An exploration of the cultural and geographical landscapes of Indigenous organisations in Australia

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Abstract

Indigenous organisations are significant places of recognition and self-determination for Indigenous groups across Australia. These organisations occupy a unique intercultural position, operating across both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sectors, and thus face a high level of contestation and multiple challenges. However, this unique position also provides potentially powerful spaces for reconciliation and co-existence. This review explores literature rooted in postcolonial geography regarding the spaces of Indigenous organisations and the challenges they face including the dominant presence of Eurocentrism and deep colonisation. In responding to these challenges, the review considers alternative approaches to Indigenous governance and its institutions.

Key words: Indigenous, intercultural, postcolonial, self-determination, governance, Indigenous organisations

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Introduction

Indigenous organisations across Australia are important sites of communication, recognition and self-determination. These organisations create significant intercultural spaces that interact with both mainstream Australian society and politics and the various Aboriginal societies and politics they represent. Given the unique position of such organisations, they face a distinctive set of challenges and limitations. Beyond this, however, the spaces in which these organisations operate are potentially significant spaces for genuine reconciliation and coexistence.

There has been much scholarship around Indigenous governance in Australia over the past few decades, some of which will be drawn upon in this review. It is not, however, the technical aspects of Indigenous governance that this review is interested in. Rather, it is concerned with cultural and geographical landscapes of Indigenous organisations and the processes through which they can most effectively manage their unique position. There is less research in this particular area and the majority of it has been carried out in relation to land or environmental management based organisations such as Gibson’s (1999) work with native title agreements in the Katherine region and the research done by Suchet (2002) and Muller (2008) around environmental management.

This literature review begins with a brief discussion of key issues as a background to the subject area including an explanation of the theoretical roots anchoring much of the literature, an overview of the political and governance background and a consideration
of the term ‘self-determination’. The review then considers the body of literature concerned with the particular intercultural position of Indigenous organisations and the challenges they face including deep colonisation (Rose 1999) and the impacts of the dominant Eurocentric ontology (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006). Following this the review explores alternative approaches and theoretical frameworks ending with some case studies that illustrate their manifestation.

Background
This review, whilst broad, is underpinned primarily by the theoretical framework of postcolonialism and in particular, postcolonial geography. Postcolonial geography, a relatively recent approach, considers the initial and continuing impacts of colonialism on contemporary societies (Ashcroft et al 1995). There is a swathe of diverse literature on this subject encompassing a broad range of opinions, methods and theories (Blunt and Wills 2000). There are, however, some central premises that remain consistent. Broadly, postcolonial geographies are “committed to critique, expose, deconstruct, counter and (in some claims) to transcend the cultural and broader ideological legacies and presences of imperialism” (Sidaway 2002 p. 13). More specifically, one of the foundational elements of postcolonialism was established by Edward Said (1978) in his work on ‘the Orient’. His exploration critiqued the discourses that produced ‘the Orient’ rendering the Western coloniser ‘self’ as superior to the necessary, but inferior, colonised peoples, a discourse that built and justified European colonialism (Jacobs, 1996).

Further, the discipline is concerned with making heard the marginalised voices of colonialism that remain unheard (Sidaway 2002). Spivak (1988, p. 25) first interrogated this idea, asking “can the subaltern speak?” She argues that the subaltern class cannot ever truly voice their political opinions as the language, and the conceptual frameworks within which they are bound to speak, are all of the hegemonic coloniser. Derrida (1998) rearticulates this process as the first ‘trick’ of the coloniser but adds that the second is in the coloniser instilling in the colonised the fantasy of freedom through a reappropriation of language. He emphasises that appropriation of language is always impossible and thus the process further entrenches the ‘inferior’ position of the colonised. As a response to the greater examination and understanding of these processes, decolonising geographies have come to be of crucial importance in postcolonial studies. These approaches actively seek to engage in decolonising practices. In the Australian example this demands a strong dialogue with Indigenous geographies so that ontological and epistemological barriers can be removed (Esteva 1987, Howitt, Suchet-Pearson and Muller 2009, Shaw, Herman and Dobbs 2006). It is in this theoretical field that much of the literature of this review has its roots.

Another overarching theme of this review is that of governance. Governance, and in particular Indigenous Governance, is a broad area and has been the focus of much academic research, particularly by institutions such as the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR). In conceptualising ‘governance’, Hunt et al (2008, p. 9) in a recent CAEPR research monograph define it as “the evolving processes, relationships, institutions and structures by which a group of people, community or society organise themselves collectively to achieve the things that matter to them”. Importantly this definition supports the idea that people, power and relationships are as equally important aspects of governance as the physical structures
and technicalities. This understanding of governance informs the lens through which the literature in this review is understood.

The background and history to governance policy in the context of Indigenous Australia is one of continual change and complexity. The emergence of a significant Indigenous organisational sector occurred between the 1970s and the 1990s where policies were being created that, after a long period of assimilation-based governance, were better geared towards the notion of ‘self-determination’ (Hunt et al. 2008). This sector ranged from the national level representational body of ATSIC (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) to local councils, to a plethora of organisations concerned with various social and political issues. The election of the Howard government in 1996, however, saw a movement away from these policies, which the federal government argued were not addressing the levels of social disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians (O’Malley 1996). Policies shifted to an approach of ‘shared responsibility’ where the government dealt directly with Indigenous communities around SRAs (Shared Responsibility Agreements). These agreements not only sidestepped many already existing and competent organisations but also reintroduced colonial donor/recipient dynamics and unearthed discourses around welfare dependence (Lawrence and Gibson 2007). Amongst the increasingly dominant discourse regarding the ‘failure’ of self-determination the Howard government developed strategies with the objective of removing barriers to economic opportunity and giving Indigenous Australians access to services on the same bases as other Australians. In the words of Mal Brough, at the time Minister for Indigenous Affairs, “culture should not ‘stand in the way of progress’” (Hunt et al. 2008). It is in the midst of this intense policy climate that local and regional level organisations find themselves facing both old and new difficulties.

Despite the official policy movement away from self-determination, it is still a significant concept in the literature surrounding this discussion and deserves some exploration. In Australia, the exact meaning of self-determination is debated and there is no single definition (Gibson 1999). Despite this, however, it is generally understood that the term refers to the right of Indigenous peoples to autonomously make decisions on issues related to them and to deal with their own affairs (Roberts 1994). As to how this occurs, there is little agreement and, as noted above, policies created around advocating for ‘self-determination’ have rarely achieved this. Moreton-Robinson (2007) suggests that the dominant policy framework since the 1960s has rather been that of ‘self-management’. Despite attempts throughout the literature to singularly define self-determination, Gibson (1999) argues that its articulation and manifestation should be based on “multivalent” and diverse interpretations of identity, culture and sovereignty. This acknowledges that the meaning of self-determination is not concrete and fixed but rather fluid and changing depending on the particular context. Gibson argues this understanding is contrary to that upon which policy decisions are based. At an international scale, Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) offers an official definition that “Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”. In 2007, when the declaration was first voted on, Australia voted against it, self-determination being one of the problematic issues. The government has since acknowledged formal support of the document but questions still exist as to its real impact on the channels for self-determination of Indigenous Australians (AHRC). The
continuing debate around self-determination reflects its significance in contemporary Australian Indigenous affairs, including the organisational sector.

Regional Level Organisations: Intercultural Spaces
Indigenous organisations act as important intercultural spaces in the context of contemporary Australia. A large number of Indigenous organisations sprang up during the 1970s to 1990s on the understanding that local Indigenous organisations were in the best position to address Indigenous needs. Much support was provided at the time and the subsequent array of organisations that developed demonstrated the preference of Indigenous people for a very local level of representation (Hunt et al 2008). More recently, many authors still describe Indigenous organisations as significant points of contact between mainstream Australia and Indigenous politics and social systems (Martin 2003, Ivanitz 1999, Martin and Finlayson 1996, Hunt et al 2008). Martin (2003, p. 1) asserts that “as intercultural phenomena Indigenous organisations form important sites around which Indigenous people’s values and practices are brought to bear, but where these values and practices are also contested, adapted and transformed”. As a result of existing within such an intercultural space, Martin and Finlayson (1996) argue that the organisations find themselves straddling both social systems and having to maintain authenticity in both. This requires a high level of accountability both to the Indigenous communities and their leaders and also to the government and other funding bodies (Ivanitz 1999). The systems of accountability and requirements for each are often vastly different to the point that the heavy compliance structures of Western donor funding often weakens processes of actual self-determination (Muller 2008). It is across this diverse landscape of accountabilities that Indigenous organisations work to find a balance.

Over the past two decades there has been significant research done on Indigenous governance and the challenges it has faced in the ever-changing political environment. One considerable challenge that emerges from the literature is that of deep colonisation. Deborah Bird Rose (1999) coined the term ‘deep colonising’ to explain the contemporary situation where colonising practices are embedded in institutions and institutional policies whose purposes are ostensibly decolonisation, that is, supposedly reversing the processes of colonisation. She argues that the embedded nature of these practices can “conceal, naturalise or marginalise continuing colonising practices” (p. 182). Hollinsworth (1996) explored the nature of this struggle before the term ‘deep colonising’ was made popular in his article posing the question, “Community development in indigenous Australia: self-determination or indirect rule?” He argued that with the incorporation of Indigenous communities “under the mantle of self-determination”, including their politics and organisations, into mainstream institutions has come increased supervision from the state, rather than increased capacity for self-determination (p. 118). O’Malley (1996, p. 322) expresses a similar argument when stating that the incorporation of Indigenous ‘governances’ into mainstream Government processes can involve “their translation into the domain of the subjugators, weakening or severing their nexus with the indigenous domain”. More recently, Hunt et al (2008, p. 41) described Indigenous organisations as being at the “frontline” of the tensions produced by the struggle to be self-determining and fulfil local Indigenous aspirations whilst simultaneously having to comply with increasingly mainstream funding conditions. As these authors articulate, Indigenous organisations in Australia represent sites of deep colonisation that add layers of complexity to their roles in the communities they serve.
In exploring the manner in which processes of deep colonisation take place, the concept of a Eurocentric ontology is central to understanding contemporary Australia. This concept has been well discussed in the literature and continues to be acutely pertinent to discussions of this nature (Suchet 2002). In the same vein, Rose (1999) uses the term a ‘hall of mirrors’ to describe the manner in which the self is not able to see past its own worldview. In Rose’s terms, “The self sets itself within a hall of mirrors; it mistakes its reflection for the world, sees its own reflections endlessly, talks endlessly to itself, and, not surprisingly, finds continual verification of itself and its worldview. This is monologue masquerading as conversation, masturbation posing as productive interaction; it is a narcissism so profound that it purports to provide a universal knowledge when in fact its violent erasures are universalising its own singular and powerful isolation. It promotes a nihilism that stifles the knowledge of connection, disabling dialogue, and maiming the possibilities whereby ‘self’ might be captured by ‘other’” (p. 177).

This powerful quote illustrates an overarching characteristic of Western thought that is embedded in Australian social, political and cultural institutions. Suchet (2002) uses the metaphor to explore environmental management and Eurocentric notions of nature in Australia. She investigates the dichotomous Eurocentric understanding of nature where man is completely separate from and superior to ‘the wilds’, the natural world. This definitive singularity stands in stark contrast to the multiple knowledges represented by Australian Indigenous groups. Suchet goes on to discuss the manner in which Eurocentric understandings of nature subsequently inform resource management, deeply embedding colonial practices in environmental institutions throughout Australia. This example demonstrates the way that Eurocentric ontology has come to be the dominant discourse across Australian social and political systems, including Indigenous organisations.

This discussion around management is approached from a slightly different angle, in the work of Merlan (1998). From her work with Aboriginal communities in and around Katherine, Merlan describes an imitative, or ‘mimetic’, process. She explains the shift from assimilation policy to policies more favourable toward self-determination as a process that, “seeks to elicit from Aboriginal people what are taken to exist as their own modes of organisation and to recast the management of Aboriginal affairs in what are seen to be indigenous terms” (p. 150). This conceptualisation challenges the troublesome assumption that Indigenous cultural reproduction, including processes of management, happens autonomously to that of mainstream Australian society (Martin 2003). The mimetic character of Indigenous organisations as ‘intercultural’ spaces, Merlan (1998) argues, is part of the broader tendency of the West to reduce everything to what is familiar and known and ultimately manageable. Whilst this conceptualisation of management in Indigenous organisations is approached somewhat differently, themes of dominant Eurocentric ontology and deep colonisation are still significantly resounding concerns.

**Alternative Approaches**

Also well discussed in the literature are alternative ways of approaching the intercultural spaces of Indigenous organisations. Howitt and Suchet-Pearson (2006, p. 323) discuss at length the manner in which the recognition of ontological pluralism disturbs the entrenched Eurocentric narrative and argue that the “conceptual building
blocks” constructing the Australian imagination must be rethought. Taking the case of environmental management the authors purport that “in seeking to decolonise the realities and imaginaries in which indigenous peoples are implicated, conceptual building blocks need to be … reconceptualised, indigenised and interrogated continually for deeply colonising effects” (p. 328). Planning, institutional strengthening and capacity building are examples of basic structural assumptions that need to be challenged and their ontological biases broken down in order for true diversity to be embraced (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006). Esteva (2010) echoes this idea in what he terms radical pluralism, which argues that cultural diversity is essential to harmony amongst peoples and groups and that every worldview is subject to its cultural context.

Both Esteva (2010) and Howitt and Suchet-Pearson (2006) emphasise the importance of not aiming to trade one version of universalism for another and of acknowledging cultural relativity rather than accepting cultural relativism. In moving to understand these concepts through a sustainable development lens Jacobs and Mulvihill (1995) discuss the idea of ‘viable interdependence’ as a unifying theme over the various issues challenging cross-cultural development. The authors assert that viable interdependence is both a prerequisite for sustainable development and a manifestation of it. A truly viably interdependent situation would enable “self-reliant societies [to] maintain political, economic and cultural links with other societies in ways that do not compromise the sustainability of either” (p. 9). Theories of ontological and radical pluralism, theoretical frameworks that could create viable interdependence in the Australian context, have serious implications for development and research (Howitt, Muller and Suchet-Pearson 2009). There needs to be a radical transformation that moves beyond the mere insertion of Indigenous goals into our institutionalised practices and instead faces the challenges of embracing multiple ways of knowing.

Some authors have explored approaches to facing the challenges presented in breaking down the universalised borders of Eurocentric discourse. To enter into such a process is to open up a new space of engagement, which has been referred to, from slightly differing aspects, by various authors (Bhaba 1990, Howitt 2001). Bhaba (1990, p. 211) describes it as a ‘third space’ that “displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives”, whilst Howitt (2001, p. 240) likens the space to a tidal zone, a zone of “interaction … transformation, transgression and possibility”. Situated engagement as described by Suchet (2002) suggests that in opening up these spaces, intersubjective interactions must be contextualised in the recognition of their positions and the various subjectivities implicated. From these situated places, not only can the Eurocentric ontological ‘mirrors’ be removed but new possibilities can be imagined and new knowledges co-constructed, a process Suchet (2002, p. 153) illustrates as the former mirrors being transformed into open windows.

To consider, more specifically, how this process unfolds in an organisational context, Jacobs and Mulvihill (1995) present aspects of new, adaptive institutions, such as their organic nature. The visioning and planning that takes place in such organisations must occur outside the bounds of predetermined goals. Rather, the process must “move from need to need, from opportunity to opportunity in a series of adaptations that themselves become increasingly coherent and purposeful, so that they generate a complex, final design, hardly less unified than a pre-formed geometric pattern” (p. 14). In this way, echoing Suchet (2002), without the mirrors that create preconceived goals, knowledges, new possibilities and indeed institutions can be co-constructed through the open
windows of a radically plural space. In his essay around grassroots movements in Mexico, Esteva (1987) further illustrates this idea of new institutions using the metaphor of a hammock. The hammock encapsulates ideas of horizontality, flexibility, transportability and primarily the hammock adopts the shape of its multiple users (p. 129). Whilst this representation certainly has its merits, one of its defining factors is that it functions as an overarching movement for various organisations and individuals rather than as an organisation. Further research and discussion could shed light on its applicability to individual organisations.

**Case Studies**

There are also examples in the literature of cases where Indigenous groups and organisations, through transformative processes, have been able to move beyond dominant Eurocentric discourses. Muller (2008) presents the example of the Yolngu traditional owners from northeast Arnhem Land who have developed a plan to gain management rights over their sea country which has previously been considered, as per Western ontology, as separate from land and thus under the jurisdiction of the State. The plan, whilst taking a format accessible to key stakeholders and the government, is reimagined around Yolngu ideals and Yolngu concepts of space and time (Muller 2008). Muller reflects on this as an example of post-development wherein, as described by Gibson-Graham (2005, p. 6), the challenge is not “to give up on development … [but] to imagine and practice development differently”.

Gibson (1999) presents the case study of the Jawoyn people from the Katherine region in the Northern Territory. The group renegotiated the terms of the Mt Todd mining agreement in such a way that their prior and continuing sovereignty over the land was recognised and subsequently moved beyond the non-indigenous parameters of self-determination. Gibson explains this further: “Rather than considering the issue of mining on traditional lands as a matter of ownership of title (in a western legal sense), a recognition of native title rights enabled the Jawoyn to negotiate to some extent as Indigenous ‘sovereign guardians’ over their country” (p. 16). These two case studies illustrate transformative processes away from completely Eurocentric ontological frameworks to truly intercultural approaches. There is further scope to thoroughly explore Australian Indigenous organisations and groups in this position, to consider their particular successes and challenges, to consider perhaps the ‘hall of mirrors’ they may be working within and to understand the strategies with which such groups manage their unique position.

**Conclusion**

Indigenous organisations represent intercultural spaces straddling different political, social and cultural worlds. Considering this unique space, these organisations have the potential to be at the forefront of genuine reconciliation and co-existence. In this vein, this review has explored the literature around Indigenous organisations looking in particular at the challenges they face and the processes through which alternative realities can be realised.

The review first explored the nature of the position of Indigenous organisations and some of its challenges. In particular, work of Rose (1999) and Suchet (2002) was drawn upon to examine the manner in which deep colonisation and dominant Eurocentric ontology present major challenges to the sovereignty of Indigenous organisations. Alternative approaches were then explored looking primarily at ideas of ontological
pluralism (Howitt and Suchet-Pearson 2006), situated engagement (Suchet 2002) and ideas around ‘new institutions’ (Esteva 1987, Jacobs and Mulvihill 1996). Whilst this area of the literature is relatively robust, it is weaker in its application of these ideas to case studies. Further research could be done in this area. Additionally, the majority of the research is concerned with environmental and resource management based organisations. In order to diversify and strengthen the literature in this field, research could incorporate a wider sample of organisations including, for example, organisations related to culture and cultural conservation.

The scope of this review does not allow for an exhaustive analysis of the entire body of literature in this field. It has, however, examined the central themes of the conversation around Indigenous organisations in Australia. This conversation is a highly significant one within the debate around self-determination and autonomy for Indigenous Australians, and is a conversation that must be ongoing, rooted in the practical recognition of multiple understandings of reality.

References


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