Anmatjere: Representation in an early regional structure

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The Anmatjere Community Government Council (ACGC) is an early example of regionalism. However, unlike the more recent regional structures established in the north—Tiwi Is., Thamarrurr and Nyirranggulung—the Anmatjere region is not an Aboriginal domain. As a result, some of the issues raised in this paper are a bit different from those raised in the other papers here today. The Anmatjere regional structure can be considered from three perspectives, all of which operate and interact with each other. The first is as a federation of wards, the second is as a regional centre with outlying settlements and the third is as an Indigenous nation. These three ways of considering the Anmatjere region all provide a lens through which to understand and problematise the issue of representation.

My particular interest in the dynamics of representation across a regional structure was first engaged in thinking about how Indigenous socio-political structures intersect with the formal electoral structures. However, the collaborative research arrangement we have with the Council does not give us license to engage in our own research interests unless it meshes with an issue of interest to the Council, and this issue has not yet been raised with them. The specific research task to date that we have been engaged to undertake is to inform the Council on the make-up of the fringe camp, known as Creek Camp, in the town of Ti-Tree, so that they can develop a position on it. After conducting a series of interviews with Creek Camp residents, based on a questionnaire discussed with the Council, we reported our findings to them. This plain English report has been circulated and many here would have seen it. Examining this issue of the fringe camp in the township, however, has given us a window into the processes of representation. As will be discussed, although Indigenous interests appear central to this Council structure and as they comprise around 80 per cent of the regional population, the Council response to the Creek Camp reflects wider interests that need to be understood in the context of the region’s colonial history.

First, a snapshot of the region. As a regional federation of wards the ACGC, established in 1994, was the first of its kind in Central Australia. This community government scheme covers the residents of three large parcels and seven small parcels of land. These 10 Council wards range across seven pastoral leases, two of which—Ti-Tree and Alcoota—are Indigenously owned while another, Pine Hill, is under Native Title claim. The three large parcels of land are on the old Ti-Tree Station pastoral lease, granted as Aboriginal freehold in 1987. Each of these three large land parcels has one discrete Aboriginal living area. Six of the seven small land parcels are Aboriginal living area excisions on the surrounding pastoral stations. The final small parcel of land included in the scheme is the roadside town of Ti-Tree, with a far more mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous resident population. Ti-Tree was not included in the scheme until 1995, a year after the other nine land parcels, though it would be fair to say that its incorporation in the scheme, as the major service centre for the region, was anticipated from the outset, at least by the Northern Territory government.

The total land area of the Anmatjere scheme is 3,631 km², less than ten per cent of the ABS Anmatjere area. The Stuart highway, as the NT’s major highway, bisects the region.
Unlike the Thamarrurr region, the Tiwi Is. region, and to a lesser extent the Nyirranggulung region, the Anmatjere region is strategically placed in geographic and economic terms. Pastoralism is still viable, and due to an extensive supply of potable groundwater there is a burgeoning horticulture industry, mainly in early season table grapes. The Stuart Highway, as a major transport corridor, also allows scope for some tourism focused at the roadside stops of Aileron and Ti-Tree. There is also a mine in the region, although how this contributes to the local economy is less clear. The town of Ti-Tree, established when the overland telegraph line was laid down in the 1870s as a watering point for cattle and people, has emerged as the dominant regional centre. However, its proximity to Alice Springs 200 km to the south, although playing a prominent role in terms of ready access to markets, has also limited the growth of the town. So overall, in this region the ‘governance environment’ is more mainstream than in other regions where the Indigenous population predominates. Nevertheless, the scheme, excludes pastoral and horticultural interests. The only non-Indigenous interests covered are in the Ti-Tree township.

1) The Federation structure: Quorum rules and selection processes

Perhaps the most straightforward way to consider the regional structure is as a federation of 10 dispersed wards. Each ward has two representatives on the Council, irrespective of the disparities in ward populations. This ward system reflects a diverse array of settlement types, from family outstations—representing a group of 30—to the significantly larger settlements of Laramba, Engawala and Pmara Jutunta, that have populations of approximately 260, 170, and 450 respectively (Anmatjere Community Government Council Annual Report 2001).

The constitution requires elections for Council membership to be held every two years. During the 12 year life of the Anmatjere scheme the number of nominations has tended to reflect the number of offices available, thus the elections are rarely contested. This is not the case, however, for election to the position of Chairman and Vice-Chairman, which is a secret ballot amongst the councillors. Nonetheless, this is not to suggest that each ward always has the required number of nominations. Only one representative for a ward is not uncommon, resulting in by-elections, while currently the ward of Anyungunba (on Pine Hill) is vacant.

One of the factors that plays into the issue of how individuals are selected to stand for the Council is family affiliation. Each ward is to varying degrees associated with a family, who in turn may be primarily affiliated with the country on which the settlement or ward is situated. This is the case for the majority of the wards and is most clear-cut for the wards based on family outstations. This meshing of traditional interests with representation on the Council makes no attempt to cover all traditional Anmatjere estates (if this exercise were to be undertaken), unlike the more recent attempts at regionalism.

Non-Indigenous people are formally represented in the ward of Ti-Tree where, according to the constitution, a person is eligible to vote if they have resided there for not less than 3 months. In the other wards, eligibility to vote is 12 months continuous residence. Prior to the Anmatjere scheme, the Ti-Tree Progress Association represented the interests of
non-Indigenous people in the township. Since the scheme's inception there has been no more than one non-Indigenous person on the Council at any one time. Most recently this has been the wife of the Ti-Tree station manager. She resigned this year because of childcare responsibilities. However, there were some non-Indigenous people affiliated with the Council who suggested that she might have felt frustrated by the decision-making process of the Indigenous Council and left on this account.

The quorum for a Council meeting is the majority of members then in office, including at least one representative of each ward which has at least one member then in office. This rather high quorum rule has led to the dismissing of the Council by the current Town Clerk twice in the last two years, most recently in November 2005, as a result of the quorum rule not being met at two consecutive meetings. The current Town Clerk has raised the issue of possibly lessening the quorum rule\(^1\), but Council shows little or no interest in doing so.

This suggests that not only is the issue of constitutional change perhaps a hard one for the Councilors to decide on, but that the ideals of wide representation, as difficult as they are to maintain, are strongly held to. Certainly the ideals of consensual decision-making are important in any federal structure and appear to be actively maintained in the Anmatjere scheme.

2) Tensions between centre and periphery

A second way of looking at this regional scheme is in terms of the tensions between the central service centre and the various tiers of outliers. This raises the issue of circular mobility and the pull between the outlying wards and Ti-Tree as the service centre and geographic centre of the region. One of the major reasons the Council finds it difficult to routinely meet its quorum is because its members are highly mobile. Combine this mobility with poor communications and roads infrastructure and the result is that maintaining the regional scheme at all is a real challenge. One could consider this in terms of a centrifugal pull at work, with Ti-Tree as the centre. The first tier might be considered in terms of Ti-Tree and Pmara Jutunta as the two central settlements with relatively high and stable populations. They have ready access to essential services. The second tier could be identified as the settlements attached to the centre by unsealed roads. These are the settlements of Woolla, Yanginj, Anyungunba and Nturiya, all of which have trouble holding population. The first three settlements were established by families as outstations, while Nturiya was the first Indigenous settlement at the old Ti-Tree station homestead. The populations of these settlements regularly spend considerable periods in Ti-tree town, Pmara Jutunta or in Alice Springs, so that the Nturiya store has since ceased to operate and Woolla and Yanginj have for the moment been vacated. A number of the Creek Camp residents are from these wards.

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\(^1\) Two potential restructure options put forward by the Town Clerk were: a majority of members need to attend and the majority of wards need to be represented (at least 10 members representing 5 wards); or only that a majority of members need to attend and at least 75% of wards need to be represented (at least 10 members representing 7 wards). However, during the Council meeting in April that we attended, although further discussion was provoked, again no decision was reached and the issue had clearly not been resolved many Council meetings later. Hence, the recent Council dissolution.
The third tier comprises the wards of Alyuen and Wilora, situated south and north respectively of Ti-Tree on the Stuart Highway. They are readily accessible to the highway and have some independence of services, being close to the roadhouses of Aileron and Barrow Creek respectively. They tend to have stable populations.

The fourth tier comprises the outliers of Engawala and Laramba. They are relatively large settlements, the farthest from the centre and have their own essential services, such as a clinic, store and school, so their basic service needs are met. This independence has led to Laramba, almost routinely, threatening to ‘breakaway’ from the scheme. Likewise, interestingly the longest serving Chairman was from Engawala, which has been a more stable presence in the scheme.

This population mobility within the region suggests that the Ti-Tree Township acts as a magnet to the inner tier populations. The relative concentration of resources at Ti-Tree may also be attracting greater resources, perhaps to the detriment of the outliers. Likewise, the store at Nturiya which closed several years ago is unlikely to reopen, while a supermarket has been discussed for Ti Tree.

3) The region as a micro nation

Perhaps ironically, it was perceptions of lack of representation on Indigenous issues by some Anmatjere people that led to the establishment of the regional structure initially. For this reason, the establishment of the Anmatjere scheme is worth over-viewing briefly, as it encapsulates the relationship between government policy and what was an early exercise in Indigenous nation-building. So a third way of looking at the region is as an example of an early nation-building exercise.

A key event that led to the formation of the regional Council was a political dynamic urging an Anmatjere ‘breakaway’ land Council and a fostering of close ties between Anmatjere people and the Northern Territory government. Although unsuccessful, this recent socio-political history of the region can be considered in terms of the tensions between the then conservative CLP government, the Lutheran church (through the Finke River Mission, FRM), who both opposed the passing of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1976, and the Central Land Council. The FRM were opposed to a regional representative structure—as embodied by the Central Land Council—and in favor of smaller scale regional bodies based on traditional dreaming estates and the clan groups with traditional responsibility for these (Morton 1994: 19–20). Likewise, in the late 1980s the NT Government had what was referred to as a ‘community government program’ also known as a ‘decentralising’ program. This program encouraged discrete communities to incorporate under the Northern Territory legislation, of which the Anmatjere Association was incorporated in 1990, and in 1994 the Anmatjere Community Government scheme was approved. Eric Panangka was the first Anmatjere Council Chairman. He is also an ordained Lutheran pastor and has served continuously on the Council since, either as chairman or councilor. His grandson is the current chairman.
This early push toward an Anmatjere nation indicates a sense of being willing to work together and to be known as ‘one-mob’. Thus, wanting everyone to be part of the decision-making process. Likewise, the continuity of membership within the Council, indicated above, also suggests that change is not a priority. This may also explain the reluctance to alter the quorum rules, as they embody this shared ideal.

**Indigenous interests, representation and creek camp**

So, on one level although the Anmatjere Council appears to be dominated by Indigenous interests, the unresolved issue of the creek camp suggests that the colonial history of the township is embedded in the Council operations and to some extent the actions of the councillors. Although given the opportunity, the Council hasn’t changed the status quo of Indigenous people as fringe dwellers in the town. This deep colonial history is reflected in the structure of the ward system which has Indigenous living areas as peripheral to the white enclave of the township as service centre. Thus, the structure formally maintains the separation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interests. In our discussions with Creek Camp residents about whether the Creek Camp should be developed as a town camp and if they would prefer to live there or in the actual township, all but one camp stated that living ‘separate’ from ‘whitefellas’ was preferable because of lifestyle differences, and that some sort of development should occur within the camp. There was a significant awareness that non-Indigenous people did not approve of them being within the township, and that the perception was that they had outlying settlements that they could move to. Gillian Cowlishaw’s observation that ‘the outsiders gaze can generate considerable self-awareness’ (Cowlishaw 2004: 5) resonates here. Interestingly, a number of Councillors and Council employees (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) suggested that only workers should be entitled to houses either in the town or in a potential town camp.

So the issue of representation is complex, where whose interests are being represented is never clear-cut. Anmatjere people and Anmatjere Councillors have, to greater and lesser degrees, embodied non-Indigenous interests. That this is evident in this region more so than in very remote regions, such as Thamarrurr and the Tiwi Is, is likely because of its history of pastoralism and the early engagement with the frontier of the overland telegraph line from the 1870s. Non-Indigenous interests are also represented in other ways. Although non-Indigenous representation is as a minority on the ACGC—one Councillor out of 20—their interests are represented by the Council staff and particularly perhaps by the Town Clerk. This representation is in terms of informal interactions with Councillors and in formal terms through issues papers tabled at Council meetings.

**Policy and Practical Challenges**

Considering the region in three ways reminds us that a region, even one defined constitutionally, is a complex system. The tensions between the various outlying settlements and the centre are always apparent. They manifest themselves through population mobility, difficulty fulfilling the quorum, leadership challenges and changes, and unfilled electoral seats. Nevertheless, that the Council is reluctant to change the quorum rules suggests that this issue is more a problem for government than for the council. This issue also reminds us that the juridification of electoral structures, whether
Indigenous or non-Indigenous, is something that is hard to change once set, and so requires great consideration at the outset.

The issue of representation is never clear-cut. There is no straightforward relationship between Indigenous representation and Indigenous voice on what are apparently Indigenous issues, such as the Creek Camp. A particular policy challenge for the Northern Territory Government is balancing the tensions between residency on Aboriginal land and residency within non-Indigenous townships. Although Aboriginal freehold land has offered Indigenous people some great freedoms in legislative and lifestyle terms, it has also hampered residency and thus lifestyle choices in some contexts. For instance, the fact that the Ti-Tree township is surrounded by Aboriginal Land seems to have limited Indigenous options for legally living elsewhere, such as within the town. Attempting to enforce residency on Aboriginal Land does not recognise the diversity of experiences and the needs of Indigenous individuals.

References

