Reference No. 85

Summarising: Martin (1997), *The incorporation of ‘traditional’ and ‘historical’ interests in Native Title Representative Bodies*
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
The incorporation of 'traditional' and 'historical' interests in Native Title Representative Bodies

Research Publication:
Fighting Over Country: Anthropological Perspectives

Name of Researcher(s):
D.F. Martin

Time period:
1996

Geographic location:
The region surrounding Mt Isa (Qld)

Methodology:
The researcher draws upon his extensive experiences as an anthropologist working in Northern Australia, including northern Queensland, over the preceding decade.

Aims:
This paper analyses the potential conflicts between 'historical' and 'traditional' peoples of the Mt Isa region regarding the development of representative bodies for Native Title purposes.

Selected findings and insights:
The Mt Isa region of far western Queensland was very complex in terms of the diversity of its Aboriginal traditional groupings, its post-contact history and its contemporary Aboriginal and wider politics.

Movement of Aboriginal people was characteristic of Aboriginal people in the region:
- out of the region to centres such as Palm Island and Yarrabah due to government policies in the early part of the 20th century,
- movement as far as Port Augusta and Alice Springs,
- as well as long-term movements within and into the region. For example, with the demise of the cattle industry as an employer of Aboriginal workers in the 1960s and 1970s there was movement into regional townships and centres such as Mt Isa.

The complexity of these demographics had implications for the establishment of Native Title representative bodies as Aboriginal people may have either had historical or traditional links to the region and specific lands.

The paper examines the changing nature of 'tribes' and 'families'. It also describes the mix of what are termed by Queensland Aboriginal people 'historical' and 'traditional' or 'tribal' peoples which provided one of the fundamental dynamics within the Aboriginal political domain in this region and indeed in many others.
• The terms ‘traditional’ and ‘tribal’ people of a particular region, as used by Aboriginal people, refer to those who are recognised as members of the ‘tribal’ groups whose lands lie within the region; that is, they are accepted as belonging to one of the relevant ‘families’, primarily through socially validated genealogical connections. They are the ones who can legitimately ‘talk for country’. The label for each tribe is the language group which is held to have occupied the area in question.

• The ‘historical’ people include those who are living in a particular area now, but who are from elsewhere in this region, and those who have moved here from outside the region entirely, for example from the east coast or from the Northern Territory.

This ‘traditional/historical’ dynamic is complicated by at least four factors:

• there is constant and often vitriolic disputation as to who can rightfully claim to be the traditional owners of many areas and this in turn is rendered even more complex because of the high degree of choice by which people can assert genealogical links to forebears, and by the enormous social dislocation in the region during the colonial period;

• there are strong concerns expressed in regional townships about domination by people and organisations based in Mt Isa. These concerns can be seen, in part, as structurally arising from the common resentment of remoter regions to bureaucrats and organisations in any urban centre. There is an added dimension too, in that those Aboriginal people who live in the small, remote townships feel that they are maintaining their own cultural identity and links to land in a way which the ‘urban’ people are not;

• there are also people who assert traditional ownership of the outlying regions who now live in Mt Isa and who are seen by at least some of the residents of the smaller townships as being politically linked there; and

• there are major resource developments in the region, which have provided a focal point for conflict over who can legitimately speak for country, on what basis assessments of the impacts of these developments on Aboriginal people should be made and how any benefits from the developments should be directed.

Educational implications:

This paper provides useful background information on the culture of Indigenous communities which is relevant to principals and other educational leaders in understanding communication and decision-making protocols when consulting with Indigenous leaders. It is also of value for senior departmental officers responsible for implementing education, training and employment strategies as part of Indigenous land use Agreements (ILUAs). Furthermore it highlights the complexities of dealing with Indigenous communities both in terms of consultation and development of appropriate governance structures.

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Related papers:

Mantziaris C and Martin D Native Title Corporations: a legal and anthropological analysis The Federation Press 2000