

# **MWERRE ANETYEKE MPARNTWELE**

## **(SITTING DOWN GOOD IN ALICE SPRINGS)**

**A PROJECT BY TANGENTYERE COUNCIL**

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### **Project Aims**

THE MWERRE ANETYEKE MPARNTWELE PROJECT HAS RECENTLY commenced in Alice Springs. It has been conceived and is driven by Aboriginal elders, although it utilises an experienced non-Aboriginal facilitator in a coordination and secretarial role. The project has, during its evolution, been called the Social Behaviour Project, the Anti-Social Behaviour Project and Town Camp Law. It aims, over several generations, to gradually socialise Aboriginal people into agreed-upon styles of preferred healthy social behaviour, in response to the currently widespread alcohol-related violence and numerous other types of anti-social behaviour. The Arrernte title, *Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele* (sitting down good in Alice Springs) refers to such preferred ideal behaviour. This paper provides a description of the project's ideology and its current and proposed methods.

The program is orientated to three broad categories of Aboriginal people:

- n the residents of the nineteen established town camps of Alice Springs;
- n the permanent and itinerant residents of up to twelve small informal camps in the Todd River and Charles Creek in central Alice Springs; and
- n Aboriginal people from the outlying communities of Central Australia, including those adjoining the Northern Territory in South Australia and Western Australia, who visit the Alice Springs town camps, and use Alice Springs as their regional centre. The visitation of bush people is characterised by a large influx of money into town camps, heavy drinking sprees, noisy all-night partying and associated problems.

The "problem" behaviours that the Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project seeks to address are numerous and well-documented, and include: alcohol-related violence; inappropriate sexual behaviour between "skin" groups; sexual assault; the spending of money on liquor leaving little or none for food; the ignoring of obligations to non-drinking relatives; neglect of commitments to work and ceremony; damage to personal and public property; and inappropriate behaviour towards host families by bush visitors. The extent of social problems caused by or contributed to by alcohol abuse are well documented, but see especially Langton et al. (1991), Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report (NT), and Tangentyere Council's "What everybody knows about Alice", and its River Campers Report. Detailed definition of "preferred" and "non-preferred" styles of behaviour are being resolved by Aboriginal participants in the program through a series of conferences, consultations, workshops, and attempts at putting such into practice.

The creation of a better "style of drinking" is especially important. Many social problems are caused by "binge drinking" which is not only injurious to the health of the drinker, but disruptive to other Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents of the town, as it often leads to rowdy behaviour, social disruption, neglect, violence, property damage, vehicle accidents and shame. Apart from the social costs, this type of behaviour imposes a heavy economic burden on the Central Australian community—probably some tens of millions of dollars per year. The Social Behaviour Project aims to reduce such damaging behaviour, and its associated social, psychological, and economic costs.

The ideological and methodological approach in this project is believed to be a more holistic one than that tried by any government or Aboriginal agency in Central Australia before, involving both reactive and pro-active strategies and involving many divergent albeit interrelated problem dimensions, including behavioural norms, leadership, social structure and cohesion, social authority, conflict management, communally sanctioned punishment, educational processes, and personal identity with sacred sites and Dreamings. It is argued that this more holistic approach is necessary in order to come to terms with the complex and rampant problems of Aboriginal violence in Alice Springs. This project aims to impact on anti-social behaviour in a manner which has not been possible from within the conventional agencies (police, courts, prisons, church, etc). Emphasis is placed on culturally appropriate methods, drawing on traditional Aboriginal concepts when available, relevant and applicable

(for example, the authority roles of elders, the use of the "square-up" concept—see later).

### **The Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project**

The Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project will involve a series of integrated sub-programs to help create better social behaviour and more appropriate use of alcohol in the Alice Springs region. It is hoped that an initial and careful balance of research, design, trial implementation and evaluation, will provide the foundation for the long-term project aims of implementing social changes over several generations, into the twenty-first century. Although the project has been operating in piecemeal fashion for several years, it is only in the last four months that it has been implemented in an intense manner under the coordination of Dr. Memmott. He is in turn directed by the Four Corners Council, a Council of male elders from the Alice Springs town camps who form a consultative group for Tangentyere Council on matters of Aboriginal law. At present, women's sub-programs are being planned which will be controlled by the Tangentyere Women's Committee, a parallel women's elders' group to the Four Corner's Council, and whose coordinator is Ms Betty Pearce.

Each component of the Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project is part of an overall strategy to reduce the incidence of destructive behaviour through information, intervention, negotiation, and education. A common denominator is the identification and reinforcement of the role of Aboriginal elders, and their powers arising from Aboriginal Law, and which are relevant to addressing contemporary social problems. In detail, the sub-program components are as follows.

#### *Preferred and non-preferred behaviour*

This phase of the project has involved holding elders' meetings and workshops to develop lists of preferred and non-preferred forms of behaviour in town camps and in Alice Springs, based on Aboriginal values. These lists are being discussed at town camp meetings and at bush community meetings in order to refine and gain endorsement for such. The rules can then be incorporated into conflict management and mediation processes.

It is not expected that there will be a sudden conformity with the rules in the town camps; the process of change can only be gradual. However, change cannot occur until there is an agreed-upon ideal at which to aim in working at such change. The rules thus provide an important reference point.

#### *Bush elders' consultations throughout Central Australian communities*

These consultations are being held between Four Corners Council elders and elders in the many settlements throughout Central Australia in which reside the Arrernte, Alyawarre, Kaytetye, Warumungu, Warlpiri, Pitjantjatjara and other language groups.

These consultations intend to:

- n explain and gain support for the town camp rules and the program generally, in bush communities;
- n identify common interrelated problems and joint solution strategies; and

- n deal with specific problems such as getting bush people home and co-participation in conflict resolution. The most important purpose of these trips is to seek formal endorsement of the project by bush elders and to nominate bush representatives to the Four Corners Council from each centre. These representatives will in turn be assembled at a large regional conference later this year in order to consider the progress of the Project. It is also intended to engage them, when appropriate, in conflict mediation involving protagonists from within their own groups. These trips have to date been carried out by members of the Four Corners Council under the coordination of an Aboriginal cultural officer, Mr Ian Liddle (a traditional owner for the Alice Springs region). Funds are being sought for a parallel program of consultation by women elders.

### *Conflict management and mediation*

Whilst Tangentyere Night Patrol provides a first line of intervention in Aboriginal conflicts, this sub-program goes further, by attempting to manage the worst or most potentially disruptive disputes so that they terminate and do not continue as a drunken series of reverberating paybacks and homicides. Such problems are not necessarily solved by the normal judicial and corrective services systems. Indeed they may well be exacerbated. The incarceration of a convicted killer, without undergoing organised tribal payback for his homicide, is likely to result in ongoing acts of drunken retaliation against the innocent family members of the convicted person, by those who are aggrieved.

The Aboriginal concept of a controlled "square-up" is a principal method under evaluation in this project, used to manage the worst conflicts, which involve homicides, severe stabbings, brain injuries, et cetera. This technique involves assembling the protagonists and their close families including their senior-most responsible leaders, together with other elders from their tribes, neutral elders as witnesses, elders from Mparntwe (traditional owners of Alice Springs), and the leaders of the camps where violence occurred. The presence of the traditional owners is seen to legitimise events in the eyes of the local country holders in whose land, transgression of the law is occurring. The senior elders of the protagonists' groups are encouraged to judge the situation and decide on whether any appropriate punishment is required. Once emotions are "squared-up", the protagonists are required to shake hands and commit themselves to having finished their troubles. This method has met with most success in conflicts between rival gangs of siblings or other conflicts between family groupings.

A recent outstanding example involved the assembly by Warlpiri elders of about 150 adults on the Yuendumu oval to witness and participate in the public chastisement of two gangs of young men who had been assaulting one another in Alice Springs for five years. The assembly stressed the closeness of their grandfathers who had been ceremonial partners, and insisted that the men hug one another, shake hands and reconcile.

By invoking the town camp rules in the process and involving a public shaming process, as well as other types of Aboriginal punishments, this approach is thus designed to introduce notions of responsibility for correct behaviour, and social disdain for unacceptable behaviour, as well as a socially accepted form of Aboriginal justice.

A range of approaches to conflict management is necessary due to the different types and severity of problems, as well as the differing identities of individuals involved. For example, treatment of an internal camp conflict will differ to that of an inter-camp conflict, or a conflict between people from a town camp and a bush community. Internal camp conflicts may occur within a single extended family or alternatively between permanent residents and partying bush visitors who have overstayed their welcome. Inter-camp conflicts often involve gangs of young men who strike unexpectedly, terrorising residents with knives and sometimes guns. Their disputes usually commence in bars or clubs, and reverberate on to town camps.

Funds are currently being sought to employ male and female Aboriginal Mediators or "Square-up" Officers, who will coordinate the dispute management process. Their roles will be to consult with town camp leaders who are experiencing a serious social problem in their camp and who have requested assistance, and then to organise a mediation meeting with an appropriate composition of people as described above.

A further role of the Mediation Officer will be to regularly monitor the nineteen town camps for the occurrence of serious problems, through regular interaction with camp leaders, Night Patrol staff, Tangentyere's Housing Officers, et cetera. In circumstances of alcohol abuse, it will be the duty of the Mediation Officer to involve Tangentyere's AAA Counsellors to offer and provide alcohol treatment to individuals. The mediation process thus aims to draw in a wide range of town camp people and in so doing generate experiences of leadership and strengthen social cohesion in communities. This in turn is an empowering process which provides people with the skills and confidence to solve many of their own problems.

With the strengthening and increased involvement of the Women's Elders' Council it is expected that more incidents of spouse violence, rape and child abuse will be addressed. The male elders consider it essential that female elders be involved in dealing with female antagonists and victims.

#### *Leadership and social cohesion*

Leadership and social cohesion will be encouraged by all aspects of the Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project. The "social rules" must have, and must be seen to have, the backing and support of the appropriate Aboriginal leaders, both men and women, to have any effect. Furthermore, leaders cannot quell spontaneous alcohol-fuelled trouble in camps unless they are self-confident, well-respected and can draw upon their fellow residents for any necessary physical support.

One way to strengthen leadership and social cohesion is through ongoing participation in the male elders' Four Corners Council and the Women's Elders' Council. The Four Corners Council is currently the dominant Aboriginal force behind the Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project. The Four Corners Council established itself in February 1991 and has formally met fourteen times in the period up to March 1992, that is an average of once a month. Recent meetings have involved a minimum of sixteen members and up to twenty-eight members present. There is a membership list of about fifty male initiated elders who are resident on the town camps. However, the attendance at meetings is flexible since elders from bush communities who are visiting town are usually encouraged to participate; whilst formal members may often be absent at their out-stations. The composition is such that it incorporates representatives of all of the sixteen or more language groups in Central Australia as well as traditional owners of Alice Springs itself. This gives the Four Corners Council

a capacity to communicate with elders from other tribes or language groups, and to ask for their support and assistance, particularly in dealing with their own people when they come to Alice Springs. The name "Four Corners" was originated by the Arrernte elder, Wenten Rubuntja. It is his term for the site Nthwerrke or Emily Gap, into which four significant travel lines of ancestral heroes converge, linking together tribes from all four corners of the Central Australian region.

An underlying ideology of the Council is a commitment to Aboriginal Law. It aims to educate, advise and adjudicate on the basis of Aboriginal Law. Furthermore, the Council aims to support Aboriginal culture, particularly those aspects that relate to:

- n standards of appropriate behaviour (from an Aboriginal viewpoint); and
- n the holding of ceremonies on town camps. The adherence to Aboriginal law and the recovery of influence over young men through the revitalisation of ceremony is another method of strengthening leadership and social cohesion.

The Tangentyere Women's Elders' Council consists of a body of leaders from the town camps who have similar aims to the Four Corners Council (keeping the Law, improving social behaviour). Funds are currently sought to strengthen this group and broaden their membership so that they work parallel to and in liaison with the men's Council. It is well known that in many urban Aboriginal contexts, it is often the women who are the strongest leaders.

A number of meetings of camp elders and leaders have already been successfully held, and have led to cross-camp support between certain leaders. Another method which will be used to strengthen leadership is the holding of a workshop on "leadership skills". A proposed theme is "big leaders and what they do", a type of oral history dealing with the biographies, ideologies and practices of strong Aboriginal leaders. Workshops may be combined with ceremonial demonstrations, and with bush leaders in attendance.

#### *Educational strategy*

This component involves the design and implementation of a long-term public program aimed at encouraging appropriate social behaviour in the town camps over several generations. This will be done in close cooperation with the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Planning Unit (CAAAPU), the Coordinator of the Central Australian Aboriginal Alcohol Media Strategy, and the Institute for Aboriginal Development.

The themes of the educational messages will relate to the basic content and ideology of the project:

- n Aboriginal history of Alice Springs, early territorial and behavioural rules, plus territorial camping patterns of the 1960s and 70s;
- n the pitfalls and trauma of alcohol abuse experienced by Aboriginal town camp residents and their visitors in recent years;

- n the current proposed rules of preferred and non-preferred behaviour, the identity of the camp leaders and their roles, appropriate territorial rules, the processes of conflict management and mediation being employed; and
- n the advantages to Aboriginal people of using or visiting Alice Springs within the constraints of particular lifestyle types (preferred behaviour).

Funding is to be sought from appropriate bodies to implement aspects of the program on an ongoing basis during the implementation phase. Suggestions of what might be produced are:

- n a video on "Town Camp Law";
- n a series of about 15 one to two-minute radio programs on "Town Camp Law";
- n school teaching materials on preferred town camp lifestyle for use in town and bush schools throughout the Central Australian region;
- n distribution of information on town camp rules and the identity of town camp leaders to bush communities; and
- n advertisements on Imparja Television.

An initial phase of this sub-program has been the presentation of the project concepts to the senior staff of the various Aboriginal agencies in Alice Springs such as Aboriginal Congress (health service), the Central Land Council and the others mentioned above, together with a request for their criticism and advice and ultimately their endorsement. This in itself has been a mutually productive educational experience.

#### *Participation in the Government's Judicial and Corrective Services systems*

It is clear from the outcome of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, that it is necessary to introduce into the conventional State judicial and corrective services systems, more culturally appropriate approaches and methods. By way of introduction to this goal, this sub-program comprises a six-month pilot strategy consisting of the following components:

- n the development of a role for the men's Four Corners Council and the Women's Elders' Council in advising the judiciary on the appraisal of Aboriginal crime and appropriate sentencing, including a wider range of community sentencing options as well as customary law procedures;
- n the provision of a counselling and consultation service to gaol inmates to assist them to prepare for and resolve the likely circumstances of payback and tribal punishment impending their release from prison;
- n the development of effective methods of repatriation of offenders to home communities after release from gaol or after court procedures, in order to prevent immediate return to alcoholic behaviour, recidivism and disruption

of town camp communities in Alice Springs; and where necessary incorporating alcohol counselling and treatment from CAAAPU; and

- n participation in the NT Law Reform Committee on matters of Aboriginal customary law.

A subsidiary aim of this sub-program is to mount a low-key, cross-cultural, educational process and ideological re-orientation of values amongst the police, correctional services, town council, and judiciary of Alice Springs, and to encourage a more culturally sensitive approach to their respective operations. It should be noted that the Four Corners Council already enjoys a highly cooperative relation with the senior police officers who have demonstrated a willingness to lend support with their ground staff in dealing with more difficult negotiations between Aboriginal offenders who are known to the elders, but not actually under the surveillance of the police themselves. Aboriginal police aides are also able to be coopted at times from the police by the Four Corners Council for important negotiations or meetings.

#### *River campers rehabilitation strategy*

This sub-program aims to move illegal river campers from the central reaches of the Todd River in accordance with a pre-planned strategy. These campers are composed of people from the entire range of Central Australian tribes who have gravitated into town.

This proposal is pursuant to a decision by the Four Corners Council, that most of the campers have no right to be in the central Todd, neither in accordance with Aboriginal law, nor conventional Australian law. The worst offence from an Aboriginal viewpoint is the burning of sacred trees in the riverbed. In pre-European times the presence of these sites along the central Todd prevented people from camping in the river at all. Damage of the trees is sacrilege. When Four Corners elders visit bush communities, they stress the point that Arrernte people do not travel to such remote centres, conduct drinking sprees and destroy sacred sites, therefore the reverse should not occur either.

It should be noted that most of the river campers pursue a heavy alcoholic lifestyle and do not wish to move from the riverbed. They are often placed in the watch-house, but this seldom deters them from their lifestyle. The Council fines that can be imposed for river camping are not substantial and can be met through several days of community service or a very short prison sentence. The main problems then are:

- n to find an ideological rationale for the movement to which the campers will respond;
- n to facilitate alcohol counselling and rehabilitation treatment from CAAAPU where possible; and
- n to organise transport for river campers back to their bush communities or find alternate living places that are acceptable to the campers.

If the first stage is successful, it will need follow-up work over several summers to discourage further re-occupation of the river.

*Counteracting centralisation trends in the wider region*

Alice Springs represents the regional centre, and hence the "fat city bright lights" for many Aboriginal people throughout Central Australia. Young adults are invariably drawn to its environs to enjoy its excitement: to experiment with liquor and other drugs, frequent pool rooms and game parlours, to shop for cars and other luxury commodities and find easier

access to potential lovers and spouses from a wide spectrum of tribal backgrounds. Although it needs to be acknowledged that visitation has its positive aspects, and that it is inevitable and must be accommodated, there is also clearly a need to counteract certain aspects of these centralisation trends. So far, the following specific problems have been noted.

The very existence of "dry" communities results in an exodus of a proportion of their people into town for occasional or regular drinking (including binge drinking). In some communities where efficient Night Patrol services have been established, the difficulty and consequences of smuggling liquor for home consumption has resulted in some permanent migration into Alice Springs.

Many individuals who are brought to town by government agencies for hospital treatment, court appearances and prison sentences, are not provided with a free transport service back to their home communities, once their transactions are completed. Such individuals are likely to find themselves residing in a town or river camp, waiting for a transport opportunity, but in so doing, may become involved in heavy binge drinking and an alcoholic existence. A proportion of such individuals are overtaken by this lifestyle and some remain indefinitely.

A similar problem is experienced with Aboriginal football carnivals and rock concerts. Truck and bus loads of visitors are transported into Alice Springs from communities, but some miss their return lift and are left stranded in town camps.

The above circumstances are exacerbated by the relative ease with which people can have their Social Security cheques diverted into town. Rather than pay for return transport, these cheques are too frequently used to reciprocate shouts of beer and wine for their town camp hosts. The lifestyle becomes one of regular intoxication and poverty.

The above problems represent the symptoms of a deeper seated problem, that of providing adequate employment, recreation and education facilities in bush communities, so that people generally become more content with their home lifestyle and make less frequent visitation to Alice Springs. An important reason promoted by bush elders for regular home community residence is to enable cultural maintenance: the practice of language, participation in public ceremonies and learning about the ritual maintenance of sacred sites. It is not within the scope of Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele to completely solve this wider problem, but these strategies are being explored to assist in a modest way:

- n a home transport system for prisoners is being designed as mentioned previously; and
- n a proposal is being explored to transfer the majority of the AFL football carnival from Alice Springs into bush communities, and supplement football games with rock concerts organised and manned from within the CDEP scheme.

#### *Research components*

The Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele Project incorporates a number of applied research components to strengthen its viability.

Production of a model of *residential territoriality* and dynamics in the Town Camps, using the TCHIP (Town Camp Housing Infrastructure Program) reports. The TCHIP reports are an existing series of socio-cultural studies of the Alice Springs

town camps carried out by a number of consultants to Tangentyere Council during 1989-1990. This research analysis aims to assist in developing rules of preferred camping locations for bush visitors to Alice Springs based on their tribal language and kinship affiliations, and with an understanding of past and current practices or residential dynamics. Analysis of the TCHIP reports will also result in biographical data on camp leaders for use in the project.

A systematic *land study* in Alice Springs to establish needs and options on the setting up of new town camps, particularly to cater for the needs of visitors to Alice Springs and to prevent over-crowding in existing camps. This will be carried out in conjunction with the Aboriginal traditional owners and the Four Corners Council. The principal aim is to alleviate the stress and conflict resulting from the juxtaposition of too many tribal and family groups in dense settings.

### *Program evaluation*

Another research task is to design a methodology to evaluate the impact of the program at various times in the future. Hopefully the project will have a long life and it may be necessary to carry out evaluations after two, five and ten years for example. A type of quantitative evaluation will be made by collecting data on town campers which is indicative of the incidence of assault injuries (health statistics), alcohol abuse (watch-house records) and homicides (Law Department records). The aim is to try to understand from the available statistics whether the program has had any significant impact resulting in behaviour change. A type of qualitative evaluation will be made in written reports on the progress and achievements of each component of the project.

### **Conclusion**

The foregoing methods can be divided into pro-active and reactive categories. Pro-active methods, encouraging appropriate social behaviour, include definitions of such behaviour expressed in rules and norms, educational programs, improved leadership and social cohesion, and preferred styles of drinking in moderation. Reactive methods against anti-social behaviour consist of Night Patrol, conflict management and mediation, participation in judicial and corrective services processes, and alcohol counselling and treatment.

These methodologies are being designed, tried and tested by Tangentyere during 1992 with the intention of mounting a persuasive argument for the recurrent funding of a refined program through the mid-1990s. An internal management structure is being sought whereby many of the existing Tangentyere Council members and workers have some part to play in the various sub-programs, the aim being to embed the project ideology, its skills, practices and experiences as widely as possible throughout the organisation and its clients. Mwerre Anetyeke Mparntwele is being viewed within Tangentyere as one of its most important projects for the 1990s.

### **References**

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