JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia is the official publication of the Anthropological Society of South Australia. It is a refereed journal that has been published since 1963. A list of recent peer reviewers can be found on the Society’s website http://www.anthropologysocietysa.com. The journal primarily provides a forum for researchers of Indigenous Australian anthropology, archaeology, history and linguistics although broader topics related to all of these disciplines may also be included.

Contributions accepted include: articles (5000-8000 words), short reports (1000-3000 words), obituaries (500-2000 words), thesis abstracts (200-500 words) and book reviews (500-2000 words). Notes to contributors are available through the Society’s website.

Should you wish to submit a paper to the journal please direct your enquiries to the secretary of the Anthropological Society of South Australia (current contact details can be found on the Society's website).

The journal is free for current members of the Anthropological Society of South Australia. Subscription application/renewal forms are also available through the Society's website.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA COMMITTEE

President: Dr Keryn Walshe (South Australian Museum)
Secretary (Webmaster): Dr Amy Roberts (Flinders University)
Treasurer: Mr Tom Gara (Native Title Section – Crown Solicitor's Office – South Australia)
Councillor: Professor Peter Sutton (University of Adelaide/South Australian Museum)
Councillor: Dr Alice Gorman (Flinders University)
Councillor: Mr Chris Nobbs (South Australian Museum)
Councillor: Dr Janelle White (University of South Australia)

JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
EDITORIAL ADVISORY BOARD

The Editorial Advisory Board consists of members the Anthropological Society of South Australia committee as well as the following specialists:
Professor Lester-Irabinna Rigney (Wiltro Yerlo, University of Adelaide)
Professor Jane Lydon (University of Western Australia)
Dr Paul Monaghan (University of Adelaide)
Dr David Martin (Australian National University)
Dr Natalie Franklin (University of Queensland)
Professor Robert Layton (Durham University)
Professor George Nicholas (Simon Fraser University)
Dr Stephen Loring (Smithsonian Institution)

The views expressed in this journal are not necessarily those of the Anthropological Society of South Australia or the Editors.

© Anthropological Society of South Australia 2013

ISSN1034-4438
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial
Amy Roberts and Mick Morrison  ii

ARTICLES

‘Cheque Shirts and Plaid Trowsers’: Photographing Poonindie Mission, South Australia
Jane Lydon and Sari Braithwaite  1

The Making of ‘Mission Mob’: Koonibba Lutheran Mission as a Site of Memory
Eve Vincent  31

Narungga, the Townspeople and Julius Kühn: The Establishment and Origins of the Point Pearce Mission, South Australia
Skye Krichauff  57

Aboriginal Missions and Post-Contact Maritime Archaeology: A South Australian Synthesis
Madeline Fowler  73

The Trauma of the Government Taking Control: Roper River Mission (Ngukurr), Northern Territory
Murray Seiffert  90

Murder, Infanticide and the Moral Certainty of Ernest Kramer
Philip Batty  107
THE TRAUMA OF THE GOVERNMENT TAKING CONTROL: ROPER RIVER MISSION (NGUKURR), NORTHERN TERRITORY

Murray Seiffert¹

¹ Independent Researcher, Ivanhoe, VIC 3079, Australia

Abstract

In response to the devastating activities of settlers and travellers, the [Anglican] Church Missionary Society (CMS) established the historic Roper River Mission in 1908. Now known as Ngukurr community, this early trauma is well-known. Less well-known are the problems that developed as the government assumed control of the community in the late 1960s. This paper focuses on the reasons for this change in administration and subsequent events; there are many surprises, not the least that the mission agency’s policies at the time were influenced by its experiences in assisting to establish independent nations in East Africa. The new era was characterised by inadequate funding and often inappropriate staffing; this, along with uncertainty and loss of power led to trauma, passivity and loss of hope. This paper also illustrates the localised nature of critical issues, suggesting that research based in any community which was previously a mission – church or government – needs to recognise the local nuances of this period and be wary of accepting generalisations.

Introduction

For most Australians, the Roper River district near the south western corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria is about as remote as they can imagine. But from the 1870s it was the main route for people travelling to gold fields and other mines in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. It was also the stock-route for cattle moving to the Top End and the Kimberley district from eastern Australia; they had to move north of the desert region, and the Roper River provided an almost limitless supply of fresh water for travellers and local cattle stations.
There were many bloody conflicts between the settlers and travellers on one hand and the local Aboriginal people on the other; these are well-documented (Roberts 2005; Seiffert 2008). In 1908, the Roper River Mission was established by the [Anglican] Church Missionary Society (CMS) as a refuge. This provided a sanctuary and a community grew from the remnants of about eight language groups. The mission – about 300km east of Katherine – became the community of Ngukurr and has been marked as one of the growth centres for the Territory. Not surprisingly, these changes are likely to be relevant to social research conducted in the area.

This paper grew out of biographical research concerning Michael Gumbuli Wurramara, AM, one of the elders at Ngukurr. Born in 1935 on Bickerton Island, near Groote Eylandt, he was ordained as an Anglican minister in 1973 and for almost 40 years was the key Indigenous leader of that church in the NT. Over a number of years I interviewed Gumbuli and many of his colleagues, gathering much oral history along the way. During this time I was located at Nungalinya College, Darwin and worked with him on a regular basis.

I approached this research as a social scientist with a commitment to qualitative methodology. As the research progressed I soon realised that this man was an experienced community leader prior to 1973, and that I would never understand him until I understood something of the life of the community during this time. It was a particularly volatile period as management of the community moved from the mission society to the Welfare Branch of the NT Administration. Clearly Gumbuli had been one of a number of significant leaders during this time and this is when he developed many skills of organising and negotiation.

Developing a picture of community life proved to be a challenge. Some 'big picture' accounts of changes in government policy were available, but little on how this impacted life in communities. This paper shows how these changes developed at Ngukurr.
A Change of Administration

The process of the government assuming control of the mission was well-documented within the archives used by the government and CMS in Darwin, Canberra and Sydney. Surprisingly, it seemed as if most of the files had not been opened since they were deposited.

The research challenge soon came to focus on constructing an orderly account of the change of administration. The results of that research are published in *Gumbuli of Ngukurr: Aboriginal Elder in Arnhem Land* (Seiffert 2011).

CMS had been established by the English Evangelicals in 1799 and had links in many parts of the British Empire; one of its founders was William Wilberforce who was well-known for his commitment to the abolition of slavery (Seiffert 2008:101ff). This group’s commitment to land rights is documented by Reynolds (1992:81ff) in a chapter entitled ‘The First Land Rights Movement’. In the 20th century, East Africa had been a major focus of CMS Australia; in the mid-20th century, its work there centred on preparing Africans for independence. In the East African districts where it was located, as in the NT, the CMS was responsible for virtually all aspects of community life: local government, health and education.

When Uganda became independent in 1962, Kenya in 1963 and Tanzania in 1964, key CMS staff returned to Australia. Some of the more senior workers became involved in the administration of CMS missions in the NT. One in particular, George Pearson, who had been the school principal of one of the few secondary schools in Tanganyika, was appointed to oversee the work of CMS in the NT. His negotiating skills resulted in BHP developing arrangements for the people of Groote Eylandt which were well in advance of other agreements (Harris 1998:450-452). Pearson was described as being a ‘cyclone’ as he dramatically changed the administration of the CMS missions in the NT.

Having seen the success of his colleagues who were African nationals, Pearson looked at Arnhem Land through different eyes from many of his CMS colleagues and the Welfare Branch. This was only five years after the Welfare Branch decreed that “the use of the terms ‘aborigine’ and ‘native’ should be replaced by *ward*” (Giese 1957). In 1962, Pearson wrote:
A journey through Arnhem Land leaves the impression that we are dealing with a noble people, possessing very distinctive gifts and outstanding abilities, and having a promising future...The greatest challenge...is to break new ground in the direction of Aboriginal participation and responsibility. (Pearson 1962:2-3)

As a consequence of Pearson’s commitment, Aboriginal people were immediately appointed to all administrative committees on CMS missions. Of particular importance was the new Station Council in which the number of Aboriginal members was to equal the number of mission staff, initially half of whom were elected and half nominated by the Mission Superintendent. This was not unlimited democracy, but was a major step forward. The Station Council’s role was to establish priorities and to set work programs for the next week; its responsibilities included hygiene, station improvement, wages and conditions, rations, corroborees, building priorities and recreation. The other committee established at this time was the Church Council in each CMS-linked community; these committees continue to this day and are the longest-established Indigenous management committee in each of the centres.

At about this time the Northern Territory Council for Aboriginal Rights (NTCAR) became active, pressing for better conditions for Aboriginal people. Initially it received little support from mainstream unions, although this changed over time. The movement, however, did receive considerable support from the Communist Party of Australia. Most of the key Aboriginal leaders of the NTCAR were people from the Roper River Mission, including Phillip Roberts and Dexter Daniels. It is interesting that this strong commitment to Aboriginal rights came from Roper River people. There is no evidence that it grew as a reaction to the mission administration, but there are some signs that their commitment to land rights was long-standing.

These were the days of the conservative Menzies government, and Paul Hasluck’s assimilation policies, which Pearson summed up as follows:
Government’s thoughts regarding our [mission] stations have been expressed clearly; they regard them as channels for moving the Aborigines out into other parts, where employment would be available, leaving Arnhem Land empty behind them. We believe, on the contrary, that, as an indigenous native people, the Aborigines have every right to stay where they are, even on a lower standard of living, if they so choose, and that the Government has a duty to make this possible. (Pearson 1964)

Many years later, Sir Paul Hasluck revealed that the main pressure for the abolition of Aboriginal reserves in Arnhem Land came from mining interests (Hasluck 1988:100). There was also a proposal from within CMS for it to withdraw from Roper River Mission, but Pearson insisted that it should remain there for the time being, arguing that “the mission’s presence in these crucial years may well make the difference between their [the Roper River people] retaining their heritage in Arnhem Land, and losing it” (Pearson 1964).

Central to Pearson’s thinking was his view that CMS should rapidly accelerate the process of Aboriginal people taking control of the mission. This vision was strongly grasped by the Indigenous leaders of the mission.

One of the most significant steps for the community was initiated by CMS, who convinced the government to conduct a trial at the Roper River Mission. From 1960, no longer were social services such as child endowment and aged pensions to be paid to the mission society alone, but significant parts were to be paid to the eligible person with the remainder being used by the mission society for the provision of services. At the local level, this meant the introduction of a cash economy to people who were mostly unaccustomed to dealing with money (Seiffert 2011:172). The arrangement can be seen as having similarities to the current Income Management which has been introduced into prescribed communities in the Northern Territory by the Australian Government (Altman 2010).

After 1965 CMS did not handle any personal payments from the government, but they were posted directly to the recipients. It was clear to CMS that these decisions would be the beginning of the end of its administration, as the changes resulted in a dramatic decrease in income for administration of the mission. CMS personnel saw this change as unavoidable if
the Roper people were to take their place as full citizens. It became obvious that CMS would not be able to raise the additional finances that were required, over and above the government subsidies, to maintain the mission and develop the community, especially when it was committed to local people receiving award wages.

In addition to the financial problems, the mission society could not recruit the growing number of staff required, even for subsidised positions such as schoolteachers. The CMS documents of the time are quite clear that these were the two reasons which forced it to withdraw and pass full responsibility for the mission to the government. It is equally clear that the initiative for the changes in the processing of welfare payments came from the CMS. The mission became a national leader with these innovations and eventually these changes were introduced nationally. Not surprisingly government officers monitored these developments closely (Seiffert 2011:181; Sharp and Tatz 1966:188-190).

By June 1967, CMS realised that the anticipated financial problems associated with managing the mission were intensifying. It sought additional financial assistance, and when this was not forthcoming, it requested that the government take control of the mission from 1st July 1968.

CMS was clear that it did not want to abandon the mission. Commenting on relationships with the residents of the missions, one CMS official wrote:

We should endeavour to make it clear to the Aboriginal people that we have entered into another phase of our work and that this development is being thrust upon us and is not of our own choice. We should try to make them realise that although it may appear to be a withdrawal, it actually will be a step forward towards the goal of complete integration into the Australian community. They should be encouraged to take over as much responsibility as possible before any changeover takes place. I realise only too well that when we thrust responsibility on to them there will be problems and disappointments but I feel that it must be done if we are going to discharge our Christian duty towards them.

(Langford 1967)

One consequence of the events of the day was that CMS was no longer able to employ all available residents at the mission. Previously there had been a paternalistic form of Christian
commune, where almost every adult was described as a ‘Mission Worker’. In 1967, exposure to market forces, award wages for a few and unemployment benefits for the majority had arrived. This led to a significant degree of ill will, mostly directed towards the government, although some was towards CMS. A public meeting was called which expressed concern that the government had not supplied CMS with sufficient funds to maintain the mission (Seiffert 2011:174).

These events coincided with the delayed implementation, in 1968, of the Cattle Station Industry (Northern Territory) Award which caused major disruption to Aboriginal people in the NT. One consequence was that many mission-trained stockmen and their families returned to the mission, so that its population increased from 210 in 1968 to 480 in 1972, and housing conditions went from bad to worse, a problem that the government did not address seriously and was the cause of on-going protest.

One of the Roper people was Dexter Daniels who had been a union organiser with the Northern Australian Workers’ Union and involved with the Wave Hill walk-off in 1966. His brothers were key leaders at the mission. He was interested in organising a similar walk-off at Roper River Mission, but was not supported at this time, even by his family, although there was a withdrawal of labour for about four weeks in 1970 (Seiffert 2011:175, 191).

On the 29th of April 1968, Harry Giese, the Director of the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory advised the Department of the Interior in Canberra that:

...because of lack of suitably qualified staff and other impending staff problems [CMS] no longer can carry responsibility for administration of the mission. They have now asked that [the Northern Territory] administration assumes responsibility for station as from 1 July 1968. There is no question having regard to Society’s performance on this mission and at Angurugu and Rose River [Numbulwar] that it is unable to attract sufficient staff.

Eventually the Minister replied by teleprinter message; his reply arrived in Darwin on the 28th of June 1968, authorising Harry Giese to conduct negotiations with CMS with a view to taking control of the Roper River Mission from 1st July 1968!
The Minister has approved that you: Be authorised to conduct negotiations with CMS with a view to taking control of its Roper River establishment from 1 July 1968 and [s]eek the Society’s agreement to transferring the buildings and equipment essential to the continued conduct of Roper River without requiring financial compensation from the government. A further message is being prepared raising the question of whether our future at Roper should be by way of full-scale settlement or some other way (e.g. open township)....[It was noted that] Consideration [was] being given to possible new approach to future of Roper River and would appreciate your quick reaction to possibility of conducting Roper, not as a settlement but as some form of township. The thought here is that social development of Roper people might lend itself to “controlled experiment” of this nature.

(ce)ment of the Interior June 1968)

There was a clear difference between the approaches which the Minister had in mind and those that were acceptable to the Welfare Branch. The Minister’s imagination was expansive, including the establishment of an open township. Documents show that such an approach was ridiculed by Harry Giese (e.g., Giese 1968a). The Welfare Branch had clearly come to the end of its willingness to experiment and could not – or would not – contemplate the Minister’s ideas, ensuring that they could not be implemented. Of course, the Minister’s ideas had many similarities with those of George Pearson.

Harry Giese’s formal reply reveals considerable understanding of the situation, including significant observations of the attitudes of the people at the mission. It is entirely consistent with Gumbuli’s observations and his views:

If the whole range of activities at the mission is taken there is a substantial number of possibilities between the point where the government controls and directs all activities and the point where the Aboriginal group completely directs and controls all activities. The latter position is one that is not occupied by any community in the Northern Territory and, therefore is one which would be unrealistic in respect of an aboriginal settlement. It was clearly stated by the people that they were not ready to assume control of the mission. They made it clear that it was not their wish that the Welfare Branch should take control. They were equally clear, however in their statement that CMS should have remained in control.
They stated that they needed the assistance of CMS for some years to come to prepare them for a greater degree of self-dependence. Their objection to the transfer at this stage was that they would have to get used to Welfare Branch ways and Welfare Branch would have to get used to them and that this would retard the developmental process. (Giese 1968b)

This observation is consistent with Gumbuli’s statement that CMS withdrew too early. For him, if they had stayed longer, the local people could have been managing their own affairs by the time Welfare Branch took over.

It is interesting that there were some Welfare Branch officials who had close experience with the mission who believed that the department should have treated it as a special case and developed it into a ‘normal’ township. One of the few who is remembered as a competent administrator was Ian Pitman who had varying titles such as Area Advisor, and Superintendent; he commented that: “the Council as a group is strong, active and of independent spirit” (Pitman 1969).

Prior to the official date of the changeover, the transfer of administration had already commenced, with CMS withdrawing from running the school from early in 1968 because of lack of staff, particularly as there was a desire to establish classes at secondary school level. The new era of the school was disastrous, mainly related to staffing problems.

**Government Control**

When the government finally took control of the mission on the 1st of October 1968, it was quite unprepared for the task. It could not recruit enough staff, and some were unsuitable for the task. This was traumatic for the community who were accustomed to missionaries being adopted into local families and staying for a significant period of time. All of the missionaries moved out, except for the European chaplain who remained for a few years, and the health centre nurse, Edna Brooker, who remained until CMS relinquished the Health Centre in 1982, usually supported by an associate nurse.

Initially the government take-over was a dramatic step backwards in autonomy as government officers took over from elected committees and introduced new rules. Local people who
had been leaders, including the members of the key families, were pushed aside immediately, such as in the management of the community store (Seiffert 2011:189, 194-8). At the time, Pitman (1970) wrote:

There is no doubt whatsoever that the majority of people at Roper River wish to retain and enhance their distinctive identity as an Aboriginal group, living upon land over which they have at least some measure of control, in a community that is predominantly Aboriginal. A desire for a large measure of control over their own affairs exists in the community, and this will probably become more and more strongly expressed (Ford 1971).

Very quickly the community became disillusioned, with people reluctant to undertake work supervised by the new administration, and attitudes to government officers became hostile (Seiffert 2011:196, 201). For a period of months the settlement remained at a standstill bringing morale to a low level.

Lawlessness and drunkenness became common and the new administration had no solution to managing discipline within the community, something which had mostly been the responsibility of the community leaders for decades. Alcohol was prohibited from the community until the government allowed building contractors to bring it in (Seiffert 2011:209, 231-6). For over 50 years, the story of alcohol management has generally been a curious mixture of local control – mostly opposition – and governments ignoring local wishes.

From the earliest days of government management, its consultations with the community took the form of rushed meetings, leaving the local people feeling as if they were “never able to get a satisfactory hearing of their views” and “they were frightened of a white majority taking over the station” (Seiffert 2011:188).

As an example of the impact of the new regime, CMS had purchased horses from men who spent long periods out in the bush catching wild brumbies and breaking them in for use on the mission’s cattle enterprise. The new administration took the view that the horses belonged to the government and the proceeds of any sales should go to the government, not the workers; the government also introduced similar rules for unbranded cattle. One man complained “We are not doing
proper work, just picking up papers, moving stones and weeding” and another “we want to receive some training like the missionaries gave us in building and painting and plumbing” (Seiffert 2011).

The community recognised that it was now subservient to an administration which was very different from the mission society’s administration. It recognised that it had little control over anything at all. At the same time, issues of land rights were becoming important, such as at Wave Hill station. “God gave us the land!” was the cry at Ngukurr.

This was now a community which, at a personal level, was grieving the loss of a significant number of missionary friends and apprehensive about the new residents. There were many local people whose occupations had disappeared or been taken over by Europeans and an overarching sense of powerlessness. Some received direct knock-backs, such as the Head Stockman who sought to occupy some land to establish a small cattle enterprise. He was told that he wouldn’t be able to manage it.

A key point recognised by the Ian Pitman was that the Ngukurr people wanted control over their own affairs and did not welcome the Welfare Branch taking control. This resulted in a local strike aimed at achieving local independence and land rights. Pitman (1970) concluded that their vision of ‘self-government’ was to be:

...economically self-sufficient, or largely so, and administered by a Council of Aboriginals possessing the authority to determine local affairs and development. Such staff as there would need to be should be Aboriginal as far as possible...Implied...is a rejection of the assimilation-cum-integration policy which the government still officially follows...

In October 1971, Ian Pitman eventually attempted to reform the local Station Council so as to include more Aboriginal representation.

The Government’s attitude to local people is illustrated by the following interchange when it agreed to the building of a new health centre/hospital. The Station Council asked: Will the [Station] Council, as the representative body of the Ngukurr community have the privilege of viewing the plans and making recommendations for changes? The relevant officer replied:
The plans for the new hospital have been completed and a copy can be made available to the Station Council for information. It is not usual for this type of facility to be submitted for consideration because of its specialist nature. The plans of the hospital have been developed in full consultation with the appropriate professional staff at the Department of Health. (Ford 1971)

Four years after the changeover, Harry Giese, while noting that the Minister had directed that “as much as possible the management of the centre should devolve on the Aborigines...[added that] Reports from [many people] have referred variously to an atmosphere of discontent, lassitude and unrest in the community, and to an aggressive attitude on the part of many members of the community...toward the government. The reports refer also to poor relationships between various sectors of the European community, and between many Aborigines and some sectors of this [European] community and to a lowering of the morale of the whole community and consequent lack of interest in the development of social and economic programs.” He notes that that “Roper River seems to be a bad example of complete community breakdown with morale and attitudes among Aborigines at a depressed and low level...I believe that Roper is heading for some major ‘blow-up’ unless some new purpose and incentive can be instilled into the place” (Giese 1972). Giese (1972) argued that the problems at Ngukurr had arisen because of the limited number of staffing vacancies the Minister would authorise and the limited funds available for capital works.

These were the events of 1968. Government policy continued to support mission societies for many years after then. At a conference for mission societies, convened by the Whitlam Labor Government in March 1975, the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Senator J.L. Cavanagh said “The Government looks to missions as a continuing source of assistance to the Aboriginal communities so long as those communities want them to remain” (Cavanagh 1975).
There is no question that there were government officers who wanted the Ngukurr people to have control over their own affairs, but there were a variety of visions looking to different levels of independence. The Federal Government clearly wanted to see a higher level of independence than did the Northern Territory’s Welfare Branch. Even Welfare Branch officers such as Ian Pitman, who looked to greater local freedom than his senior officer, found himself unable to implement such policies because the legislative basis was inadequate (Pitman 1970). As an example, the local people expected that the ‘Mission Lease’, which had been administered by CMS, would revert to them. Instead, it simply became Crown Land, the local people having few privileges for its use.

**A Paradox**

The paradox of the government’s stated goals for independence is that there seems to be only two instances in which the local people were able to exercise some sense of autonomy. One was the decision to choose the name ‘Ngukurr’ for the community, the other was the choice of Kriol as the language of the community which was a decision made at a meeting of Ngukurr residents (Seiffert 2011:185, 211).

The allowances paid to adults in the community were called training allowances. One of the Aboriginal leaders pointed out that the main thing people wanted to do was to earn money. This was a problem because the money earned from the cattle program went directly to ‘Consolidated Revenue’. He also asked “why the term training allowance was used when few people received any training. How could you be a trainee labourer?” It was also recognised that the training allowance was too low for maintaining a family, and simply overcame the problem of the government paying a fair wage.

Many of the actions of the new administration disempowered the Ngukurr people. The construction of houses was one of them. Previously the mission had trained men as builders, mostly working under the supervision of skilled missionaries. After the government took over, it imported contractors to build houses while the trained mission workers on welfare payments watched from the sidelines. When maintenance issues arose, there was nobody to fix them.
Events linked to the community store are typical of many episodes. For quite some time, the locals had full control of the store, initially with assistance in management and bookkeeping. Then the Welfare Branch took control, pushing the experienced committee aside. One of the last CMS chaplains at the mission reported:

Ian Pitman in a long discussion with me the other evening said that there are some things he hopes CMS will note re. the Roper River handover...[recognising that there were other missions to be handed over.] I gather that one of the main causes of much of the ‘trouble’ in his estimation, particularly the trouble in the Shop, is that CMS gave the Aborigines the feeling that they had absolute control of the running of the shop, thus making it very difficult for the managers and committees.

On the other hand I would like to say that in the case of the last three managers of the shop [all Europeans], each has been incompetent and two out of the three have had deep emotional problems and have been just plain unstable. While then there is something to learn from what Ian Pitman says, the main and basic reason for the sad and serious state of affairs at present in the shop has been the continual mismanagement of the business. [Emphasis added] (Woodbridge 1970)

The autonomy which the officer noted was exactly what CMS were promoting, as they had promoted in East Africa, but it was different from the expectations of the government, which were far from clear.

The obvious point from this review of the changes at Ngukurr is that it was a traumatic time for all residents, especially the leaders who were put into a position of having to argue for their community. One of the key leaders, Douglas Daniels, died in May 1975 aged 47 years; local people attributed his premature death to the pressure on him to continually fight for his people.
Conclusions

Today at Ngukurr, some of the issues seem better, some seem worse. There is a major development in the housing situation within the community, creating what is virtually a new suburb. On the other hand, the creation of the so-called ‘super shires’, in this case the Roper Gulf Shire, which is 78% of the area of the State of Victoria, has developed a structure where there are only two representatives from Ngukurr, and for many people, the feeling of disempowerment remains. The new conservative government in the NT is committed to increasing local decision-making.

Certainly these changes in the management of the community are central to developing an understanding of the events of the late 20th century and early 21st century, as the origins of many of the current stresses in remote Aboriginal communities can be found in the changes in politics and economics as the government took control of the mission (Altman 2007; Seiffert, 2011:161).

Equally as important as this point, are the differences between communities. In the 1960s, there were four separate missions managed by CMS in south-eastern Arnhem Land and Groote Eylandt. Each one had quite different origins and the strengths and stresses in each are different to this day. The variables would be even greater for missions managed by different organisations in widespread locations. Key factors include origins of the residents, dislocation or maintenance of traditional social structures, employment opportunities and mining, and substance abuse. As shown in this case study, probably the most significant missed opportunity was when the NT administration failed to grasp the opportunity of promoting Ngukurr’s community and economy as encouraged by the Federal Government, the mission authorities and the leaders of the mission.
References


