RACE OR RACE? THE DARWIN BEER CAN REGATTA AS A STATEMENT OF RACIAL SUPERIORITY.

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Introduction[1]

When I first arrived in Darwin in 1969, the town still had the atmosphere of a frontier city. Hotels catered for the Aboriginal patrons of spacious bars and beer gardens like the Bamboo Lounge of the Don Hotel or under the stars at the suburban Seabreeze Hotel. Single white men bought drinks for Aboriginal women and fights were a regular event amongst the heavy-drinking crowds. At the courthouse each week barefooted Aboriginal men and women were called forward to receive nominal fines for public drunkenness (see *Bunji* November 1972; Sansom 1980:46; Day 1994:22). Down 'the track', the Stuart Highway was lined with beer cans that glinted in the headlights. To the east, on the edge of the dry Arnhem Land Reserve, the notorious 'beer can mountain' continued to rise beside the thirsty Aboriginal customers of the licensed Border Store.

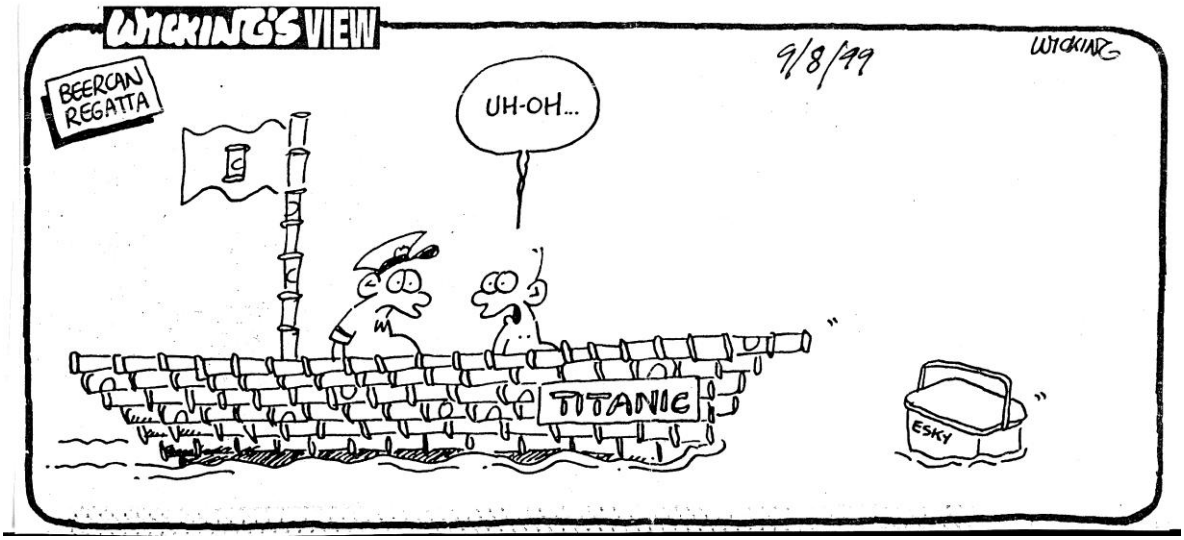
In 1964 the passing of the NT Social Welfare Ordinance had given all Aboriginal people in towns the right to consume alcohol – a right which had been denied to 'full blood' Aborigines as 'wards of the State.' Remembering the long campaign for citizenship, Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory and elsewhere equated the right to drink with 'citizenship rights' (Albrecht 1974:5; Bain 1974:43; Sansom 1977:59, 1980:49; Saggers and Gray 1998:50; Cowlishaw 1999:22).[2] In camps around Northern Territory towns, Aboriginal fringe dwellers viewed themselves as 'the true inheritors of the new era' (Sansom 1980:50).

By the 1970s, non-Aboriginal Northern Territory drinkers were increasingly confronted by the contradiction of deploring uncontrolled Aboriginal drinking while glorifying their frontier tradition of drinking to excess. In the past the Australian bush worker and Aborigines had a symbiotic and at times exploitative relationship at outback drinking locales where 'work and bust' was the rule (see Sansom 1980:180). While the frontier population was predominantly

[1] This article is an edited extract from **'**Alcohol, resistance and race in Darwin: fringe dwellers and the Beer Can Regatta', a chapter of my PhD thesis: *Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin: Cultural persistence or a culture of resistance?* The University of Western Australia, 2001.

[2] Rowley (1972b:263) comments that in the early sixties more attention had been paid to the right to drink than to the right to an equal wage. Voting rights were granted in 1962 (see Wright 1985:16; Chesterman and Galligan 1997:162). The 1967 referendum removed special provisions from the Australian Constitution that excluded Aboriginal people from the census and prohibited the Commonwealth Government from making laws for Aboriginal people. However, the vote was more generally seen as being for full citizenship rights for Australian Aborigines (see Bandler 1989; Attwood and Markus 1998).

Asian and European single men living amongst the racially-mixed populace the Ted Egan song remained popular praising 'bloody good drinkers in the Northern Territory, from Darwin down to Alice Springs they're always on a spree.' During the rebuilding of the cyclone-ravaged city of Darwin in 1975, the casual 'thongs bars' frequented by single White men and Aboriginal drinkers experienced a revival (Sansom 1980:179). However, as Darwin became more settled, the informal bars were gradually converted to a more stylish air-conditioned and controlled environment with strict dress codes.



Above: *The NT News* cartoonist's 1999 subtle portrayal of the conflict between symbols of heavy drinking and purposeful drinking at the Beer Can Regatta.

As dress regulations, rising prices and a shift from frontier drinking in Darwin bars increasingly made Aboriginal men and women feel unwelcome in hotels, they moved out into the parks and found drinking partners amongst visiting kin. In addition, 'many indigenous Australians prefer open, public drinking environments' (Saggers and Gray 1998:63). Drinking styles became increasingly different and drinkers became increasingly segregated because the more racially exclusive gatherings are less secure than supervised bars for Whites.[3] Wild frontier drinking was also increasingly seen in settled Darwin as 'antisocial'; however, drinking beer remains an integral part of the image of a particularly North Australian way of life, as I suggest in the following case study of the Beer Can Regatta festival.

The decriminalisation of drunkenness

In 1974, the year of the first Darwin Beer Can Regatta, drunkenness was decriminalised in the NT, shortening the weekly parade of Aborigines before the courts. The repeal of Section 56 of

[3] Sansom (1980:58) claims outside drinking is more dangerous for fringe dwellers. However, Saggers and Gray (1998:62) maintain that research shows licensed premises to be the most 'risky' in terms of alcohol-related harm. Mandelbaum (1965:284), comments that in complex societies taverns perform the role of kinship networks, although, as places where anonymous people gather, they can be dangerous.

the *Police and Police Offences Ordinance 1923* and the subsequent amendment allowed NT police to take drunks into custody for up to six hours without laying charges. However, the removal of drunken or homeless Aborigines from parks and contested spaces around Darwin continued apace. The 106 per cent increase in persons taken into custody for being drunk between 1974 and 1982 suggest the changes were 'decriminalisation in name only' (Donald 1984:25).

According to Warren Donald (1984:24): 'The increase [in numbers of those taken into custody for drunkenness] immediately after decriminalisation [from 8606 in 1974, to 17,766 in 1979] could be explained by the peculiar social conditions present in the Northern Territory in the reconstruction period following cyclone "Tracy"'. However, Donald gives no figures for 1975-7, the years of Sansom's fieldwork. Figures dropped and then rose in later years from 12,736 in 1980, 13,969 in 1981 to 16,217 in 1982 (Donald 1984:23).

Although they were not charged, the numbers of intoxicated Aboriginal people who were taken into custody under the amended ordinance by police in the years following decriminalisation suggest a much higher level of state intervention into fringe camp drinking than is indicated in the table reproduced by Sansom (1980:47), showing that 179 Aborigines were charged in the Darwin magistrate's court in 1976, with 79.4 per cent of the charges alcohol-related.[4] Sansom has cited only the more serious offences, while the figures given by Donald reflect a greater police surveillance of Aboriginal lives. Donald's statistics raise doubts about the reality of a 'free grogging community' on the Darwin fringe described by Sansom (1977:60, 1980:51) which 'established an independence from direct white interventions' (Sansom 1980:51) and an 'absence of alien and externally imposed ideologies and instruments of social control' (Sansom 1977:59).

The police discretionary powers to take drunks into custody could easily be misused without the protection against wrongful arrest that the courts offered to Aborigines and others (Donald 1984:25). Donald (p.40) believes the NT increase was a result of the failure to allocate specific resources until 1983 and the allocation of an unrewarded and unpleasant duty to police officers.[5] In contrast, in the USA decriminalisation produces a decline in drunks processed by the law (p.37). Although Donald (p.50) argues against accusations that a racial bias accounts for Aboriginal people comprising over sixty per cent of those taken into custody

[4] Statistics submitted by Australian Legal Aid Services to the Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs (see NT Hansard, 3 July 1976, pp. 871-2).
[5] Donald (1984) notes that in 1983 a sobering-up centre opened in Darwin to complement an amendment passed that year making intoxication sufficient reason to be taken into custody. However, police retained the duty of picking up and transporting drunks in Darwin.

in Darwin in 1982, it is possible that the police reflect the desire in 'settled' Australia to 'clean up' the city by removing Aboriginal drinkers from public places.

By 1974, in Alice Springs public drunkenness was seen as 'uncontained and dangerous' in contrast to the 'contained' private drinking of most Whites (Collmann 1988:47). To avoid reports of racial tensions, the problem was expressed as a parochial concern over maintenance of social order and not as strife between Aborigines and other town residents (p.47). Reports of racial disputes aroused the national media and threatened federal intervention into Territory affairs at a time when aspirations for self-government were growing (Collmann 1988:51).[6]

At the same time, the Territory sought a new image by removing the kilometres and mountains of cans and labelling the excluded Aboriginal drinkers as 'transients'. Marcia Langton (1993:197) writes of the colonial necessity of transforming the dangerous native into the 'pathetic mendicant "Abo"'. In addition, Langton (1993:205) believes anthropological notions of social pathology and cultural degeneration amongst Aborigines in towns have supported White society's view of the Aboriginal drinker 'living a fantasy of wanting to become like a white man, but unable to do so' (see also Langton 1981:18; Cowlishaw a:103). For non-Aboriginal drinkers in settled Darwin, acceptance of these concepts avoids an analysis of the process of dispossession taking place in the north, in a pattern resembling that that occurred earlier in the southern cities of settled Australia.

In Darwin, it would seem that homeless Aboriginal people become less threatening as 'transients' or 'itinerants'. These categories are often used as the equivalent the iconic 'drunken "Abo"', as described by Langton (1993). However, as Cowlishaw (1994:80) claims, the refusal of Aborigines in towns to be passive and silent 'stimulates the fears and feeds the paranoia' which many town residents feel towards the significant minority. The behaviour of public drinkers warrants increased local surveillance and intervention, without threatening the economy built around the sale of alcohol (see Drakakis-Smith 1981:41) or asking the question posed by Langton (1993:199): 'Who benefits from the sale of alcohol?'[7]

Aboriginal people who did not conform to the lifestyle of the majority in Darwin were increasingly excluded in the 1970s as the city became an enclave of settled Australia in the

[6] As I have illustrated, racial outbursts by public figures in the 1990s sometimes projected the issue of Aboriginal drinking in towns into the national media.

[7] During my fieldwork the police began charging liquor outlets that served alcohol to drunks (*NT News* June 13, 1997). A drive-in bottle shop raised the price of casks and explained the increase to me as 'High profit for high risk' (see letters page, *NT News* September 19, 1997; Brady 1998:103, citing *NT News* June 13, 1996).

remote north. Families began to 'put down their roots' and plan for a future in Darwin as the Territory population stabilised and the distant federal administration was being replaced by a settler-dominated legislature in preparation for self-government in 1978. Beyond the larger towns, the Territory remained typical of 'remote Australia' as described by Rowley (1972b:13), where Aboriginal people are a predominant percentage of the population. It was in these years of transition, in the early to mid-1970s, that the Beer Can Regatta began as a unique Darwin event that I interpret as a marker of the changing attitudes towards Aborigines and alcohol in the NT.

The Beer Can Regatta

The Beer Can Regatta was an instant success, gaining publicity for Darwin around the world and attracting large crowds. Team or individual entrants were required to construct various categories of vessels with used beer cans that were in abundance. In a good-natured spectacle, the finished boats and rafts competed in various classes and sizes on the calm dry-season waters of a popular Darwin ocean beach.

According to Mewett (1988:11),[8] beer cans removed from their usual setting as alcohol containers become symbols. He suggests that: 'The beercan as the dominant symbol of the Beercan Regatta does not imply that the Regatta is about beer or drinking. Rather the beercan is symbolic of certain axioms about the social order' (p.11). A festival's 'metamessage' is about affirmation of social values and social control (p.6). In Mewett's insightful analysis, the values are those of the working man's frontier masculinity. These values are supported by the Darwin elites because the frontier is the image that draws high rates of federal funding (p.3). However, perhaps because he did not do extended ethnographic fieldwork and lacked local knowledge, the conclusions drawn by Mewett overlook the racial divide that I suggest is symbolised by the beer can boats.

Mewett misses the significance of the regatta's origins in the Keep Australia Beautiful campaign to clear the NT landscape of beer cans. The construction of beer can vessels publicised the need to collect used cans, which in remote Australia were otherwise left to be hidden by the long grass or be swept away in monsoonal floods. As the 1996 program for the festival stated: 'In 1973 [a Darwin business man] came up with the ideal solution for the Keep

[8] Mewett, P 1988 'Darwin's Beer Can Regatta: masculinity, frontier and festival.' *Social Analysis*, 28:3-37.

Australia Beautiful Council who were looking for ways to dispose of the drink cans that littered the city'.[9]

Comments which I will cite by entrants, suggest that instead of producing litter to disfigure an increasingly settled environment, emptying the cans becomes a useful occupation when the empty cans are subsequently bound together as boats for competition in the regatta. Similarly, I suggest that drinking becomes purposeful, constructive and family-orientated rather than an antisocial activity of the single frontier male who was often in the company of Aborigines, more particularly Aboriginal women (see Cowlishaw 1988:95; Rose 1991:179-188)

The cans are glued, bound and contained into imaginative and colourful floating shapes. The vessels made from cans compete in organised races around a set course and at set times, guided and propelled by crew. In the speedboat section the aqua-dynamic craft use outboard motors to skim around the course at high speeds (Illustration 4). In my view, the symbolism is predominantly one of the controlled uses of beer cans, in contrast to discarded cans that are evidence of uncontrolled frontier drinking.

The association between clearing litter and controlling Aboriginal drinkers is still made in Darwin. In 1996, under a heading, 'The dirty drunks of Darwin', the founder of Clean up Australia Day, Ian Kiernan, was reported as saying that drunks are often to blame for litter in Darwin (*NT News* February 9, 1996).[10] The launch of the clean up also signalled the beginning of a campaign against 'itinerants' by the mayor who said: 'I'm saying that there is a problem, we have to admit there is a problem, and if that makes me a racist or a red-necked bigot, that's exactly what I am' (*NT News* February 10, 1996; see Illustration 2..1).

In his class analysis, Mewett (1988:4) describes the demography of Darwin in the 1980s, where public servants accounted for 46 per cent of all employed people. Mewett claims that the regatta is a 'festival of the working man' and that many of the middle-class shun the vulgarity of the events (p.5). However, 'elaboration of the ideology of frontier' in the festival is supported by Darwin elites because it presents the Territory as unique within Australia, which helps attract the federal grants on which the Territory depends. Mewett adds: 'For the boom to continue and for all that this means for the ruling party and the Territory elites, the

[9] Aluminium cans became a greater litter problem because they do not corrode as quickly as steel cans. However, it was more practicable to recycle aluminium cans in the north.

[10] Under a heading: 'Darwin's dirty problem baffles chiefs', the *Darwin Star* (July 25, 1981, reproduced in Tomlinson 1982:102) reported that: 'Litter is choking Darwin's beaches and parks - but it appears nothing can be done. The problem is worst around the city's illegal campsites where there are no bins and little motivation to dispose of rubbish'.

subsidies must keep rolling in' (p.4). Mewett (p.18) notes that 'Territorians, with the highest average incomes in Australia, are better off as ordinary people than those in any other part of the nation'. He concludes that 'the Beer Can Regatta facilitates the ready cooperation between working people and the Darwin elite' (p.4). At the regatta the two classes 'focus their consciousness together ... to generate a commonality of understanding' (p.12).

18 + Northern Territory News, Friday, August

Your weekend

Drink hard, row harder at regatta

By EMMA CHADWICK

Up to 10 000 people are expected to turn out for the famous Beer Can Regatta at Mindil Beach this weekend.

Regatta chairman Jeff Dunn said the event had grown last year and this year it looked like it would be big again.

He said up to 15 boats were expected to enter Sunday's event.

Mr Dunn said: "I would say between 8000 and 10 000 people through the day – I think that is realistic."

Last year's reigning champions from Morewater Plumbing & Drainage say they will be back better than ever.

The team of six has rebuilt its craft from last year and is out to win.

Morewater Plumbing team member Bevan Cox said: "Ours is the fastest boat in the Territory. We do not expect to lose."

Mr Cox said team training had involved lifting 375ml weights with left and right arm extensions after work every Friday and Saturday for months.

Drinkers at the Berrimah Hotel bottle shop have also worked hard to build their regatta boat.

In fact, they drank so hard they have built two boats for the regatta this year.

Dedicated

They used about 7000 beer cans to build a 10m-long, 6m-wide catamaran.

Berrimah Hotel bottle shop attendant Steve said many patrons were dedicated to the project.

He said: "It is all about getting down there, not being larrikins, but having fun."

● **The Beer Can Regatta will start at 10am on Sunday at Mindil Beach. Racing will start at 11am.**

Regatta entrants Kiwi (left), Brenton Woodman, Graham Cassidy, Tom, Gary Ellis, Bevan Cox. Picture: KELLIE BLOO

Above: 1998 *NT News* report

I suggest that, rather than signifying the class conflict that Mewett suggests, the regatta has a racial metamessage. Class differences are less significant in the Northern Territory, where the Chief Minister said, 'you could really be anything you wanted to be' (*Suburban* May 29, 1997). In this environment, racial divisions tend to replace class divisions. In the NT, the conservatives have held political power since the granting of self-government in 1978, largely by playing on racial issues that appear to draw many voters to their policies. Labor candidates are elected only in predominantly Aboriginal electorates while many Whites who settle in Darwin find a commonality in their opposition to Aboriginal claims to prior ownership of the land. According to Cowlishaw (1988:6), 'Racist beliefs become culturally sanctioned responses that, perhaps unintentionally, defend the advantages that whites enjoy'.

Mewett (1988:14) noted that the festival had little ethnic participation:

> A final comment about the audience is that it was overwhelmingly composed of people who appeared to be of Anglo-Celtic origins (or at least of Western and Northern European extraction). Non-whites, both Aboriginal and migrant 'ethnic minorities' were noticeably absent...

For Mewett (1988:15), the racial composition of the crowd is significant only because it emphasises the common cultural understandings that are symbolically endorsed by the festival. Judging by my own observations during attendance at the regatta many times since its inception, and during my fieldwork, the absence of Aboriginal participation is a striking feature of the regatta, in comparison to other events that are supported by Aboriginal people.[11] In overlooking the significance of Aboriginal non-participation, Mewett has missed the racial metamessage of the Darwin Beer Can Regatta.

By failing to mention the significance to Aboriginal people of Mindil Beach (see Map 2), where the events are held, Mewett also reinforces the dispossession of Aboriginal people by viewing the landscape as an empty canvas on which meanings are inscribed by the settler society.[12] This is a role of the regatta which was implied by the *NT News* (June 15, 1974) when it reported that: 'Darwin has, of course, been on the map since the late 1800s when

[11] I instigated an Aboriginal entry in the first Beer Can Regatta ('Beer can boomer', *NT News* May 24, 1974, p.1). The 'boat' was actually a stack of 2000 beer cans wired together into layers for an experimental building materials project supported by a local architect and the Railway Dam Aboriginal community. The federally funded experimental building, using empty beer cans inside concrete slabs, coincided with the move to clean up Darwin and had the support of the fringe dwellers. The beer can boat did not make it to the starting line.

[12] In her interpretation of the Mindil Beach Sunset Markets, Helms (1998) also fails to consider Aboriginal readings of the landscape.

white men first settled here ... but it should be in little danger of slipping off the map after tomorrow's beer can regatta'.

Mindil Beach was a fringe camp at the turn of the century when Aboriginal people lived on the seafront in humpies very similar to the shelters in many fringe camps today (see *Bunji* May 1981).[13] In a belated recognition of prior use, a memorial was erected at the northern end of the beach in 1992. A plaque states:

> The memorial acknowledges that the Larrakia and in more recent times other Aboriginal people living in Darwin, have traditionally used the area for the burial of their ancestors.
> Designed by Koolpinya (Richard Barnes) one of the Larrakia custodians for the area, the memorial was completed in November 1992 with a traditional mourning ceremony putting to rest a skull returned from Edinburgh by an Aboriginal delegation in 1991...
> Darwin City Council funded the memorial to mark the site for Larrakia and other Aboriginal people to ensure that people are respectful and remain aware of the history and sacredness of the area.

For Mewett (1988:19) the association of dangerous sea and racing craft represents the conquering of the unknown frontier by 'real men' while the spectators in the safety of the dry beach are representative of effete men and females of settled and civilised Australia. However, in the dry season in Darwin the sea is calm and inviting. It is unlikely that spectators considered the ocean dangerous at the time of the regatta, as Mewett (1988:17) insists. Despite this criticism, I agree that the building of racing craft out of empty beer cans is a symbol of the ability of real men to 'overcome adversity' (p.17). However, I believe 'real *white* men' is the dominant signifier rather than 'real *working class* men' (as Mewett suggests).

Mewett stresses the gender message of the festival where 'boats were crewed almost exclusively by men' (p.12). Mewett (p.22) claims that the ironman event, where contestants drink beer between amusing tasks, is a demonstration of the competitors' mastery of beer:

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[13] *Bunji* shows a photograph of 'Woolna camp at Mindil Beach about 1904' from the Gillstrom Collection, National Library of Australia.

> Men who are unable to 'handle' their beer in this way are distinguished and separated from real men and marked as part of that mass of effete men, barely different from women and children (p.23).

Rather than a marker of gender, my observations suggest that the ability to drink is seen as a marker of the racial superiority displayed at the Beer Can Regatta. It is not women and men who are contrasted by the predominantly White spectators but Whites and Aborigines. The display of purposeful, enjoyable and controlled drinking by the participants in the races can be interpreted as a demonstration of the successful assimilation of alcohol into the culture of settled Australia, in contrast to Aboriginal drinking, which is viewed by many as childlike and without culture.

The displays of masculinity observed by Mewett (1988) appear to typify the role of men on the frontier as protectors of white women. However, in settled Darwin, functional and controlled white drinking is shared by white women and displaces the secret liaisons between frontier white men and Aboriginal women that were an integral part of riotous drinking in remote Australia. By 1997, the Beer Can Regatta ironman had become the 'ironperson', 'Mr and Mrs Beer Can Regatta' replaced Miss Mindil Beach and many women competed in the races. One Defence Force crew titled their entry, 'The vicious bitches' (*NT News* August 11, 1997).

Mewett (1988:18) believes the 'real [working] men' who have tamed the frontier mock the yachting regattas of the effete and wealthy in the south. I suggest that the regatta can be seen as a wet imitation of the 'Henley on Todd' races in Alice Springs where contestants run inside boat-shaped constructions in the dry riverbed. The connection became explicit when the Beer Can Regatta began including 'Henley on Mindil' races for crews carrying yacht-shaped structures in a dash along the dry beach. The borrowing of names can be read as ironic comments on the cultural displacement of the transient non-Aboriginal population, while inscribing a mythology onto an empty landscape. In addition, the signifiers of regatta and Henley-on-Thames suggest the British origins of 'civilised' society that distinguishes white drinking behaviour from the 'uncontrolled and purposeless' drinking of Aborigines.

The Beer Can Regatta in 1996 and 1997

In 1997 the Living With Alcohol Program proposal to have breath-testing equipment at the festival caused a controversy (*NT News* August 9, 1997). According to the newspaper report, organisers believed people would be intimidated by breath-testing. They added that 'the "boozy" image of the regatta had been dispelled years ago'. After moves to change the name

of the regatta to something less associated with beer drinking, the festival publicity chairman reflected the concern of an *NT News* (August 10, 1996) editorial that Darwin was losing 'its last frontier-type of image' (*Suburban* August 7, 1996). He accepted that responsible drinking must be promoted but also believed Darwin's beer drinking image should stay intact. The chairman said: 'Once they try and convert [Darwin] to a churchy, teetotalling sort of an area I think the image of Darwin will go down'. However, despite concern in 1996 that entries were well below the sixty the Lions Club event attracted in the peak years of the festival (*NT News* August 12, 1996), over 8,000 people, still predominantly Anglo-Celtic Australian, enjoyed the family events on the beach.

During my 1996 fieldwork at the regatta, a Christian group shouted testimonies from a distance, in opposition to the regatta's celebration of alcohol. In response, the crowd on the beach interrupted the Christians' singing of 'Amazing Grace' by throwing missiles at them. Smoke drifted from a campfire of four seemingly disinterested Aboriginal campers sitting under the grove of casuarina pines which fringe the northern end of the beach. The only other Aborigines from remote Australia apparent at the festival were small groups of high school boarders whose neat weekend wear contrasted with the half naked white skin around them. As the *NT News* (August 11, 1997) stated the next year: 'An hour after the event began Mindil Beach had transformed into a carpet of Eskies, resting red bodies and frolicking families'.

Heavy drinking was excused as preparation for the beer can races. One team said they had drunk 3,000 cans of beer in a week. 'If we win we'll get rid of a few more cans of beer - to use in next year's race, of course' (*NT News* August 6, 1997). Illustrating that beer drinking for the festival was a constructive 'occupation', distinguished from wasteful drunkenness, the *NT News* (August 11, 1997) noted: 'After months of arduous work (a moderate boat takes about 6,000 beer cans), eleven feats of engineering brilliance finally made it into the water for the Battle of Mindil'. The *NT News* (August 1999) reported that drinkers at the Berrimah Hotel had 'worked hard lifting 375ml weights' (beer cans) to build their entry: 'In fact they drank so hard they have built two boats for the regatta this year'. The burly crew were pictured consuming cans for their craft. The declining interest in the Beer Can Regatta follows the successful transformation from wild frontier drinking in Darwin to a pattern more typical of settled Australia.[14] In the new environment, 'itinerants' do not belong or contribute to (civilised) society.

[14] A National Drug and Alcohol Research Institute report claims that alcohol consumption among non-Aboriginal people in the NT remains 43 per cent higher than amongst other Australians (*NT News* February 2, 2000). The report found there was significantly higher alcohol consumption in the Katherine and Alice Springs areas. Alcohol

IS THE PARTY OVER?

Once upon a time in Darwin, there were barbecues on sandbars in Darwin Harbour, ice hockey on Mindil Beach, people who spent days sitting on rocks drinking alcohol and swarms of boats built from beer cans. But now these events are in danger, if not gone. Are Territorians becoming boring? Are our party days over? **PENNY BAXTER** grabbed a six pack and went to find out

EVERYONE has heard of the pub with no beer.

But what about the beer can regatta with no beer cans?

That was one problem facing an entrant in the lead-up to tomorrow's Beer Can Regatta, after they could not find enough beer cans – that hadn't already been recycled – to build their boat.

But a lack of beer cans is not the only problem organisers face with the build-up to the regatta.

Only 15 boats are expected to enter the race tomorrow, and three days before the big event no boat entrants had been registered.

Is the apathy of locals sealing the fate of Darwin's annual Beer Can Regatta, which faces a crisis almost yearly over whether it can continue?

It seems so.

Originally thought up as a way to clean up and recycle beer cans around Darwin and Katherine, the Beer Can Regatta is not the only Territory institution that has suffered over the past decade or so.

What happened to the ice hockey competition at Mindil Beach, or the rock sitters' record-breaking rock sits?

Or how come the After Derby Sandbar Barbie is now held on a beach at Mandorah?

Is this a bid to tame the Territory, and have the down-south wowsers won the battle to make everything alcohol-free and politically correct?

"I guess it's like a lot of things we've had over time in Darwin that we no longer have. We are becoming more southernised"

Beer Can Regatta creator Lutz Frankenfeld thinks so.

Mr Frankenfeld's discovery of how many empty beer cans could bear the weight of a human sparked the world's first beer can regatta in 1974.

The well-known Darwinite worked out that 360 empty beer cans would safely support the weight of a 70kg man. And a Darwin institution was born.

On June 16, 1974, no fewer than 63 boats creatively built out of beer cans took to the water off Vestey's Beach for the inaugural, world first Beer Can Regatta.

Featuring two categories – powered and unpowered boats – the regatta attracted an amazing crowd of 10,000 to cheer on competitors.

Mr Frankenfeld built the first beer can boat dubbed *Dry Ark* which raced alongside other trusty vessels called the *Dum Barge* and *Tipsy Moth*.

He said: "The idea came up because there was a lot of litter around Darwin and Katherine, so we decided to encourage people to clean them up in a fun way."

Even the tragedy of Cyclone Tracy in 1974 didn't dampen the beer can boating enthusiasts' efforts with the second Beer Can Regatta held only six months after the cyclone almost destroyed Darwin.

Fifty boats took to the water for the regatta's Open World Cup that year, and the race was fittingly won by the Cyclonic Slops team.

In the regatta's heyday in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the event attracted international attention.

Mr Frankenfeld said: "In 197 we took *Cantiki 2* over to Singapore and had 300 photographers and a crowd of 5000 to greet us."

The boat was made of 15,000 beer cans.

And while the international interest in Darwin's unique event is still keen, local apathy has almost killed it off over the past few years.

Boat numbers competing in the regatta started to dwindle in the mid-1980s with 25 beer can boats entered in the races, although the crowd swelled to 12,000.

In 1991 there were only about half a dozen entrants but a lot of drunken, sunburnt people on the beach, and regatta organisers became concerned over safety.

A year later the idea to drop "beer" from the regatta's title was floated in a view to "shrug off" any unfavourable connection with alcohol.

But the Beer Can Regatta retained its title, only to face potential ruin in 1996 with a poor turn out of about 12 boats, and the possibility it would be the last regatta.

The icon survived to see its 25th anniversary in 1997, but its fate was questioned yet again last year when there were no boat entries four days before the big event was planned.

Only about 15 boats are expected to enter the race at tomorrow's Beer Can Regatta.

Beer Can Regatta Association chairman Tony Moore said the event was one of the last remaining Darwin icon events.

He said: "It is one of our few remaining icons of the real Darwin.

"I guess it's like a lot of things we've had over time in Darwin that we no longer have.

"We are becoming more southernised."

But Mr Moore said while locals were not as eager to build a beer can boat and compete, the Beer Can Regatta still attracted international interest.

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Above: A 28th July, 2001, *NT News* report giving the history of the Beer Can Regatta and lamenting that Darwin was becoming 'more southernised.'

consumption in the Katherine region 1993-1997 was earlier reported as 18.7 per cent higher than the NT rate (Clausen 1999:36).

Conclusion

I suggest the display of purposeful drinking, confirmed year by year at the festival, overcomes the contradiction of Whites enjoying their drinking while criticising Aborigines for their excesses. Cowlishaw (1994:80) observed in a similar situation 'a pervasive hypocrisy' associated with White morality which reserves 'disapproval and contempt' for Aboriginal drunkenness while being 'secretive and ashamed' of their own drinking to excess.

In postcolonial Darwin where public expressions of racial superiority are illegal, the festival makes a powerful unspoken statement authorising task-directed white drinking in public places. Aborigines, who are noticeably absent from the Mindil Beach festival, are further displaced by the appropriation of the supposedly empty landscape for the predominantly White festival. Finally, the festival is a measure of social change in settled Darwin where Aboriginal drinking as a remnant of remote Australian lifestyle is disowned by the settler-residents of Darwin and banished to city parks and vacant land. In these 'public' spaces the relatively newly won citizenship of the Aboriginal drinkers, who are now objectified as 'itinerants', is nullified.

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