

**ABORIGINAL FRINGE DWELLERS IN DARWIN,
AUSTRALIA:
CULTURAL PERSISTENCE OR A CULTURE OF
RESISTANCE?**

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ABSTRACT

From 1971 to 1979 I supported the campaign for land and housing by homeless Aboriginal fringe dwellers from many language groups who were living in on vacant Crown land in unserviced shelters they had constructed of scavenged materials in Darwin, the capital of the Northern Territory, Australia. Many of them had been born in the city, while others had migrated from surrounding areas or more remote regions of the Territory. During the 1970s, and until I left Darwin in 1985, I was impressed by the courage of these Aboriginal people in confronting public and government hostility to their claims.

I returned to Darwin in 1996 to begin fieldwork for a PhD thesis, to determine how Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin order their lives in their bush land camps. Was this ordering best described as 'cultural continuities in a world of material change', as Basil Sansom claims in his 1980 ethnography, *The camp at Wallaby Cross: Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin?* Or is cultural reproduction amongst Aboriginal people in towns always in a context of opposition, as Gillian Cowlshaw concluded in rural New South Wales? Can Aboriginal fringe dwellers in Darwin be better understood through theoretical frameworks that stress cultural persistence or those which emphasise resistance?

In academic debates, these dichotomous perspectives are sometimes referred to as the 'cultural' and the 'political' approaches. The former approach is criticised for neglecting indigenous people's engagement with the wider social, economic and political world. The latter is criticised for incorporating indigenous people into a Western discourse by prioritising a materialist

analysis. My intention was to examine the appropriateness of these approaches amongst the Aboriginal people of Darwin who had continued to maintain camps in urban bush land and on town beaches despite harassment campaigns by Local and Northern Territory Governments.

My study is in the context of an invading socio-economic system rather than the segregated social field described by Sansom. In a critique of Sansom's conclusions after his fieldwork amongst Darwin fringe dwellers between 1975 and 1977, I find that relatively fixed traditional Aboriginal social structures account for cultural continuities in the fringe camps more than the flexible processes described by Sansom as typical of Northern Australia. Traditional values are also the basis of the 'oppositional culture' amongst fringe dwellers. I also suggest that resistance by Aboriginal fringe dwellers involves a greater political awareness than is apparent in the everyday Aboriginal 'oppositional culture' described by Cowlshaw in New South Wales country towns.

My evidence suggests that, rather than constituting a closure of the Aboriginal domain, as described in other studies, resistance amongst Aboriginal fringe dwellers can be interpreted as engagement with the dominant society, in a process which I describe as 'merging'. My conclusions are drawn from fieldwork examples of conflict between the Northern Territory Government and Aboriginal fringe dwellers and the more successful interaction between sympathetic non-Aboriginal people in Darwin and the fringe campers that continued into late 2001.

The struggle by fringe dwellers for space in Darwin is placed in the context of the native title claim over vacant Crown land in Darwin made during my fieldwork by the Larrakia people, who claim to be the Aboriginal traditional owners of the Darwin region. Despite a supposed conflict of interest between the fringe dwellers and the Larrakia people, I suggest that the interests of the

two groups are not necessarily in opposition under Western law or in Aboriginal customary law.

Finally, I focus on the opposition between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal drinking in Darwin and its association with dispossession. I argue that a study of the origins of the Darwin Beer Can Regatta gives insights into this conflict. I suggest that the festival serves to distinguish non-Aboriginal drinking as controlled and purposeful, in contrast to 'antisocial' fringe dweller drinking. In my analysis, I use Charles Rowley's division of Australia into 'settled' and 'colonial', or 'remote' regions, and argue that Darwin is now an enclave of 'settled' Australia in the remote north. I suggest that this characterisation provides a useful framework for interpreting the position of fringe dwellers in Darwin.

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