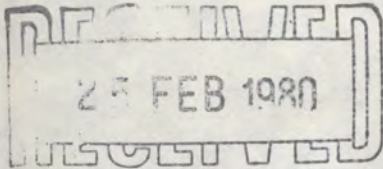
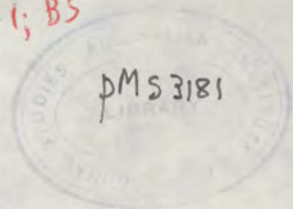


A1; B5



RES: B-96

Research in Aboriginal Economy
Report of Fieldwork in Yuendumu, Willowra and Numbulwar
by
Dr Elspeth Young
Department of Social Security, Canberra
17 July 1979

This talk by Dr Young is the most recent progress report on a research project on the socio-economic situation of Aboriginals in three different communities in the Northern Territory. The project is co-ordinated by E.K. Fisk of the A.N.U. Development Studies Centre and is funded through a research grant from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The main aim of the project is to show how the Aboriginal economy fits into the overall Australian economy. Dr Young's main focus is on "how Aboriginal people make a living". Her talk concentrated on the role of wages and Social Security payments in the Aboriginal economy.

The three Aboriginal communities which were selected for close study were:

- Yuendumu is a community of 1,500 people including 100 Europeans and is the largest Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory. The community is centrally located and not dispersed to outstations to any great extent.
- Willowra is a community of 250 people situated on a pastoral lease owned by the community. The property is situated 200 km north of Yuendumu on the edge of the Tanami Desert.
- Numbulwar, N.E. of Roper River and a former mission, has 400 people. Dr Young notes some factional differences during her stay. At Numbulwar, Europeans had controlled many of the projects, including the garden which had failed because it was not in tune with Aboriginal requirements. This project stopped operating about 3 yrs ago, and is only one example of the problem of introducing projects which can only be successful when run along European lines.

The project is examining resources, both monetary and non-monetary, and how they are used by the three Aboriginal communities. Dr Young also attempted to analyse the employment structure of these communities and gauge what amount of funds entering a community was used for Aboriginal as against non-Aboriginal wages. She also stressed the need to distinguish between income which Aboriginal people actually use for family support and that which supports the infrastructure in the community.

It was difficult and inappropriate (in terms of resources) to assess the amount which a particular individual received because of sharing in the community. Dr Young did however, arrive at a per capita figure in each community and the proportion derived from wages and Social Security benefits. Traditional food sources (another form of income) are used as a very important source of nutrition to supplement western foodstuffs purchased at the community stores - but their importance varied seasonally, by location (more important in Numbulwar i.e. Top End), and according to access (vehicles, living in outstations etc.)

The following tables show average per capita income, categories of Social Security payments (as a percentage of total Social Security payments) and the community's sources of income (either wages, Unemployment Benefits, or other Social Security payments). Information was gathered from a number of groups including extended families, widows and nuclear families: these tables apply to the whole community.

Table 1

Variations in Department of Social Security (DSS) Payments

	<u>Yuendumu</u>	<u>Willowra</u>		<u>Numbulwar</u>
		Jan* 1979	Mar* 1979	
Income per capita per fortnight (includes a very small amount from sales of artefacts. There is limited access to markets).	\$47	\$33	\$47	\$64
% from wages	57%	18%	42%	70%
% from D.S.S.	43%	82%	58%	30%

(* Employment at Willowra tends to be seasonal,
e.g. mustering)

Table 2

Categories of Social Security Payments (% of total receipts from Social Security)

	<u>Yuendumu</u>	<u>Willowra</u>	<u>Numbulwar</u>
Unemployment Benefit (UB)	50	48	25
Pensions	36	42	56
Child Endowment (FA)	14	10	19

Table 3

Source of Income (i.e. % of adults aged 15-55)

		<u>Yuendumu</u>	<u>Willowra</u>		<u>Numbulwar</u>
			(a)*	(b)*	
Wages	Male	22	7	28	54
	Female	17	5	14	19
U.B.	Male	16	31		9
	Female	2	1		-
Other DSS) Pensions)	Male	3	3		4
	Female	10	13		17
Nothing	Male	59	59		33
	** Female	71	81		64

* (a) January 1979

* (b) March 1979

** Most receive Family Allowance

Employment and Education

All these communities have relatively large populations but limited economic opportunities. Many of the eligible workforce are unemployed (See Table 3 - actual proportion of men 15 - 55 in Numbulwar not working = 46). Employed Aboriginals are engaged mostly in unskilled or semi-skilled jobs such as camp cleaning or firewood collection. At Yuendumu, the Council is by far the largest employer (50%) followed by the Department of Education (14%) and the Yuendumu Housing Association (8%). At Willowra the pastoral enterprise is the major employer but work is seasonal and for most of the time the majority of the community is unemployed.

Yuendumu school has been operating a bi-lingual system since 1974, and, in addition to teacher aides working in the classroom, in its language centre, employs three people full-time and six part-time. Much of the instruction is carried out in Walbiri. Walbiri is also the principal language at Willowra. Numbulwar has no language centre and bi-lingual education, in English and Nunggubuyu, has proved hard to establish, partly because of the strength of Roper River Kriol in the community.

Yuendumu and Willowra both enjoy good community-school relations and school attendance levels are reasonably high (75% at Yuendumu). At Yuendumu European staff participate in a variety of activities organised by the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal and European children also mix freely at Yuendumu and some of the European children are bi-lingual.

Although the Walbiri bi-lingual program has progressed at a rapid rate, as yet, no Social Security pamphlets have been produced in Walbiri. A difficulty in publishing in languages other than English is the problem of the translation of European concepts. In the Chimbu region, P.N.G., a local radio program, 'Talk Savvy' is run in the regional language. Individual messages could be relayed on this network, and this was a great help to illiterate people. Similar programs in the N.T. could provide a useful means of publicising Social Security pensions and benefits.

The Willowra community has not sent any students to Yirara College since 1973 but some post-primary children are educated at Willowra. Although some Yuendumu children go to Yirara, the Yuendumu community would like its own Walbiri High school. Numbulwar has sent only a few children to Kormilda and currently there are none at Dhupuma. In each community, parents are apprehensive about the social and cultural pressures to which their children may be subjected in town, and often prefer to keep them at home.

Housing and Health

Both Aboriginals and Europeans live in houses in the Yuendumu town area but at Numbulwar the Aboriginal and European villages are quite separate. Yuendumu has many humpies in several fringe camps. As a result, social relationships in that community are poorly developed (about 70% of the Aborigines are in this type of structure), Numbulwar has only one numpy. Most Aboriginals try to retain as much as possible of their traditional lifestyle. This is because these houses are airless, not planned for the climatic extremes common in these environments, and not appropriate for extended families and maintenance of Aboriginal customs. When provided with transitional housing they prefer to sleep, eat and cook outside and keep the central room for storage. Deaths, disagreements and ceremonies are the major reasons why people abandon houses.

Yuendumu has a modern clinic staffed by European nursing sisters and Aboriginal health workers. This facility is intensively used by the whole community and provides important basic health care. While Yuendumu has three male health workers, Willowra has no males in this job. This results fewer male patients coming for treatment by the European Sister during official hours, but some come after hours.

Although many Aboriginals now use European health services, they still believe strongly in traditional methods of healing. Men and women who are known to have healing powers are much in demand and work both in the camps and, occasionally, at the health centre. Some of the Yuendumu Pintubi are famous for their skills and are visited by people from Willowra and other communities as well as by Walbiri residents in the community.

Community Stores

Originally the stores at Yuendumu and Numbulwar were run by the mission. Now these communities have supermarkets. While the Numbulwar store is still run by the mission (CMS) Yuendumu store is run by the Social Club. (At Yuendumu, Aboriginals hold some of the higher management jobs). The Willowra store is currently being run by European businessmen who have a private contract with the Community. The store at Yuendumu is owned by the communities and also function as social centres. Willowra store was formerly under community control but is now privately run by outsiders (see above). On cheque days, when much of the shopping was done, it was not uncommon for people to spend three hours at the store. Shopping for food at these stores tended to be done by women with men purchasing items other than food.

In late 1978 the community store at Willowra had debts on its books totalling \$60,000 due largely to the rapid turnover of bookkeepers and lack of community understanding. Some papers relating to accounts were lost or mislaid. The present private arrangement is providing a necessary community service, and giving the Willowra people time to improve their financial position. They expect to wipe off this debt through 1979 cattle sales.

At Numbulwar, goods are sometimes sold at inflated prices, partly because of high costs of freight during the wet season (there are no road communications for approximately 5 months). Shop-keepers sometimes leave perishable items such as soft fruits, on the shelves after they have deteriorated and still price them highly.

Social Security and the Aboriginal Economy

Unlike the situation in the Top End outstations, people cannot remain sedentary in large groups for long in the Tanami Desert (or other parts of Central Australia) unless they have reliable water supplies. As employment opportunities are severely limited, outstation people rely on income support, including Social Security payments, to survive. Those in central settlements also depend largely on this source of money.

At Numbulwar only one person had received Unemployment Benefit prior to 1978. This was a result of the policy of the Anglican Mission which had not passed on information about entitlements to the community, nor passed back information to the Department of Social Security about people's eligibility. There had been a slight change since as the Numbulwar Council was now responsible for publicising Social Security information, but there was no mechanism for ensuring that information reached all groups in the community. There also seems to be variations in departmental policy - in the Top End social security people feel that UB is less essential and may in fact undermine self-employment in the artefact industry thus it is not encouraged. This ignores the fact that places like Numbulwar make few

artefacts - they are not all like Yirrkala.

Dr Young feels that the reasons why so many men have neither work nor receive unemployment benefits are complex. Part of the problem lies with the Department of Social Security. There are poor communications between departmental officers and would-be recipients. This is because the bureaucracy cannot easily accommodate itself to the special needs of illiterate and semi-literate clients, because the Department has been short of fieldworkers in the Central Australian region and because of the inflexibility and inappropriateness of rules and regulations operated by the Department, particularly in regard to the "work test" when applied to Aboriginals in remote localities. Other reasons are that some people are unwilling to apply for benefits, because they feel shame doing so, and that some leaders in the community do not consider that young unmarried men should receive this type of payment.

Another group which misses out on income is the old men (aged fifty years or so) who have never worked for wages, but only for rations, e.g. as at the Willowra Stock Camp until 1973, where the work consisted mainly of mustering and fencing. Now, only the younger men get jobs and are paid wages. The older men are not literate, are unemployed, and have failed the work test. Often these men are traditional leaders and have a very important status in the community.

Dr Young believes that most of the cash that comes into the communities is spent in the stores - about 70% at Numbulwar, about 80% at Yuendumu and over 80% at Willowra goes into the local stores to purchase food and clothing. As Willowra had no bank, the fortnightly Social Security cheques were also cashed at the store. Both Yuendumu and Numbulwar have a Commonwealth Bank. On cheque day, sales of "non-essential" items such as gum and cakes were prolific. When money became short later on in the fortnight, people were more likely to purchase basic items such as flour. Pensioners tended to spend less money on non-essential items than wage earners did. Soft drinks were a major item of expenditure, but mainly because they were the only cold liquid available.

Much of the remaining income was redistributed through gambling, and large winnings were then used to buy cars. Small gains went to the store for food. Although women owned cars, they rarely had access to them.

At Numbulwar, \$8,000 was spent in four weeks on charter flights mainly to attend to essential ceremonial business. Very rarely were these trips for the purpose of just drinking and seeing friends. Dr Young sees the maintenance of traditional contacts with clan and family over long distances as being quite important. In those communities which hope to get future mining royalties it is planned to use part of the money to travel to ceremonies etc. and not have to rely totally on government income.

(This summary was prepared by the Aboriginal Unit, D.S.S., and Research Section, D.A.A.).