorcerer may continue to do this over a long period, playing with his victim (*ma' kee'athan*), who will be getting weaker and weaker. The victim's kin will by now begin to notice that the person is ailing, and enlist the help of a healer (*nhoyan*) who might divine that the person has been ensorcelled (*ma' pamam* or *ma' weechan nunang*). The anger and distress caused by the perception that sorcerers have been at work is palpable. Kin will actively seek for the container of blood; if they find it, they wash the congealed blood in water, and the victim will immediately be revitalized. If they do not, and if the healing of the *nhoyan* is to no avail, the victim's condition worsens and they become dreadfully ill (*man-way* or *wenych-thaa'*). When the sorcerer finally takes

the hot stones and sears the package right where the small hole has been left, the person convulses and dies.

Wik do not simply express belief in such practices—they take action on the basis of those beliefs. All Wik actively and suspiciously monitor events for signs that a sorcerer may have been at work. For example, I recorded parties of men setting out to seek the sorcerer's parcel containing the blood of sick kinsman. Not only do Wik closely observe a dying or ill person for signs by which the work and identity of a sorcerer can be established, but they also scrutinise those from other groups for evidence of untoward behaviour which can point to their being a sorcerer. Such signs are said to include a preference to travel or camp out in the bush on their own. One man was accused of being a sorcerer because when he took part in an expedition to seek the blood of an ensorcelled man from another clan, he would not take his shirt off in the mangroves as had all the other men. While he complained there were too many mosquitoes, all agreed that this was only an excuse, and that he must have had other reasons. Wik accusations of sorcery therefore are more than a mechanism for assigning causality to the otherwise inexplicable. They are a means by which causality was both externalized and personalized, by which social conformity is maintained, and by which relations between dominant and marginal individuals and groups are sustained and reproduced.

Despite the attenuation of much of the content of the original religious system and its associated cultural geography, attribution to sorcery for a range of occurrences continued, and even intensified through its role in contemporary conflict and violence.[19] I asked a Wik friend why sorcery is still strong, in contrast to initiations:

> Young fellows grow up, and young women. This dangerous custom is not a recent one. It is a hidden custom. People are told to be careful, to keep aware—that's how it keeps going. With initiations, they didn't tell them like that; the mother did not say "I'll tell your father, so that you can go through bora." It was not like that at all. But this thing (sorcery), they are told to be aware of it, it is still strong.[20]

Virtually all deaths of Wik people in contemporary Aurukun continue to be attributed to human agency, either directly through physical violence or indirectly through the malevolent magical means of sorcery.[21] The words of a dying person, their gestures, any twitches of their eyelids, the final position of their limbs in death— all are closely watched for signs by which the identity of the sorcerer can be divined. Even where the immediate cause of death is recognised as physical trauma, sorcery is often implicated:

> A woman died after being violently assaulted by her husband in a jealous rage provoked by her alleged infidelity. His kin did not dispute that the attack had caused her death. The question raised by them however was what had led to his homicidal rage. He was a quiet, unassuming man (*thaa' mochan*) they said; clearly, he had been ensorcelled as a means of exacting retribution against his wife and her kin (Martin 1993: 162).

The allegations served here to unite the husband's kin and those of his wife against a common external enemy, the

alleged sorcerer and his kin, from one of the politically and socially marginal clans from an area south of Aurukun. In the ten years I lived in the Aurukun region, virtually all sorcery accusations were made against men from this region, which significantly is environmentally relatively marginal and is situated between two large, resource-rich river systems. The few accusations that are not directed against men from this region are against equally marginal men from elsewhere.

The chain of imputed causality in the case of the violent death of the Wik woman parallels that observed by Evans Pritchard (1937: 69-70) in his famous example in which an Azande man of the western Sudan died when he leant against the support of a sun-dried clay granary. It was clear to other Azande that the man was killed as the result of the granary collapsing on him—but the important question was who had caused its collapse at that particular moment, to be answered within a framework of causality in which such personal misfortune is attributed to witchcraft or sorcery. McKnight (1981a: 43) argued that for the Lardil of the Wellesley Islands, sorcery cases revolved around sexual jealousies, quarrels with affines, and competition for spouses, a theme to which he returned in considerable detail in a subsequent book (McKnight 2005). Here, however, he argued that sorcery was no longer commonplace because the Wellesley Island people no longer had their magic and powers having lost control over their own lives following the increasing bureaucratisation of the community under local government (McKnight 2005: 211). This was certainly not my experience of Aurukun Wik people—although it is accusations of sorcery now, rather than its

putative practice, which is so deeply embedded in the chronic disputation and violence in Aurukun.

Thus far, I have outlined certain aspects of the religious and magical underpinnings of everyday Wik life. This is not to say that these define the totality of that life, or the only framework within which Wik interpret it. But, I have focussed my attention here on these phenomena because as the epigraph from Helen Hughes quoted at the beginning of this article illustrates, such phenomena are seen by many commentators and policy makers as part of a "degraded" traditional Aboriginal culture in troubled communities such as Aurukun, to be replaced by the "rule of reason". Furthermore, sorcery and healing, and certain forms of traditional male power, utilise magico-ritual techniques directed at individuals which nonetheless have as their aim quintessentially *social* outcomes (Reid 1983: 55).

But is it only traditionally oriented Aboriginal people who subscribe to the power of seemingly irrational socially transformative techniques? The question must be asked: Do some of the Aboriginal policy proposals of the Bennelong Society and the Centre for Independent Studies themselves follow the 'rule of reason'? Or are they more akin to the transformative art of alchemy?

The alchemy of Aboriginal policy

European medieval alchemy was based on mystic and speculative philosophy, and aimed to achieve such goals as the transmutation of the base metals (particularly lead) into gold, a universal cure for disease, and a means of indefinitely prolonging life. Much effort was invested in the search for the

Philosopher's Stone, believed to mystically amplify the user's knowledge and capacity to achieve such goals. While the alchemists failed in these endeavours for reasons clearly established by modern science, they played a very significant role in the development of chemistry (Moran 2000). Indeed, one of the founding fathers of science, Isaac Newton, was keenly interested in alchemy and its associated chemical experiments and evidently devoted more time to these enquiries than to his mathematics, planetary mechanics, and the optics of colour (Guerlac 1977). In modern usage, the term 'alchemy' also infers an almost magical transformative process of change from one state to a different, putatively better and more valuable or desirable, one.

It is thus, in my view, a suggestive metaphor in the Aboriginal policy arena.[22] The medieval alchemists proceeded on their quest in ignorance of the objective nature of the base metals they sought to transmute to gold, and furthermore attempted to do so by irrational magical means. So too, I suggest, do certain of the Aboriginal policy prescriptions of Helen Hughes and Gary Johns ignore or distort key characteristics of the Aboriginal 'substrate' in their quest to have its base and dysfunctional nature transmuted to the desirable form of the economically integrated Australian citizen, through means which are 'quasi-magical'. In the following section, I will outline just some of the anthropological findings on the principles of Aboriginal economic life to illustrate this distortion, and the quasi-magical means by which they propose Aboriginal people are to be transformed.

Aboriginal 'economic' values: policy's blank slate

Anthropology enables us to recognise that what we understand as 'the economy' does not lie outside culture, but indeed is an intrinsic aspect of it (e.g. in the Australian Aboriginal context, Austin-Broos 2003; Macdonald 2000; Martin 1993, 1995; Peterson 1993, 2005; Povinelli 1993 and Schwab 1995). Trigger (2005) usefully summarises the literature in relation to how we are to understand the Aboriginal economy and the relationship between economy and culture in terms of pervasive Aboriginal values such as a strong ethos of egalitarianism and an associated pressure to conform to norms of equality, the pursuit of family and local group loyalties against notions of the 'common good', demand sharing as a mechanism working against material accumulation, and an underlying ideological commitment to continuity with the past which militates against the acceptance of change. Logically, such values would seem to have significant implications for the ways in which people engage with the general Australian society, its economy, and government policies and programs predicated on economic integration as a primary mechanism for addressing disadvantage.

However, a mere list as presented here does not capture the true import and embeddedness of such values for many Aboriginal people. For example, as has been well documented Australian Aboriginal societies can be aptly described as 'kinship polities', with kinship not only structuring 'private' familial relations, but also 'public' social, economic and political relations (e.g. Mantziaris and Martin 2000: 282-3; Sutton 2003:

178, 206ff). At the same time, relations of kinship provide a foundational dimension of personal identity, and indeed a certain structure to ethical frameworks; for example, the common feature of a lack of a notion of the wider common good extending past local group and family boundaries (e.g. Martin 2001; Tonkinson 2007)

Of particular insight here are the discussions by Peterson and Taylor (2003) and Peterson (2005) regarding the Aboriginal 'moral economy', a term adapted in part from the work of E.P. Thompson (1991: 339-340). Peterson characterises the activities involved in acquiring a livelihood in the pre-colonial situation as being embedded in kinship and/or group relations. Production, in the sense at least of the products of foraging, was nearly always intimately linked with consumption, even indeed before the activity took place, through obligations and commitments established through the kinship system. Peterson argues that after Aboriginal people in remote Australia and elsewhere entered the cash economy,[23] primarily through the welfare system, the cultural structuring of the Aboriginal economy involved an almost exclusive focus on circulation and consumption, rather than also on production. He argues that with circulation and consumption as the central features of economic activity, their focus turned to kinship, reciprocity and sharing practices. In this context, he suggests that the notion of 'moral economy' is useful to understand what is going on. By moral economy, he is meaning the allocation of resources to the reproduction of social relations at the cost of profit maximisation and obvious immediate personal benefit.

The Aboriginal moral economy is characterised by the centrality and persistence of sharing. As Peterson explains it:

> Sharing is inseparable from the division of labour, the minimisation of risk and the managing of uncertainty; it is also at the heart of the production and reproduction of social relations, egalitarianism and the self. There are four elements to the Indigenous domestic moral economy. It is characterised by a universal system of kin classification that requires a flow of goods and services to produce and reproduce social relationships. The circulation of goods takes place within the framework of an ethic of generosity, informed by the social pragmatics of demand sharing, with open refusal rare, since it is seen as a rejection of relatedness. In such social contexts personhood is constituted through relatedness while at the same time it is associated with an egalitarian autonomy. (Peterson 2005: 5)

What is in some ways a complementary scheme for a modern hunter-gatherer 'mode of subsistence' has been proposed by Bird-David (1992), who argues that in most if not all aspects of what they do for a living, modern hunter-gatherers *procure* resources, even when they do so by means which are prototypical production activities for other peoples. By 'procure', the author refers to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary meaning of "to bring about, to obtain by care or effort, to prevail upon, to induce, to persuade a person to do something". While it is akin to 'harvest' in referring to gathering the resources of lands and waters, 'procure' also usefully pertains to the social environment as well. She argues that hunter-gatherers do not engage in production …

in the full sense of the word, neither as understood by Marx as a cyclical process, where production and consumption are dialectically related, nor in the neo-classical sense, where production is all about the creation of resources, inextricably connected with re-investment ... The extension of sharing practices to these activities, in the various ways it is done, fully or partially, directly or indirectly … reinforces the logic of procurement against the logic of production.[24] (Bird-David 1992:40)

Bird-David further argues that it follows that modern hunter-gatherers are not 'opportunists', a term to which along with 'foraging' she objects on the grounds that they are pejorative,[25] but rather are committed to a 'logic of procurement' which is so deeply embedded in their world view and understandings of themselves, that it is not dependent on the exclusive or even the ongoing pursuit of hunting and gathering *per se* (Bird-David 1992:40). She proposes that this 'hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence' is characterised by four inter-related prototypical features:

(a) *Autonomous pursuit of activities directed to gaining resources*. Individuals and families shift autonomously between different means of procuring resources in response to their circumstances and opportunities.

(b) *Variation over time (diachronic variation)*. These shifts do not follow any regular temporal pattern, but vary over time, and indeed over generations. Variety and flexibility are prominent over time.

(c) *Variety at any given time (synchronic diversity)*. Often, diverse means for procuring resources are pursued simultaneously within the social group at

its various levels. Variety and flexibility are also prominent at any given time.

(d) *A continuous presence of the hunter-gatherer ethos*. While individuals may shift frequently between different means of procuring resources, and engage variously with economic activities of the wider societies within which they live, 'procurement' as a means of gaining access to resources persists, as noted above, even when classical hunting and gathering is no longer practised. (Bird-David 1992:38-41)

Within this framework, work for wages can itself be just one of the strategies adopted to gain food and other material resources, combined as opportunities arise and in no fixed way (Bird-David 1992: 28). Further, 'procurement' (for which we can safely substitute foraging in my view, despite Bird-David's concerns) is an entirely different social, cultural and economic institution than 'work'. Foraging can certainly at times be extremely arduous, especially in harsh environments (e.g. Cane 1987, of Western Desert peoples), but it contrasts with the imposed regularity and indeed regulation, purpose, and economic and social entailments of work.

In this context, it should be noted, there is no *Wik Mungkan* equivalent to the concept of 'work', and hunting is no more 'work' than are card games, although it may take more physical effort.[26] Both can be seen in Bird-David's terms as procurement, as opportunistically accessing resources that exist *a priori* rather than only after they have been 'produced'. What's more, as has been discussed previously, successful hunting for Wik people, like successful gambling, involves in part the individual's use of magical means to manipulate the

relevant environment; it also entails maximising opportunities and minimising effort. The demand sharing of which Peterson writes, through which one opportunistically seeks both tangible and intangible resources from others, is another aspect of this same foraging concept of economy.

The features of Peterson's Aboriginal 'moral economy', such as the nexus between personhood and relatedness established through sharing, and those of Bird-David's hunter-gatherer 'mode of subsistence' in which one forages for already existing resources in a flexible, opportunistic framework in which autonomy is maximised, are arguably amongst the factors underlying the extraordinary persistence of distinctive Aboriginal ways of life amongst people who can be many generations away from their hunter-gatherer forebears. I turn now to a brief examination of how Johns and Hughes would change these ways of life.

Market mechanisms: the modern Philosophers Stone?

I noted earlier that the alchemists invested much effort in the search for the Philosopher's Stone, which they thought would mystically enable them to achieve their goals, including that of transmutation. I also noted that, as modern science demonstrates, the alchemists were ignorant of the objective characteristics of the base metals they sought to transform. An equivalent ignorance of the nature of Aboriginal societies, including but not limited to their 'economic' values, is evinced by Hughes in particular but also by Johns.

Other commentators have noted Hughes' scant regard for the facts of the matters on which she writes in Aboriginal affairs,

and the highly polemical approach she takes (Hunter 2008; Rowse 2007). Hughes certainly demonstrates an alchemist's ignorance of the base state she wishes to transform:

> Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are frustrated because they cannot express themselves in English in speech or writing. They feel that life is slipping through their fingers because they do not have the job opportunities, incomes and living standards of other Australians. They resent their separation from the wider Australian community. They do not want to interact with other Australians and the rest of the world merely as 'cultural exhibits' in 'living museums', but also through mainstream work and recreation (Hughes and Warin 2005: 13).

Even a minimal reading of relevant literature, including but not limited to that from anthropologists, should have dissuaded Hughes from claiming that such views, motives and emotions are held in common amongst Australian Indigenous people. Johns has at least accessed some of the relevant anthropological and other work, but has taken a very reductionist and motivated reading of it. For instance, he states:

> Too frequently 'culture' has been used to veil or excuse bad behaviour. For example, it has been recognised for a long time that Aboriginal economies in remote areas operate by 'demand sharing' or 'humbugging' (that is, where kin demand the immediate use of whatever a person owns), rather than by individual accumulation of physical or financial capital (Martin 1995: 19). Yet there is no suggestion Aborigines should be

advised that this is why they are poor, or that this aspect of the culture must change. (Johns 2008: 68)

Let us examine the alchemic logic of this statement. 'Humbugging'—an Aboriginal English term which has now entered the everyday parlance of Aboriginal affairs bureaucrats—by Johns' account[27] is *the* fundamental principle by which Aboriginal economies operate, and (he infers) changing this bad behaviour will enable Aboriginal people to be transmuted from their current base state to a different, richer, one. Quasi-magic causality indeed, given that as the discussion of demand sharing in the previous section illustrates, and whatever its problematic or unintended consequences may be in an era of welfare dependency, it is not simply 'bad behaviour' but a practice deeply implicated in the nexus between personhood and relatedness. To change the practice must necessarily involve an inculcation of a profound reordering of social and psychological worlds which cannot rationally be addressed by people being 'advised' to change.

Johns is alert to the real dilemmas posed for the modernisation project by certain deeply embedded Aboriginal values and practices of ancient origin. In this respect he is arguably more honest than Cape York's Richard Ah Mat (2003) who in claiming that modernisation is in fact essential to cultural survival, elides the profound personal and cultural transformation that would necessarily be entailed. On the other hand, it is a theme to which a good number of anthropologists themselves as well as others have paid attention (e.g. Brunton

1993; Cowlishaw 1998; Elkin 1951; Folds 2001; Martin 1993, 1995, 2001; and Stanner 1979; as well as Sutton 2001, 2005). Sutton for example raises a range of issues that overlap directly with those of Johns, but based on a detailed and nuanced understanding of remote Aboriginal societies. Johns does not refer to Sutton's work, or that of many other relevant researchers. Consequently in the absence of any significant direct experience of Aboriginal societies he is as ignorant of the true nature of these societies as any alchemist was of the true nature of base metals.

Both Hughes and Johns would rely on market mechanisms as a primary driver to transform Aboriginal people's values. Their writings instance the morally reformative character of the discourse around market-based policy frameworks. In no small part, the justification for this new order is established by defining the current state of much of Aboriginal Australia in terms of its inherent dysfunctionality, thereby legitimating a focus on transforming Aboriginal communities and lives in particular directions. Johns for example pathologises not only Aboriginal culture as was discussed earlier, but also the totality of Aboriginal social life itself in remote Australia. He claims:

> The uncomfortable fact is that, having recognised for decades the impediment that Aboriginal culture poses to success, policy-makers nevertheless chose cultural observance over success. Such choices ensure that the 'cargo cult' … is alive and well. The consequence is that if people are maladapted to modern society they are, in fact, trapped in a culture of bad behaviour, a 'sick society' … that continues to reproduce its awful daily mores. (Johns 2007: 68)

Those who are not adapted to modern society, we may infer, are trapped in immoral cultures. Another particularly clear example of this moral cast is provided by Pearson (2000a, 2000b), with his influential call for the fundamental necessity of Aboriginal engagement with what he terms the 'real' economy, which is constructed in quintessentially *moral* rather than formal economic terms (Martin 2001). A real economy, Pearson tells us, involves a demand for both social and economic reciprocity. The traditional Aboriginal subsistence economy and the contemporary market one are in Pearson's view 'real' economies, entailing as they do both rights and responsibilities and are thus, we may surmise, 'moral' economies (although not in the sense in which Peterson has used the term as discussed previously).

Directly related to the previous point, the morally reformative nature of work itself is stressed; work is not just about production, or indeed about wages, but about making ones way in the world as an independent and self-sufficient actor. Through work, one thereby discharges one's obligations to society in general but in a manner abstracted from commitments to particular networks and communities and to particular locales (Martin 2001). Johns expresses this neatly:

> Land rights will only be useful for those few who can create a life on the land … Land rights, nevertheless, are legal and political reality, so the goal must be to make them work. The way to make them work is to stop treating Aborigines as exotica and regard them as being able to abide by the same civic obligations and respond to the same

economic incentives as anyone else. (Johns 2007: 1)

In Johns' and Hughes' work, reflecting a long historical propensity in Aboriginal affairs, there is a strong focus on the moral reformation of the individual, abstracted from his or her social and cultural nexus, as opposed to a preceding focus on Aboriginal groups and communities (Martin 2001). One illustration of this move can be seen in Hughes' and Johns' rejection of policies framed around self-determination and other such collective rights-based frameworks (which Hughes 2005 sees as evidencing imposed socialism) in place of those which emphasise human capital development and the responsibility of the individual to adapt and change (e.g. Hughes 2005; Johns 2007, 2008). This emphasis is consistent with the requirements of today's free market economies, based (at the ideological level if not in practice) on the essentially unrestricted flows of goods and services, including a mobile labour force with portable skills, willing and able to move to wherever the work is. The epitome of this of course is the fly-in fly-out mining operations in remote regions of Australia where Aboriginal people often comprise a substantial proportion of the population, but where with some notable exceptions in recent years (e.g. the Argyle diamond mine in the Kimberley, and the Century zinc mine in Queensland's Gulf country) they have had little involvement in mine site employment.

Finally, the use by Hughes and Johns of terms such as 'choice' and 'incentives' is drawn from and consistent with market-based policy frameworks. This work, and indeed much

Aboriginal policy especially that developed over the past decade, is predicated on the implicit assumption that Aboriginal people will naturally, given the opportunity, choose lifestyles and adopt associated values which correlate with economic integration, or that if they don't, a carrot and stick approach can be used to achieve this. This assumption is well illustrated in a quote from Helen Hughes, in a letter to the editor of *Quadrant Magazine*:

> We argued (Hughes and Warin 2005) that because there are no clear and simple individual property rights in land (including long-term, 99 year leases), there are no leafy Aboriginal suburbs and no successful land-based businesses. (Hughes 2005)

However, incentives by definition are not culture or value free. The incentives which presumably drive many Australians to work in the ways and to the extent that they do—pride in the inherent worth of what they are doing, material comfort, financial security and autonomy as individuals or family units, paying off the mortgage on the family home, supporting their children through education as a valued goal in itself and so forth—cannot be assumed to apply equally across cultures. In particular, it cannot be assumed that such inducements apply amongst at least a substantial proportion of Aboriginal people, including but not limited to those living in remote and perhaps more traditionally orientated communities (see e.g. Peterson 2005, Tonkinson 2007, and Trigger 2005).

My own experience and observation is that the possibility of living in a leafy suburb would of itself provide little if any inducement to change economic behaviour for many remote-

dwelling Aboriginal people. On the contrary, I have observed the case of a person from a remote community, for whom living for only a few months in just such an environment as Hughes extols led to deep psychological distress and what we would term psychosomatic illness. For many (although certainly not all) remote dwelling Aboriginal people, moving permanently away from kin and country is a very confronting notion, and potentially higher material wealth provides little incentive at all if it involves breaking these connections so intrinsic to establishing who one is. To be able to enable significant numbers of Aboriginal people to make such a move on a sustained and sustainable basis without simply changing the geographical location of social dysfunction will require more sophisticated policy levers than are provided by simplistic assumptions about choice and incentives.[28]

Concluding remarks

The foregoing should not be taken as an argument from an entrenched 'left' position against the necessity for change. There is in my view an unassailable case for the transformation of remote Aboriginal communities—maintenance of the status quo is indefensible (Martin 2001). But, both 'left' and 'right' have exhibited not a little of the alchemic tendencies of which I have accused Hughes and Johns. Where the right have wished to transmute Aboriginal society from the base nature of communalism and social dysfunction to the gold of autonomous economic actors, the left have proposed they be transmuted from the base state of dispossessed anomie to the gold of the encultured Aboriginal citizen. For the left, the Philosopher's Stone has been the

granting of rights under the rubric of self-determination, whereas for the right is has been the market. Both have their magical illusions.

Ultimately there is always the possibility that health, educational, income and other socioeconomic indicators for particular Aboriginal groups or communities may suggest continuing discrimination and exclusion by the dominant society, whereas in fact they may also in part also be the entailments of preferred lifestyles and ways of being in the world. A difficult philosophical, ethical and political question here is to what extent diversity can be accepted or even encouraged in a pluralist society, when it may be reflected in very significant disparities in socioeconomic status (Martin 2005). [29]

Nonetheless, Aboriginal policy debates typically avoid meaningful consideration of the demonstrable fact that many Aboriginal people, particularly but not only those living in remote regions, bring a distinctive repertoire of values, world views and practices to their engagement with the general Australian society. This avoidance poses a major impediment to the necessary processes of sustainable social, economic and cultural transformations in Aboriginal societies——and indeed to the necessary changes in the mechanisms through which government promotes and supports such transformations. For, unless Aboriginal people themselves are actively involved in and ultimately committed to such changes, history shows us that they will be resisted. An Aboriginal affairs policy framework as proposed by Hughes and Johns will end, like the endeavours of the missionaries at Jigalong in

the far Western Desert (Tonkinson 1974), as another failed crusade, but this time conducted by the alchemists of the market economy, and with consequences on a far greater scale.

Notes

1. Helen Hughes, Executive Highlights No. 470, *Lands of Shame: The deprivation of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders*, Centre for Independent Studies, Melbourne, available at http://www.cis.org.au
2. www.cis.org.au/aboutcis/aboutcis.html, accessed June 2, 2008.
3. www.bennelong.com.au/aims.php, accessed June 2, 2008.
4. In rendering words in *Wik Mungkan*, I have used the practical orthography adopted by Kilham et al (1986), with some amendments (see Sutton, Martin et al 1990);

Consonants
p   close to English p
th   a stopped consonant like t, with the tongue touching the upper teeth
t   close to English t
ch   close to English ch
k   close to English k
'   glottal stop
m   close to English m
n   close to English n
ng   close to English ng in 'singer'
nh   a nasal like n, with the tongue touching the upper teeth
ny   close to English ny in 'canyon'
l   close to English l
r   close to Australian English r, with tip of tongue curled back
rr   a flapped or trilled r, like that in Scots English
y   close to English y
w   close to English w

Vowels
a   like the /u/ in English 'but'
aa   long /a/ as in English 'father'

e   like the /e/ in English 'pet'
ee   long /e/ like the vowel in English 'care'
i   like the /i/ in English 'bit'
ii   long /i/, like the vowel in English 'beet'
o   like the /o/ in English 'pot'
oo   long /o/, like the vowel in English 'poor'
u   like the /u/ in English 'put'
uu   long /u/ like the vowel in English 'do'

5. Where coastal Wik had regional cults such as *Apalach*, *Puch*, and *Wanam* superimposed over localized ones, inland Wik peoples (Ursula McConnel's 1930a, 1930b, 1934 'Wik Munkan') had th e localized totemic cults only.
6. The common name for this highly venomous snake was in fact taken into English by Donald Thomson from Cape York languages, where it was called by this term over a wide region.
7. The *ngangk*, loosely the heart area, was seen as the seat of strong emotions—anger, passion, sadness, greed and so on. *Chaapar* or blood was associated with the viability of life. The sorcerer can cause the sickness and eventual death of his victim by stealing his or her blood and performing certain actions on it.
8. *Ach-kum* was a type of sorcerer who blinded his victims with nails, marbles or similar objects. That is, while initiations gave access to power, infringements of proscriptions attracted severe sanctions, including those of sorcery.
9. *Ngeenwiy* was one of many avoidance terms used of things or matters of ritual danger. Etymologically, it is drawn from *ngeen* (what) and *wiy* (some or other).
10. *Wachaman* was an avoidance term used for ritually dangerous or problematic objects or states which can not be directly talked about; in this context it thus meant fat.
11. In at least certain parts of the Wik region (e.g. *Wik liyany* speaking people from the upper Kendall River), the complex of restrictions on the widow of a deceased man included her having to sit under the platform on which the corpse, bound in bark, lay (see also McConnel 1937). Such phenomena have been discussed by Bloch and Parry (1982), who have noted a common theme in many societies of the ideological assimilation of women to death and pollution, denying as it were their fecundity and role in reproduction.
12. The spear thrower *thul* stands as a fundamental symbol of masculinity and of male prowess and potency. It also stands as a euphemism for the penis.
13. Michael Hindmarsh, pers. comm. to Peter Sutton, 2007.
14. But also suggestively, the army instilled not autogenous modes of thought and practices, but those of the dominant society, another instance of Wik being consumers of symbolic forms produced outside their society.
15. In contemporary times, as in the past, having a large number of children is objective demonstration of a woman's potency. Masculine sexual potency however is not similarly singled out in terms of having fathered many children, but rather in terms of sexual performance itself. Put another way, where female reproductive potency relates to fecundity, that of men traditionally related to the ritual domain, particularly the reproduction of men from boys through initiations. This pathway to male power has been lost with the cessation of initiations.
16. Free English transcription of informant speaking in *Wik Mungkan*, Fieldbook 11:181-3
17. Rendition of *Wik Mungkan*/English statement, Tape DM-29A.
18. *Purriy-purriy* was almost certainly a loan word from the Torres Straits. While there is an extensive *Wik Mungkan* lexicon dealing with various aspects of the practice of sorcery, I am not aware of any which could be directly translated as 'sorcery' as such.
19. Pearson (2002) argues that sorcery has 'revived' as social problems have worsened, and sees it in particular as providing a mechanism for 'denial' of the real cause of problems in illness and deaths arising from substance abuse.
20. Translation of *Wik Mungkan*, Tape DM-29.
21. McKnight (1982:497) states that not all deaths are attributed to sorcery, and that Wik recognised deaths could be accidental or from 'natural causes' such as age. This does not accord with what I was told and observed. Even when old and frail people die, one cannot assume that sorcery will not be mooted as a cause. The determining factor is rather the social and political importance of the individual and of their patrikin. The

deaths of socially peripheral aged people from politically marginal clans are less likely to result in at least public accusations of sorcery than those of equally aged people from powerful clans.

22. Indeed, having tentatively established the title for this article, I came across one by Goldman and Morrissey (1985) that used the term alchemy for a similar purpose. Entitled 'The alchemy of mental health policy: Homelessness and the fourth cycle of reform', it argued that "[community support activists] must resist the temptation of the alchemy of past reforms for fear of turning the base metals of social welfare into the fool's gold of overly optimistic mental health policy."

23. for many from the late 1960s but for others such as New South Wales Aboriginal shearers much earlier.

24. Sutton (pers. comm. 2008) similarly observed that 'production' is what foraging looks like from a Marxian point of view. Hunting, gathering and well-digging are not so much production as the culling of what has already been 'produced'.

25. Bird-David sees the terms 'opportunism' and 'foraging' as having negative and judgmental connotations (1992: 38). I am not convinced by the arguments. Collins English Dictionary defines opportunist as "a person who adapts his actions, responses, etc., to take advantage of opportunities, circumstances, etc." This seems entirely consistent with Bird-David's use of her preferred term 'procurement'.

26. Peter Sutton (pers. comm. 2008). He observes tha t there is no translation of the term 'work' in any Aboriginal language known to him. Nic Peterson (pers. comm. 2008) advises that there is a term used by Yolngu for 'work', *djama*, but it is a Macassan loan word. I am indebted to Peter Sutton for drawing my attention to the importance of foraging as an economic practice *and* an ethos which operates across different domains such as hunting, gambling, and demand sharing, a linkage not fully explored in an earlier draft of this article. It was this observation which ultimately led me to Bird-David's article.

27. not Martin's (1995), which Johns misrepresents in order to justify his assertions.

28. Taylor (2006: 63-4) argues that Indigenous people are over-represented in the poorest city neighbourhoods and that this pattern appears to have been very stable over time despite substantial growth in the Indigenous population in major urban centres. Indigenous people continue to display the worst economic outcomes within the poorest urban neighbourhoods, have comprised a progressively rising share of total population in the lowest status neighbourhoods and a falling share in middle-ranked neighbourhoods, and thus despite a substantial increase in the Indigenous population in major cities, there has been no aggregate social mobility with disadvantage by location seemingly entrenched.

29. This is in no way to ignore the failure of governments to resource the social and other infrastructure necessary to address Aboriginal disadvantage. Taylor and Stanley (2005) in a major case study of the Thamarrurr (Wadeye) region of the Northern Territory for example, demonstrate the substantial underinvestment by governments in such areas as education and employment creation, but higher than average spending in areas such as criminal justice and unemployment benefits. As the authors note, "this begs a very important question as to whether this situation serves to perpetuate the very socioeconomic conditions observed at Thamarrurr in the first place" (Taylor & Stanley 2005: vii).

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