Leadership:

Issues and principles
from the Thamarrurr (Port Keats) region
of the Northern Territory

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Introduction
Prior to the arrival of non-Aboriginal people in the early 1900s, Aboriginal people of the Port Keats region had a structure that enabled the development of leaders of the day. The structure began to be challenged soon after and many Aboriginal people today talk about the need to ‘walk two ways’ or ‘live in both worlds’. This paper explores some of the dilemmas for leadership development.

Community
The focus of my research is on Indigenous leadership and governance. The research ‘community’ where I am conducting research is a region with services provided by the Thamarrurr Regional Council. The main town, Wadeye, is surrounded by 20 rural outstations. Wadeye is 320 km southwest of Darwin in the Northern Territory. It has a total service population of about 2,500 people and an area of about 3,000 km².

The Thamarrurr region is often referred to as Port Keats. The term ‘Thamarrurr’ is derived from the local Murin-patha language and generally means, ‘coming together to work as one people’. The land within the council boundaries is inalienable freehold held under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* 1976. A statutory land trust known as the Daly River Land Trust holds the land on behalf of the traditional owners. The 20 clan groups within Thamarrurr are the traditional owners with separate estates. The place of main settlement, Wadeye, is on land of the Kardu Diminin clan group.

Demographic challenges
The region has a young emerging population. Almost half of the population (45.7%) is less than 15 years of age. An average of 80 babies is born per year. The school age population of almost 630 is approaching one-third of the regional population. By 2023, it is estimated that there will be an 88.5 per cent increase in the total population to 3833. The working age group (15–49 yrs) will increase by some 1,338 during that period (Taylor 2004:30-31).

There is high unemployment (83.9%). Numeracy and literacy, particularly for some in the age bracket 16–24 years, which makes up 20 per cent of the population, is poor. In fact, many of the people aged over 50 have much higher standards of ability in this area. The regional school-age population is 626. Attendance usually peaks at the start of the year and then drops, sometimes to about 20 per cent.

There is gross overcrowding in houses. Thamarrurr Council manages 217 dwellings in the region, however only 148 of these are classified as habitable. If the sub-standard houses are excluded from the stock, the occupancy rate is 16 persons per house (it is 11 if they are counted in). An extra 206 dwellings would be required to ‘normalise’ the situation at seven persons per three-bedroom dwelling. Using the projected population figures, an extra 122 dwellings would be required by 2023 to maintain occupancy at the current high level. There is virtually ‘no hope’ of a young couple today starting a family in their own dwelling. In most cases, they have to share with 3–4 other families.

The cost of living at Wadeye is an estimated 40 per cent higher than Darwin. Due to historical reasons people most people live in the one town, Wadeye, with limited
opportunity to travel beyond the town or indulge in hunting and gathering. Hence a tendency to rely on the local take-away.

Wadeye has the highest per capita juvenile offending rate in the NT. The most common type of offence was property damage (34%) and assault (27%) in 2002. There are about 40 people from the region currently incarcerated. Taylor and Stanley (2005) estimate that this costs the government and the community, in more ways than one, approximately $3.3m plus per year.

Hence, there is a young emerging population, high unemployment, coupled with poor numeracy and literacy amongst the young. Housing is drastically overcrowded; there is a high cost of living and subsequent crime issues.

The question of leadership
Despite these challenges, the majority of people are keen to develop opportunities for their family and people. In the past before colonisation, they relied on their leaders to guide and sustain them and cope with change. Leaders, particularly during the last decade, have been the ones who have ‘interpreted and made sense’ of new ways. Leadership defines the situation, clarifies it, and enables people to move forward.

The people of the region are ‘rudderless’ without strong leadership and that is why it is probably the most crucial issue facing the region, and the government, today. We have to understand the notions of leadership held by the people, and then support and sustain it assisting with the development of new ‘tools’, skills, and learning environment.

How was leadership constructed before colonisation?
In order to understand the current situation, one has to examine what leadership meant, how it developed, and its perimeters in previous generations.

There are six languages and seven sub-dialects spoken by residents from within the Thamarrurr region. The languages (in bold) and dialects (Dixon 2002) are as follows: Marri Tjevin, Marri Amu, Marri Ngarr, Magati Ge, Emmi, Menhdhe, Murrinh-patha, Murrinh-kura (with ‘loan’ words from Murrinh-nyuwan), Ngan.gitjememeri, Ngan.giwumeri, Ngan.gikurunggurr, Ngan.gimerri, and Murrinh-nyuwan (also known as Djamindjung).

Ceremonial activities centre around three main ceremonial groups and their songs. They are the Dhanba/Wurlthirri/Malkarrin, Wangga, and the Lirrga. Political, economic and social alliances exist in various ways between families, clan, and ceremonial groups depending on particular situations.

Patrilineal land-owning groups, sometimes referred to by Aboriginal people as clans, are a key structural unit in the Thamarrurr region. There are 20 clans with estates and boundaries delineated. Within each clan, there are usually several key extended families. When one examines the physical location of people in Wadeye today, the structure linking family, clan, ceremonial affiliation and language can broadly be seen. It was a system heavily reliant on relationships. This over-arching structure provided the environment for leadership development.
Men and women during their life would pass through a series of categories. During early age, passage might be defined by physical ability, for example, the ability to stand up. As time went on, usually at about the age of 9-10, the young people would be identified to commence the ceremonial passage. Progression from this stage was reliant to a large degree on ceremonial attainment but also personal attributes. During these rites de passage, existing clan leaders would be ‘looking at them … looking at them’ for the emergence of potential leaders (Bunduck, pers. comm. 2004). Some attributes that were looked for were the ability to care for other people and country, to know key elements of ceremony, to be able to organise and mobilise others, and importantly the ability to fight.

Strong leadership pre-mission and early mission times were essential for clan survival and identity. Clans pre-mission were in a constant state of vigilance and warfare. Elders tell of how clans with strong leadership would sometimes dispose another group from their estate. Leadership in classical times was founded not only on wisdom, ceremonial and age factors, but on ability as warriors, fighters, decision-makers and defenders of their people.

New ways
The earliest documentation on the region details encounters between the people and intruders. Many were assessed, and then driven off. Early examples of this were Wickham and Stokes (1839), the explorers; the killing of miners from Bradshaw Station (1905); the massacre of three Japanese fishermen by Nemarluk and the Red Band (1933); and several other incidents that have become part of local folklore.

Nevertheless, some things from ‘outside’ were embraced. Stanner (1973: 13) records new ceremonies that were learnt from the Timber Creek area as well as the introduction of a new sub-section system during the early 1900s. With the emergence of the pastoral industry in the 1880s many people went to work on stations as stockmen, cooks or the like. Leaders of the day would have had a key role in who went where, what was accepted and what was not.

The Church and modernisation
A decision for the leaders of key importance was made in 1935. In June of that year, a charismatic priest, Father Docherty, landed at Wentek Nganayi, later known as Old Mission. He had five locals with him and was able to make immediate friendly contact with some clan members. During the next months, people residing in other areas such as Legune and Bradshaw stations moved into the new mission.

Possibly, the Aboriginal leaders made their decision to engage with the new order in an economic light and in terms of how it may have enhanced their own authority. However, gradually the missionaries began to challenge such authority. They stopped spear fights, discouraged some ceremonies, and discouraged polygamous marriages. Young men and women were brought into dormitories away from the ‘clutches’ of the older men and taught new ways. Many of the skills previously required surviving, and which the Aboriginal leaders were experts in, began to decline.
Father Docherty ran the mission in an autocratic fashion with himself as Superintendent and other priests, brothers, and nuns in positions of responsibility. They established over time, gardens and industry. At the same time, much of the previous responsibility for governance and well-being of the society held by local leaders was taken over by the missionaries, who in effect acted as custodians.

As time went on there was left a group of old leaders who were struggling to understand the new systems (such as the welfare cheque). Others engaged, without really knowing at times what they were doing. Some better-educated middle-aged people were able to cope with the changes and learn new skills. In later years, young people began to try and explain the turmoil with the change they were going through in music and bands. Later, possibly due to disengagement at all levels there was spawned the emergence of ‘gangs’ and a new violent and angry element to what was happening.

In 1978, the Kardu Numida Council was incorporated through the *NT Associations and Incorporations Act*. However, over time it lost legitimacy and was seen as being the instrument of a selected few. In 1994, the only people who nominated for positions on the council were those who belonged to the local landowning group. In addition, in 1994, the Kardu Numida Council had overspent approximately $1m. The people hurt by the demise of the council commenced a journey of regaining some control. This culminated in 2003 with the establishment of the Thamarrurr Regional Council and a new era.

**The change—where is leadership today?**

The highest category of ceremony men (with a restricted title) is still present in community decision-making today. They are like ‘executive directors’ ensuring that the ‘ship stays on course’. Nelson Mandela (1994: 20–1) wrote about his favoured style of leadership: leading ‘like a shepherd’ from behind and ensuring ‘consensus’. This is the forte of the Port Keats leaders and one of the most used tools in their box. Even the most heated meetings generally resolve into a consensus mode. The consensus may not be final, but it appears generally to confer respect to all concerned particularly the traditional owners whose land they are on. People also have complex relations and dues to many of those present and they are probably cautious of continued divergence.

There is another way that it appears men may have gained power and leadership attributes since the 1930s. It occurs if someone has ‘gone away’. A person may go away to work as a stockman, a crocodile shooter, or the railway or in the armed services. Unfortunately, for some of the younger generation ‘going away’ today may mean a stretch in prison and this presents challenges for the Thamarrurr system of governance. Senior men and women are keen to explore ways for these younger generations to re-engage.

Good leaders are judged and emerge because of things like ‘they think about everybody [in the region]—not just themselves or their family’. Other factors such as level-headedness, fairness, honesty, generosity also play a part. There is a tendency particularly amongst the middle-aged to launch oneself into a particular issue, see resolution, and then break for a short time from the pressure of leadership. Often
another leader(s) will then carry the burden until that person comes back for the next stage.

At a local level the re-emergence of the Thamarrurr concept of governance continues. It should be remembered that initially the concept had only been retained by the clan elders. Since then it has gradually permeated back through the wider community however, this process is still not fully complete, particularly with the younger generations. As it continues to re-emerge the concept of land-owning group/clan strengthens as well. Some clans are finding a new energy and are very keen to engage in workshops to discuss their own development. The clans are organising themselves and many groups are talking about ‘returning to country’ and developing opportunities for their own clan’s people.

Locally between organisations there is, most of the time, a lot of cooperation. This can be seen particularly between the council and the school. This partnership is very important when considering leadership development, training for jobs, and visualisation toward the future of local children.

**People development**

The Thamarrurr situation is a COAG trial. The goal is, using a ‘whole-of-government’ approach, to make a difference and create opportunities. Local leaders are of paramount importance to this process. However, they have to be equipped with basic knowledge and skills, of the non-Aboriginal domain, to go forth.

In 2004, the Thamarrurr Regional Council, the Northern Territory Government and the Commonwealth initiated a survey of social and economic conditions in the Thamarrurr region. The findings were published as ‘Social Indicators for Aboriginal Governance: Insights from the Thamarrurr Region, Northern Territory’ (Taylor 2004). It was conducted by John Taylor of CAEPR, ANU with the assistance of others. This report in many ways has provided advantage for the leadership of Thamarrurr to push their case. Further capacity in this regard was provided by a further report on opportunity costs to the status quo (Taylor and Stanley 2005).

One of the initial challenges for those working on this project was to assist the people of the region to see for themselves what has happened in the past, what the situation is today, and where they can take their people if they so desire. This process commenced nine years ago and continues. The facilitators during the early phase assisted people, particularly the elderly in the first instance, to talk about and rediscover what classical governance was operating before non-Aboriginals visited the area. This process was not easy. Various terms were used before the leaders were satisfied with what was there. In fact, this process took probably five years, as many different people and groups had to be consulted.

The understanding of what has happened and how they have been disenfranchised now seems almost universal. Tensions that sometimes occurred during the consultations amongst the people have almost gone. However, frustration comes in occasionally with the pace of change; particularly with things like improved services and housing.
**Leadership, control and authority today**

The source of the council’s power and authority goes beyond its local government functional responsibility. At council meetings not only do elected members attend. Often senior unelected leaders attend, both male and female; sometimes to oversight what is happening, sometimes with an issue of their own that, they wish to bring up. Therefore, there is a formal base and legitimacy derived from classical support by community leaders.

This goes back to how and why the Thamarrurr structure was set up. It was the elders who recognised what had happened to their original power base and it was they who could see how it could be retrieved. Often they say: ‘This is our last chance’. The last chance in their eyes, that is, to have a system of governance that is able to straddle both domains and hence retain important principles of their culture.

The limits are at times difficult to define. The Thamarrurr Regional Council has formal local government authority responsibilities and then goes beyond that regularly because of the lack of other organisations. For example, it will get involved in land tenure issues with the land council. Sometimes if clan groups are in dispute, it may encourage a positive environment or call a meeting to resolve the issue. It is expected, particularly by the police, to intervene and ‘fix’ gang disputes. It ‘dabbles’ at times in areas that are strictly beyond its formal functions.

However, there are some things particularly in the sacred area such as ceremonial activities that it leaves to other local authorities to work in (although it may assist the relevant authority group, say ceremonial leaders, with resources and other assistance). So in terms of authority the governance authority deals in most things profane, and ritual leaders handle the sacred realm, with cooperation between both at appropriate times.

The pressures on these leaders are immense. They have to work in both domains. Thamarrurr being a COAG trial, leaders are constantly being requested to meet, present, engage, and articulate to government officials, media, politicians and the like. However, there is little respite at times because there are cultural matters to be considered, community politics to engage in, and countrymen to appease. Despite the dual role, most people seem to be resolute.

In about 2002, the classic leaders of the clans and ceremony informed Thamarrurr management that they were aware that there are areas of governance that require a certain level of education, energy, and knowledge. They advised that they wished certain areas of their leadership to be delegated to the middle-aged emerging leaders (*kake*) and this occurred and continues to emerge.

A trial (three sessions) involving the senior boys from Thamarrurr school aged about 12–15 years and training sessions conducted by senior leaders was relatively successful during early 2005, and may lead to more structured development in this area. The sessions involved governance issues being work-shopped in a practical fashion. There is some discussion now about this being incorporated into the curriculum, with assessment done utilising senior elders.
Prior to 2002, many of the clans only had their own affairs to conduct because they were disenfranchised with regard to leadership and involvement. This has changed and they now have equal membership and say within the governance structure. It is fair to note however that some appear to have struggled with how they become involved and further development work is required. Therefore, the opportunities are there and the leadership may evolve to more sharing of contemporary governance in the future.

**Two ways**

The people of the Thamarrurr region use a combination of work benefits, welfare, foraging off the land, and other methods to survive today. Politically the clans’ leadership and members speak about the aspirations of their members and their clan estate issues much the same as how it may have happened in the past. On bigger scale issues, that might possibly be described as ‘policy’ issues for the sub-region or region, clans may form alliances, or even join as a language block to present a particular argument or position.

The ‘tribe’ today may, in non-Aboriginal eyes at least, form more of a political voice than it did in the past. This may also be due to the fact that most of the people in the Thamarrurr region, particularly the young and middle-aged, speak Murrinh-patha as their main language, even though their country in the classical sense belongs within another language group.

In ceremonial contexts, the leader of a clan would have an intimate knowledge of ceremonies, stages, sequences, and objects. He would also have to address gathered clansmen if a situation or problem arose. He would lead the meeting but the final decision would be made in conjunction with those others present. Today in council meetings sometimes the leader might speak to an issue (if he feels particularly strong about it), however, a case is mainly presented by clansmen who have been delegated the right to do so. The final decision however is usually made by consensus of all present.

Decision-making in Thamarrurr Council meetings occurs in ways similar to classical arrangements. Leaders put forward their point of view, other members debate it, and then a decision is made, usually one that is reasonably fair to everyone. This is viewed as a legitimate way of doing business.

When the gangs are in dispute there is often anger, tension, violence, and renewed alliances. However since Thamarrurr has emerged, the leaders of the clans, including those who are fighting are more able to sit around a table and negotiate a truce (even if it is temporary) to alleviate the situation. This was not possible previously much to the angst of the police and other residents, including affected women and children. An exciting challenge now for Thamarrurr is to channel the anger, energy, and leadership of the gangs into activities that will be of benefit to the community.

Thamarrurr is not just a council; it also is a micro-representation of the society itself. Issues emerge at family level and are communicated through to the clan leaders and the Thamarrurr representatives. This is not to say that it is all good communication—often groups, for example some women, may not be fully aware at times of what is
going on. If they were perceived to be disenfranchised on past occasions, they may also be today as well. The council nevertheless, is concerned about this and has discussed ways of better communicating with their constituents and is beginning to use the BRACS television system and other medium. They have also established a communications and community education section and process within the structure.

Understanding of ‘whitefella’ concepts, communication difficulties, and education factors often create barriers that slow down discussion and decision-making. Often this conflicts with the non-Aboriginal and some Aboriginal people’s desire to get things done, to achieve results, and to make a difference.

**Decision-making processes, and conflict resolution**

The more educated Aboriginal people (usually aged 30–40 years) understand some corporate governance matters. However, most do not and put their trust in management. Many of the key staff are non-Aboriginal and some of them also struggle to properly understand their roles and responsibilities in a difficult environment.

Strong leadership, good accounting practices, and committed people at the very top of the organisation keep it on track. Many of these people are non-Aboriginal. The problem could be if they left the region. There needs to be better succession planning and implementation. This applies to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains.

A major concern for the council now is with the young people. The council spends probably 30 per cent of its time working on issues associated with youth and particularly the results of gang conflict. However, as time has gone on, they have, by closely working with police, begun to develop strategies that deal with the situation. The clan groups and members of the council appear also to be developing the ability to make decisions that are fair to everyone and to the whole region.

**Conclusion**

The governance structure has been established with foundations in traditional ways of doing business and resolving issues. It is still in the embryonic stage of development. The strength currently lies in its recognition by its constituents as a legitimate, relevant form of governance. However, many of the council members are middle-aged and educated in an era when the mission had a high priority on the ability to be able to read and write. During the period of the 1980s to the late 1990s, this emphasis on literacy diminished because of a range of factors. Literacy has now declined to a critically low level; levels not near the level of the current middle-aged members. The community is now faced with a dearth of educated people ready to step into the forthcoming leadership roles. This is one of the biggest challenges facing this region and others in the Territory.

Today young people are still ‘looked at’ in terms of traditional leadership attributes and are accorded and invested with more knowledge as they become more and more responsible. Whilst this investiture in the Aboriginal domain still continues to a degree, contemporary leadership identification, mentoring and knowledge-building to operate in the non-Aboriginal domain is haphazard and requires attention so that they work in tandem. Young people are identified relatively early in the ceremonial sphere;
there is no reason why a complementary scheme can not be trialed in a conjunction with the wider educational system.

People are often identified as potential spokespersons/leaders to work in areas of governance. Unfortunately, most of the capacity building occurs on the job. This has had limited effect. There has been little formalised training. Innovation is happening in the development of cross-cultural training for non-Aboriginals. It is anticipated that this will lead to ‘reverse’ type courses for Aboriginal people with modules included on governance. In other words, Aboriginal people are saying that there are many cultural elements of non-aboriginal society that they cannot understand. Such courses (T. Bullemor, pers. comm. 2005, refers to it as ‘citizenship’ training) would be conducted in the local dialect and in English and focusing on the explanation of key concepts.

Perhaps it is also appropriate to re-visit the concept of ‘going away.’ My research shows that this phenomenon existed with the middle-aged and older people. Whether it was going away to learn to be a stockman or to work in the RAAF, it was part of the life passage of these people which allows them to operate in their community and with outside agencies today. ‘Going away’ today might be to work with another council, study at an institution, be exposed to new ideas in another region, or pick fruit. Similarly, Noel Pearson (2005) talks about the need for young people today to embark on an ‘orbit’ to gain knowledge, skills, and experience.

One of the most influential factors in the support of the Thamarrurr governance model has been the support and involvement of senior men and women right from the very start. They are the foundations and the teachers on how it has progressed. They continue to be heavily involved. Their own authority has been strengthened by this involvement in many spheres. It is now time to consider pathways to devolve responsibilities to new leaders.

References


