An Evaluation of Store Enterprises in Aboriginal Communities

Elspeth Young, Greg Crough and Christine Christophersen

North Australia Research Unit
Australian National University
Darwin 1993
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Foreword

The majority, if not all, Aboriginal groups in the remote regions of northern Australia derive varying parts of their sustenance from foods purchased at community retail stores. Therefore, the community store provides a vitally important service. The organisation or group providing this service has the responsibility of maintaining the store in an often complex and dynamic environment.

The Arnhem Land Progress Association† (ALPA) has operated stores for up to twenty years in many Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities. It started by buying ration stores formerly operated by the Methodist Overseas Mission. In an era when the operation of retail stores in remote communities has proved difficult (see Young 1984), ALPA has succeeded in providing the communities with efficient, well stocked, modern retail stores. Not content with providing this service, ALPA has viewed the stores and the profits generated by the stores as a means of providing the communities with many ancillary services such as training, granting educational scholarships, allocating starter loans for family and clan businesses, and underwriting community projects in the settlements in which it operates.

Although ALPA has successfully operated stores for many years there are many unresolved issues facing the organisation today. Some of these issues are not directly concerned with ALPA the organisation, although there are some which pertain directly to the nature and style of operation of this particular organisation. Problems have arisen because of the difficulties associated with service delivery to remote Aboriginal communities and the conflict between the 'money side' as opposed to the 'community side' of the organisation providing these services. Sometimes the problems are really part of the politics in settlements or the typical grumblings made by most store customers in any community, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. And sometimes the problems are part of the wider questions about the national and Territory economy, the politics of Aboriginal autonomy, Aboriginal land rights, the apparent paternalisms which dominate many non-Aboriginal dealings with Aboriginal people and so on.

† The form 'Arnhem Land Progress Association' has been used in this book instead of 'Arnhemland Progress Association', which is the form used by ALPA itself.
Since 1981 staff at the North Australia Research Unit (NARU) have been involved in various studies concerning service delivery to remote Aboriginal communities in Australia's north. This work has culminated in the production of several publications including: Ellanna L, Loveday P, Stanley O & Young EA (1988), Economic Enterprises in Aboriginal Communities in the Northern Territory; Loveday P (ed) (1982), Service Delivery to Outstations; Loveday P (ed) (1982), Service Delivery to Remote Communities; Wade-Marshall D & Loveday P (eds) (1988), Contemporary Issues in Development; and Young EA (1984), Outback Stores: Retail Services in North Australian Aboriginal Communities. The Arnhem Land Progress Association, acknowledging NARU's interest and experience in this area of study, approached the Unit with the request that NARU undertake an in-depth historical study and critical evaluation of their organisation. As well as being proud of what the Association had achieved and wanting this documented as a celebration of its twenty years in operation, ALPA was concerned about resolving the issues and questions affecting the stores and the Association today. After negotiations with NARU, ALPA agreed to fund a large part of the research project with the following objectives:

- to produce a well documented history of ALPA, its activities and achievements over the last twenty years;
- to evaluate the objectives, goals and aspirations of ALPA, the relevance of those objectives and, how they have changed over time;
- to evaluate the effectiveness, efficiency and impacts of ALPA's programs;
- to make comparisons with similar associations both in northern Australia and overseas;
- to make recommendations and suggest strategies for change.

These objectives were to be met by writing a history and a general historical evaluation of ALPA, preparing a draft evaluation of the Association for the Directors of ALPA, and preparing a comparative report of similar organisations. The research team assembled to work on the project comprised David Lea (Executive Director, NARU), Samantha Wells (Research Assistant, NARU), Greg Crouch (Senior Research Fellow, NARU), Christine Christophersen (Research Assistant, NARU), Elspeth Young (Associate Professor, University College, University of New South Wales, Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra) and Ritchie Howitt (Lecturer, Macquarie University).
Data for the project were collected from eclectic sources. Some, especially in the early stages, were obtained from background reading on outback stores, indigenous enterprises and culture contact in general, particularly those readings concerned with reconciling western thought and business practice with Aboriginal thought and modes of production. This was followed by an in-depth study of the files of ALPA, archival material and of other organisations both in Australia and North America. Much of the information collected for the project was derived from structured and unstructured interviews with individuals and groups in homes, offices and communities; formal and informal discussions; meetings with communities, organisations and groups; and observations of events. For reasons of confidentiality, many names of people spoken to, especially in the communities, have been withheld.

Drafts of Young's and Crouch's confidential reports, entitled respectively 'Support Organisations for Aboriginal Community Stores: The Arnhem Land Progress Association and its Counterparts in the Alice Springs Region and the North Canadian Arctic' and 'Some Perspectives on the Arnhemland Progress Association', were presented to ALPA's Board of Directors in July 1992. Wells's history of ALPA, Taking Stock: Aboriginal Autonomy Through Enterprise, was published in May 1993 and is available from NARU or Darwin booksellers.

The two papers in this collection are revised versions of the Young and Crouch reports of July 1992. The revisions are based on comments made by directors, referees, colleagues and community members but no additional field work was undertaken after August 1992. There is a deliberate attempt not to repeat material presented in Wells (1993) or to include material that is of a private or confidential nature to either Aboriginal people in the communities or ALPA.

The paper by Elspeth Young is based on earlier work and also on research undertaken specifically for this study. It compares ALPA's role, structure and functions with those of aboriginal store support organisations in central Australia and the North American Arctic. While revealing similarities, such as logistical problems of operating stores in small remote communities, it highlights a number of important issues of relevance to ALPA's concerns. These include a low level of aboriginal employment especially in management, dependence on or independence of government assistance, and the need to strike a difficult balance between the service and enterprise functions of organisations. Young's paper is drawn from previous fieldwork
including studies of Aboriginal stores in central Australia in 1982 and 1986 and Inuit/Eskimo and Indian stores in Canada and Alaska in 1984 and 1989. She also conducted interviews for this project in Central Australia in 1992 and analysed up-to-date information on the operations of ALPA's Canadian counterparts.

The paper by Greg Crough with Christine Christophersen is the result of visits to all the ALPA Arnhem Land stores and communities and some of the consultancy stores both within and outside Arnhem Land. It is unashamedly a 'community view' and reports on the perspectives of people in communities. Although many of the comments are critical, they do not include many that are dramatically new: rather the paper presents problems in an organised way with some commentary. Over the last two decades ALPA has attempted to grapple with issues of ownership, membership, rents and dividends, training, information flows, conflicting values, and conflicting rules. We hope that these papers will clarify issues and build on ALPA's genuine desire to provide an efficient service run and controlled by Aborigines for Aborigines.

David Lea
June 1993
Support organisations for Aboriginal community stores: The Arnhem Land Progress Association and its counterparts in central Australia and the North American Arctic

**Elspeth Young**

*List of figures* 2
*Introduction* 3

**ALPA's contemporary operations** 4

**ALPA and Aboriginal retail support organisations in central Australia** 10
- The central Australian context 10
- Anangu Winkiku Stores (AWS) 10
- Yanangu Stores 14
- ALPA and the central Australian organisations: some comparative points 16

**ALPA and North American store support organisations** 18
- Introduction 18
- Establishment, ownership, scope and role 18
- Current operations 24

**Major comparative issues** 37
- Aboriginal control in policy and operations 38
- Social and economic roles and responsibilities 42
- Dependence on outside funding 43
- Political roles 44
- Development: top-down and bottom-up approaches 45

**Acknowledgments** 46

**References** 46
Some perspectives on the Arnhem Land Progress Association

*Greg Crouch & Christine Christophersen*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALPA the organisation</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is ALPA really an Aboriginal organisation?</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who owns ALPA?</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rights of traditional Aboriginal land owners</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The presentation of financial information by ALPA</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do the 'communities' own ALPA?</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relationship between the councils and the community</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The position of the chairman of ALPA</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ALPA ethos: a people development organisation</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The control of APA and the role of the directors</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The directors, the councils and the 'dividends'</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALPA and Aboriginal economic independence</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and the Aboriginal staff</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and the non-Aboriginal staff</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will there ever be an Aboriginal manager?</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prices and the distribution of dividends</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ALPA rules</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is ALPA unique?</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Support organisations for Aboriginal community stores

The Arnhem Land Progress Association and its counterparts in Central Australia and the North American Arctic

Elspeth Young
List of figures

Figure 1  ALPA stores and consultancy stores in Arnhem Land and Western Australia
Figure 2  AWS stores and Yanangu stores in Central Australia
Figure 3  Northern Canada — stores served by ACL and FCNQ
Figure 4  Regions covered by North American store support groups
Support organisations for Aboriginal community stores

The Arnhem Land Progress Association and its counterparts in Central Australia and the North American Arctic

Elspeth Young

Introduction

Contemporary retail stores in remote aboriginal communities share a number of key characteristics. First, and most importantly, they provide a vitally important service, unlike any other because it is used by every resident and because without it people would not have access to basic sustenance. Secondly, they operate under difficult conditions. The physical isolation and sparseness of settlement affect their basic operations, disrupting supply lines and hindering them from cutting costs through strategies such as bulk buying and storage. As a result their goods are expensive and often of low quality, the range of merchandise is limited, and frequent and lengthy delays in meeting the needs of their customers are common. With high proportions of people of aboriginal origin among their staff and customers, their particular cultural perceptions and social and economic characteristics strongly influence the way in which the stores operate. Such considerations affect, amongst other things, the types of goods demanded, the behaviour and expectations of customers, staff attitudes to work, levels of staff expertise and understanding of the complexities of financial operations. Problems stemming from poor management and financial incompetence or misdealings are all too common, as are those related to the level of control which aboriginal people† can exert.

† The general term aboriginal people is used to refer to the members of the indigenous minorities in Australia, Alaska and northern Canada — Aborigines, Eskimo and Indians and Inuit respectively. This term is now commonly used in preference to earlier terms such as native people.
over this service. Finally, although these retail stores primarily offer a service, they are also potential money-spinners, enterprises which can bring in much-needed cash to resource-poor communities. This can, as I have documented elsewhere (Young 1982, 1984), cause conflicts of interest, the resolution of which may ultimately disadvantage the aboriginal customers.

Problems such as these have led to the growth of retail support organisations, bodies charged with supporting aboriginal community stores and helping them to provide better services than might otherwise be possible. The Arnhem Land Progress Association is one example of such an organisation. It does not stand alone. Similar organisations exist in other parts of Australia, notably in the central desert region. They also exist in remote parts of North America where the high Arctic regions of Canada and the United States also have high proportions of people of aboriginal origin who form the majority in many small isolated communities. Inuit/Eskimo and Athabaskan Indian community stores in Alaska and Canada suffer, as I have summarised elsewhere (Young 1987, 1991a, 1991b), from the same types of disadvantages as do their Australian counterparts. Store support organisations in all of these regions try to deal with these problems. However the methods which they employ, and the organisational structures which have evolved are not identical. Comparisons between ALPA and these other organisations highlight both positive and negative aspects which are worth considering in improving present performances. After presenting a brief summary of ALPA's current operations, this report presents such comparisons within two broad regional contexts: that of ALPA and Aboriginal retail support organisations in central Australia; and that of ALPA and counterpart organisations in the North American Arctic.

**ALPA's contemporary operations**

ALPA currently operates five stores in Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities—Galiwin'ku, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Minjilang and Gapuwiyak. It also provides 'consultancy' services, assisting the operation of stores owned by the communities concerned, in five other locations—Warruwi, Belyuen, Umbakumba, Warmun and Noonkanbah (Figure 1). With the exception of the last two, all of these communities are within the Top End of the Northern Territory.

ALPA was established in 1972 by the Methodist Overseas Mission (the United Church of Northern Australia from 1972 and later the Uniting Church) as one way of fostering community development in accordance with the then newly
Figure 1 ALPA stores and consultancy stores in Arnhem Land and Western Australia
adopted Commonwealth government policy of self-determination. Set up by the Mission as an Aboriginal organisation, it acquired ownership and responsibility for Mission Stores, retail outlets already operating in the Arnhem Land Methodist communities. From the beginning ALPA adopted a policy of operating its stores on strict principles of fair-dealing and honesty. Although the original idea of ALPA, and the resultant structure of the Association emanated from the mission rather than from the Aboriginal people in the communities of Arnhem Land, its establishment did reflect Aboriginal opinions about how development might be fostered. This was clearly revealed in the course of community consultation conducted under church auspices in 1974 (see Wells 1993, 31–33). Nevertheless despite the fact that Aboriginal views formed part of its foundations, ALPA is still an unusual type of Aboriginal organisation. Its structures and functions on the whole reflect characteristics which are not explicitly Aboriginal but which stem from non-Aboriginal views of enterprise and development. As Crough (1992) suggests, some current confusion over the control of the organisation probably results from this initial distinctive feature. ALPA's Chairman, in the most recent Annual Report, also comments on the difficulties which inevitably arise from the need to combine 'Yolngu' and 'Balanda' culture within the structure of the organisation.

ALPA is an association with a membership consisting of the residents of the five communities in which its stores are located. It is also a highly profitable business, with total sales of almost $12 million in 1990–91 and an operating surplus in that year of over $1.1 million. Although its operating costs rose in 1991–92, it still managed to generate a surplus in the last financial year of almost $600 000. As Crough suggests, such a business would conventionally be registered as a company, with shareholders who understood exactly what their rights and responsibilities were, according to company regulations. However, as an Association ALPA has members rather than shareholders, and the rights of these members in relation to the 'ownership' and control of the stores in their own communities have never been adequately clarified. Wells (1993, 126–139) shows that this issue has often been highlighted in past meetings between ALPA management and members. The need for clarification of such points has become more and more pressing as ALPA has increased its profits and as its Aboriginal members have become more and more concerned with exerting real control over their own institutions.

ALPA offers the following services: bulk ordering stock, through G & R Wills; appointing store managers and providing support to ensure that they operate efficiently according to ALPA guidelines; encouraging the employment and
advancement of Aboriginal staff, through training programs; and providing an accountancy service, using standardised reporting procedures both within stores and between stores and the Darwin head office. It is independent of government funding, although the Aboriginal councils in the communities in which its stores are situated have periodically received government assistance for the construction of new store buildings and other capital development. Its surplus profits, derived from those earned by each individual store and from its investment earnings, are distributed according to a formula agreed upon by the Board of Directors. Recently, in each financial year each community has received a sum equivalent to 20% of their store profits plus 5% rotating profit. The size of profit available for redistribution has expanded significantly over the last few years. In 1982 this amounted to $44 000 to six communities; in 1990–91, with only five ALPA stores remaining, the communities received over $187 000 altogether, with the three with the most profitable stores, Galiwin'ku, Ramingining and Milingimbi, each receiving over $40 000. In 1991 $168 000 was distributed to the ALPA communities. Subsequent redistribution of these monies, both for community purposes and for individual payments, has been the responsibility of local organisations, generally the community councils. Some of the remaining, much larger, component of the surplus profit is used for development support, for example through schemes designed to assist other Aboriginal enterprises and to provide educational opportunities; and some has been invested in real estate.

Decisions on all matters concerning the Association are theoretically taken by ALPA's Board of Directors, all of whom except the Chairman and Executive Director are Aboriginal. This appears to give Aboriginal people a high level of control over ALPA. In reality, technical matters such as those concerning the stock ordering systems, dealing with the transport services provided by Barge Express and by air freight, developing training curricula and the methods for delivering these, supervising the work of non-Aboriginal store managers and running the financial and accountancy services, are dealt with by the Executive Director and head office staff. Most of these are non-Aboriginal. Thus Aboriginal control in ALPA's day-to-day operations in Darwin is limited. This Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal split in responsibility for policy and technical matters is unlikely to change until Aboriginal people have been given the opportunity to acquire the necessary technical skills. It is not the only such split. The issue of whether to promote commercial success or low cost retail services is also important, as discussed below.

Decisions regarding ALPA's policy, and particularly its function as an Aboriginal organisation, should very much be the responsibility of its
Aboriginal directors and members. It is here that current issues of concern arise. As Crough (1992) discusses at length, issues include the role of ALPA directors and their ability to communicate feelings and decisions both within the Association and within their communities, the distribution of store profits both from ALPA and within the communities, and the issue of who exerts control over each community store and the employment of Aboriginal people within the Association.

The issue of aboriginal employment in the stores, particularly at those levels demanding higher levels of skill and more responsibility, is of key importance. As I have commented previously (Young 1984, 1987, 1991a) stores are invariably important enterprises in remote communities, not only because of the vital service they provide for all residents but also because they need a considerable number of workers. Store work also gives people skills which are transferable to other key areas, such as working in the council or school office, or running another type of business. Extending experience of this type of employment is therefore important. But, as has commonly been acknowledged, this is not a simple process. Aboriginal employees in stores can easily acquire the necessary technical skills but they have to be able to use these in a situation where they are frequently subjected to pressures of a more social nature. The difficulties which Aboriginal check-out operators in Australia face when confronted by relatives with supermarket trolleys filled with goods which they cannot afford to pay for is only one example of such pressures. This presents difficulties in welding social responsibilities with the need to keep the store operating commercially, and it is this problem which is normally cited in explanation for the lack of success in installing reliable Aboriginal store managers. ALPA has to survive financially; however, it also professes a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination, in cultural as well as economic terms. The resolution of these aims can lead to considerable conflict.

ALPA, professing a strong commitment to Aboriginal employment and store management, established a store worker training school in 1981, locating it in Galiwin'ku rather than in Darwin in the belief that the familiar setting of an Arnhem Land community with an ALPA store would be more appropriate than a city setting. Trainees combined their short courses at the school with on-the-job training, to which all ALPA managers were obliged to commit themselves. Courses were offered at all levels, from basic storeworker instruction to accounting and other modules which covered the various tasks which were part of the manager's job. The ultimate aim, as expressed in the ALPA Annual General Meeting report of 1984, was for Aboriginal managers
to take over in all stores and for non-Aboriginal managers to be reclassified as support managers, assigned to understudy and advise the Aboriginal trainee managers as required. These training schemes, at that time, were unique and were seen as the prototype for other bodies with similar needs. They drew their students not only from ALPA store staff but also from communities as far apart as the west Kimberley region of Western Australia, Mt Isa in Queensland and Central Australia (see Wells 1993, 72–91).

Now, as ALPA staff themselves acknowledge, it is apparent that, on the surface at least, the training scheme has not met expectations—none of the ALPA stores have yet come under Aboriginal management. There is no simple explanation for this. Possibly the training schemes, now operating on-the-job rather than through the Galiwin'ku training school, were less appropriate than previously thought. It seems that, as far as management training is concerned, this is part of the reason for failure (Wells 1993, 76–87, 161–164). People aspiring to be store managers require wider experience than they can get through working solely in association with the community store and occasional visits to Darwin to gain experience in buying and to witness the operation of ALPA head office is probably not enough. ALPA did institute a program of sending Aboriginal trainee managers to large supermarkets in non-Aboriginal communities for extended periods of work experience. However, ALPA's training budget was reduced due to changes in government funding allocations, and this practice was discontinued. It may also be that, as Wells (1993, 163) suggests, some Aboriginal storeworkers do not really want to become the managers. Thus, although the programs offered through the training scheme have been continually adapted, they did not necessarily reflect Aboriginal aspirations or take into account Aboriginal ideas about changing the methodology of store operation. This problem has recently been addressed through training workshops instigated by ALPA which utilised 'a participatory action research' methodology which was perceived as a step towards Aboriginal people working with non-Aborigines to devise more culturally appropriate store management and store operation structures. Despite that, the fact Aboriginal people have not become ALPA store managers has inevitably disillusioned many individuals and made them sceptical about ALPA's real intentions. Above all it has focussed attention on the original confusion over whether ALPA is primarily a service organisation concerned with community development, or whether its main role is to run a business enterprise which is able to compete with similar operations. Throughout ALPA's first decade, community development—through the handover of the stores to full Aboriginal control and Aboriginal
management—was apparently the preferred goal. Today it seems that ALPA is placing more emphasis on the generation of profits for community use, on the understanding that these will be used to support development. Aboriginal take-over of the stores would not be compatible with this.

ALPA and Aboriginal retail support organisations in central Australia

The central Australian context

Retail stores in central Australian Aboriginal communities operate in isolated locations and are affected by socio-cultural and economic situations unlike those experienced in non-Aboriginal outback communities. As in northern Australia, problems caused by these factors have led not only to the service itself being poor but have also often resulted in financial failure and the closure of stores. When that occurs the immediate concern is for the Aboriginal customers, many of whom would find it difficult to obtain goods elsewhere. Many Aborigines are not however concerned only because the shop has closed. They also see wider implications—if they have been operating the store, then its closure may be seen as their fault. This may be due to their lack of technical expertise in the job. Or it may be due to the fact that they have not been able to control the operation of the store in the right way. External agencies, primarily government, are also concerned. Many stores have received government loans, often for the construction of new buildings, and hence their failure becomes a matter for the funding agency, previously ADC and now ATSIC. That same agency is also concerned with overall community development needs and sees the operation of stores which are financially successful, provide a good service and enhance Aboriginal employment as a priority. Reasons such as these underlie the development of the two organisations which currently support Aboriginal community stores in central Australia—Anangu Winkiku Stores and Yanangu Stores.

Anangu Winkiku Stores (AWS)

Like ALPA, AWS is an Aboriginal organisation, established in 1982 and owned by Anangu Pitjantjatjaraku (AP), the group which represents the Pitjantjatjara communities which fall within South Australia. Its members consist of the stores in three of the founder communities (Amata, Pukatja (Ernabella) and Pipalyatjara), Oodnadatta store and small stores in a number of outstations associated with Amata. AWS also assists five stores across the
border in the Northern Territory, outside the AP lands—Muitjulu, Docker River, Atitjere, Aputula and Amoonguna (Figure 2). These are not AWS members. Their costs are met principally through ATSIC, which engages AWS as a consultant to assist these stores in achieving more efficient management. These arrangements have been made because these stores were in financial difficulties. AWS is generally recognised as the store 'trouble-shooting' body in central Australia.

The current restriction of AWS membership to AP communities simplifies administration but is not logical, either in terms of the need for such services or in terms of its role in supporting all Pitjantjatjara communities. AWS would prefer to be free to serve the whole of the Pitjantjatjara area—South Australia, Northern Territory and Western Australia. However it draws heavily on ATSIC funding and under the current arrangements this area falls into three ATSIC regions.

Figure 2 AWS stores and Yanangu stores in Central Australia
This would make AWS funding applications extremely complicated. The organisation would prefer to see this bureaucratic difficulty resolved, and ultimately have a Board of Directors which represents all the stores with which it is involved.

AWS is a service organisation, not an enterprise. It does not own stores, and unlike ALPA bears no responsibility for the distribution of profits from stores to constituent groups. Its services include the provision of managerial advice, Aboriginal training, stock purchasing and financial services, on a fee for service basis. Each store, regardless of its size, pays the same service fee because the cost of services to AWS is not markedly affected by the size of the business. In return their use of AWS stock purchasing service alone saves them a considerable amount of money. As a full member of Independent Grocers Cooperative (IGC) in Adelaide, AWS orders for goods attract service fees which are only about one quarter to one third of those charged to non-IGC members. In addition, with annual purchases from IGC worth over $2 million, AWS can use its significant buying power to negotiate advantageous deals on goods in high demand in Aboriginal communities. A final advantage is that AWS, through its current and investment accounts, can back IGC's bills so that that company receives payment within the seven day period which it stipulates. Small isolated 'bush' stores often find it very difficult to meet this commitment because they do not have the ready cash resources to pay for goods which they have not yet sold. When stores order their stock through AWS they also take advantage of a clearly structured centralised ordering system, still in the process of up-dating to accord with the latest computer technology; and co-ordinated transport arrangements, whereby AWS takes responsibility for engaging and supervising the services of the trucking company.

If communities wish, AWS will help to recruit managers for their stores. Thereafter it will provide managerial support including training. Until mid 1992 all managers for member stores have been non-Aboriginal, but Amata store has recently been transferred to full Aboriginal management. This process will probably be repeated elsewhere in the future. AWS directors have adopted a resolution that the position of non-Aboriginal store manager is redundant. That means that current white managers, all of whom are on contract, may be asked to leave or, if the community wishes, their contracts may be renewed. This is seen as another important step in transferring control to the Aboriginal community.
The initial study which led to the establishment of AWS in 1982 (Green & Adamson 1982) clearly showed that the Pitjantjatjara people wanted to run their own stores, and that they saw training for these tasks as the most important input. AWS provides on-the-job training with continual backup provided by two Alice Springs-based training officers, one working with the South Australian communities and one with the Northern Territory group. These officers spend about three weeks with their group every month, varying the time spent in each place according to need. Amata, for example, will be given special support at present because the new Aboriginal manager has just taken over. All AWS non-Aboriginal managers must be committed to training and their contracts explicitly require them to operate in ways that are compatible with Pitjantjatjara cultural concepts and social structures.

The AWS training system is strongly modelled on that of ALPA, and the recent official agreement between the two groups for the use of ALPA manuals in AWS cements that connection. However AWS modules, although of similar structure to those of ALPA (including 10 components, 3 of which are compulsory—store hygiene, store workplace, checkout etc—and the remainder of which can be done according to ambition), have been tailored to meet local needs. AWS has also been negotiating the formalisation of its training modules through NTOC, so that Aboriginal store-workers will receive more widely recognised accreditation. No agreement has yet been reached, and in the interim AWS, like ALPA, has applied for recognition as a 'Private Provider of Adult Education' through TAFE.

As more AWS stores come under Aboriginal management the training issue will obviously become even more important. Although Amata is as yet the only AWS member in this situation, three of the associated stores (Apatula, Atijere, Amoonguna) also have Aboriginal managers. All of these are small. The ATSIC consultancy fee which AWS collects for five of these stores ($15 000 for each) will in effect pay the salary of another training officer. This may be the way things go in the future, with AWS saving money on salaries for non-Aboriginal management staff, but using that to pay for better overall support through training.

AWS is essentially a non-profit service organisation and does not return a percentage of its profits to its member communities. It depends very heavily on government funding, currently from ATSIC (for the administrative part of the business) and DEBT (for the training component). These funds subsidise the cost of AWS services to member stores. However it does mean that AWS regularly has to apply for funding on an annual basis, and that it must use its
funds for those purposes specified in the budget. This affects its operational flexibility, and the organisation would find it much easier to plan for the future if it received block funding. AWS sees this dependence on government monies as a disadvantage, but also acknowledges that independence, such as that upheld by ALPA, comes at a cost to the organisation, to its member stores and ultimately to the Aboriginal customers of these stores. If AWS aimed for independence from government funding it would mean rethinking the whole financial situation of the organisation. Its services would no longer be subsidised, member stores would have to pay more, and AWS itself would probably be pressured into generating additional income as a commercial enterprise. This might well detract from the quality of the services it is able to provide.

The issue of Aboriginal control within the organisation has been very important from the beginning. Control was extremely strong in the initial years, but difficulties in dealing with training and financial operations led to more non-Aboriginal staff being employed, particularly at head office. The appointment of a Board of Directors and Committee, which has only recently occurred, is seen as a very positive step. Aboriginal control has also been promoted through deliberately channelling AWS's communications with its members through the councils or store organisations, not through community advisers. This aims to ensure that decisions and information are made by Aboriginal people rather than non-Aboriginal administrators. However, as community adviser roles in the AP lands are increasingly being assumed by local Aborigines, this approach may be less relevant. Finally, the Aboriginal management appointment at Amata is an important step towards Aboriginal control. With the right kind of back-up there seem to be no reasons why more Aboriginal managers should not be working in AWS stores.

Yanangu Stores

Yanangu Stores is an Alice Springs based Aboriginal company, established in the mid 1980s with shares purchased by six central Australian community stores—Yuendumu, Ti Tree, Pmara Jutunta (Six Mile), Laramba (Napperby), Kintore and Willowra (Figure 2). Its current role is as a wholesale distribution company, concerned solely with variety goods, and, as one of the largest operators of this type in Alice Springs, it can hopefully offer considerable savings to its customers, most of whom are very small scale operators. In addition to its six member stores it serves about 50 other outlets in the region, stretching as far north as Tennant Creek, south to Indulkuna, west to Warburton and over to Ammaroo and beyond in the east. These customers
are both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Yanangu's directors are drawn only from the six original contributing members, although other Aboriginal store groups have expressed interest in buying shares.

Yanangu's wholesaling operation is located in an Alice Springs warehouse, and covers a wide variety of goods including clothing, camping equipment, tools and electrical appliances. Orders come by phone, through periodic visits made by Yanangu staff to outlying communities, or through customers coming to the warehouse while in town. Customers arrange for their own transport of orders, either with their own vehicles or through local freight operators.

Although Yanangu's current function lies primarily in wholesaling, it has in the past also provided managerial support. This has included employing store managers and subsequently advising them and monitoring their performance. The decision to abandon this part of the service in favour of concentration on wholesaling was a Directors' decision. Indirectly Yanangu staff do still advise their customers when problems are brought to their attention, but this usually takes the form of passing on information about the appropriate agency through which to seek assistance rather than offering assistance themselves. If stores need funding they are advised to approach ATSIC and DEET and if they want training courses they are asked to contact AWS. All organisations concerned with Aboriginal store support in the Alice Springs region—AWS, Yanangu, ATSIC and DEET—see the co-ordination of their efforts as very important.

Yanangu, as a wholesaling business, is primarily an enterprise, dependent on its financial viability for survival. Its current annual turnover is about $2.4 million and its profits potentially provide cash which can contribute to development in each of the member communities. Profits are not always used in this way. In the last financial year the members decided that the future financial viability of Yanangu was more important and allocated their shares of the profits for payment of the mortgage. ATSIC is not directly concerned in funding Yanangu, although the company is still paying off a government loan which was allocated to cover the costs of their premises. This means that government influence over Yanangu's operations is only minor. However the company is, as a wholesaler, much affected by the financial viability of its customers. Since it does not recruit managers, is not involved in management supervision and does not keep the books of its members it is vulnerable in this area. Problems can also arise if its member stores decide to buy their variety goods elsewhere, and stores taking this approach would be allocated a smaller
share of Yanangu's profits. With its current wide range of non-member customers this problem is not as serious as might be expected.

**ALPA and the central Australian organisations: some comparative points**

These two bodies, like ALPA, are Aboriginal organisations. However some differences in their activities and functions highlight issues and approaches of relevance to ALPA.

The scope of operations, which for ALPA includes both owning stores and running support services for them and others but for AWS and Yanangu is much more limited, obviously differs. This major contrast has important implications in determining the role of each organisation. AWS is a service organisation; Yanangu is primarily an enterprise; but ALPA is both. This has both advantages and disadvantages. One clear advantage is that ALPA controls not only its own operations, but also those of the stores which use its services, hence ensuring that its foundation remains secure. Yanangu and AWS, in contrast, are vulnerable because the community stores which support their activities may founder without them realising that severe financial problems exist. It is this which has led AWS to depend on government funding, both to subsidise the cost of its services and also to provide it with some security. On the other hand the combination of service and enterprise roles creates conflicts of purpose in ALPA. The Association uses its earnings as an enterprise to provide its services. This appears to be a straightforward relationship. However this is not necessarily the case. The service function aims not only at ensuring that the ALPA stores provide their customers with value for money, but is theoretically also based on the rhetoric that Aboriginal control of these stores is a priority. Such control might well detract from the commercial profitability of the enterprise. In other words, high levels of enterprise performance are probably not compatible with ALPA’s professed ideals of promoting community development.

Another related question concerns ALPA’s contribution to community development through the distribution of profits. Is development better served by redistributing as much of the profit as possible back into the Aboriginal communities, regardless of whether this means higher prices or continuing control by non-Aboriginal management both in head office or in the stores? Or would it be better to lower prices, renew efforts to turn the stores over to Aboriginal management, and forget the monetary advantage to be gained by running the enterprise successfully? This, as Wells (1993, 156–159) discusses, is
one of the key questions as yet unresolved by ALPA. In highlighting it in the latest Annual Report, the Chairman does not explicitly recommend either alternative but does suggest that ALPA's long-term future would be better served by adopting the first option. This is, as Crough (1992) points out, the policy which has been most strongly favoured throughout the last decade. As he also suggests it may well bring short-term benefit but little advantage in the long term. The latter strategy, to actively seek greater Aboriginal control, may in human terms offer far more for the future.

The original motives for and methods of establishment of these organisations are also in contrast to each other. ALPA evolved from the mission background, and the ideals of this foundation, largely of non-Aboriginal origin, created the philosophical framework of the association. Although the views of Aborigines have subsequently been voiced, and have affected ALPA's philosophy, this initial framework is still in place. AWS however owes its existence to needs clearly expressed by many Aboriginal people in different Pitjantjatjara communities—to control their own retail stores and improve the services which they offered. The 1982 study (Green & Adamson 1982) which led to AWS establishment involved extensive consultation throughout the Pitjantjatjara lands. This was conducted by a group of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, including Pitjantjatjara leaders and experienced store workers and also the former manager of one of the largest stores in the region, a non-Aboriginal person widely known and respected for his honesty, common sense and commitment to promotion of Aboriginal control. This consultation process involved not only extensive travel throughout the region, but also the organisation of meetings and workshops during which a large number of Pitjantjatjara people were able to give their views. The result was an organisation with a structure which the people themselves had developed and accepted, and which they understood. Yanangu similarly is the result of a need perceived by Aboriginal people to be important—here, the need for smaller organisations to band together to improve their services through reducing costs, and at the same time tap into an enterprise opportunity for the whole central Australian region.

Finally, it is important to comment on the issue of government control and AWS, Yanangu and ALPA. ALPA today proudly distances itself from dependence on government, and can therefore develop its own structure, operational methods and policies without having to take government priorities into account. However it also has to meet all of its costs, and this probably increases the problems of successfully performing its dual role as provider of services and as economic enterprise. AWS, however, is heavily
dependent on government funding. This increases the likelihood of
government surveillance of its affairs and may inhibit some changes it might
want to introduce. On the other hand it enables it to provide services at a
heavily subsidised cost, without the threat that business needs may take
priority because of the need to meet costs in full.

ALPA and North American store support organisations

Introduction

Northern Canadian and Alaskan aboriginal community stores and co-
operatives also use the services of support organisations, of which Arctic Co-
operatives Limited (ACL), Federation des Co-operatives de Nouveau-Quebec
(FCNQ) and Alaska Native Industry Co-operative Association (ANICA)
provide the most useful and interesting comparisons with ALPA’s structures,
operations and policies. The two Canadian organisations, ACL and FCNQ,
date from the late 1960s and early 1970s. They operate in Northwest
Territories (NWT) and the province of Quebec with head offices respectively
in the southern Canadian cities of Winnipeg and Montreal. ACL, in its
present form, was established in 1982 through amalgamation of two existing
companies, Canadian Arctic Co-operatives Federation Limited and Canadian
Arctic Producers. Their member co-operatives are scattered within the
regions they serve, throughout NWT in the case of ACL and more
concentrated within northern regions in the case of FCNQ (Figure 3). ACL
currently serves 38 member co-operatives, primarily in Inuit communities but
including some Dene communities in the Mackenzie River Valley and FCNQ
has a membership of 12 Inuit-owned co-operatives. ANICA, the oldest of
these organisations, has for over 40 years been operating from a head office in
Seattle and a central clearing house in Anchorage, and deals with stores all
over Alaska (Figure 4). Its current membership is between 35 and 40.

Establishment, ownership, scope and role

All three of the north American organisations, like ALPA, have stemmed from
the need to provide appropriate support for small community stores
continually subjected to pressures which threaten to undermine their financial
stability and their ability to provide appropriate services. However, as Table 1
indicates, the decisions underlying the development of the north American
organisations and those applying to ALPA have had a somewhat different
emphasis.
Figure 3  Northern Canada — stores served by ACL and FCNQ
Figure 4 Regions covered by North American store support groups
The three north American organisations were established because of general requests for assistance coming from the aboriginal communities in general, all realising that their fledgling village co-operatives would need external support in order to survive. ANICA, the oldest organisation, also owes its establishment to the aftermath of World War 2. Military ration dumps left in Alaska were passed on to aboriginal village groups which subsequently asked for advice on how to develop this windfall of goods into locally owned retail stores. In northern Canada the Inuit and Indian village co-operatives, initially set up to promote the production and marketing of local goods such as skins and pelts, fish, artefacts and carvings, preceded the establishment of both ACL and FCNQ. These origins contrast somewhat to that of ALPA where the Association was established, in response to various changes in the administration of Aboriginal settlements, as a mission/Church initiative (Wells 1993, 41–46).

ANICA, ACL and FCNQ are all owned by the member co-operatives, which predated them. People who live in these communities know that they own their stores, and also seem to be aware that they ultimately control the support organisation for their own co-operative. However the situation with regard to ALPA ownership, as Wells (1993, 166–170) and Crough (1992) discuss, is, as far as many Aboriginal residents in the communities are concerned, confused. The Association claims that it is owned by the members of the five communities in which it operates a store. Each community owns, or is paying off a government loan for, the store building, but ALPA owns the stock inside the store and has the responsibility of operating the store. As recent comments from community members have indicated this can lead to an anachronistic situation in which the community council thinks it might set up another store to compete against the one which, according to ALPA, already belongs to them. Such misunderstandings have also apparently occurred in aboriginal cooperatives in the Canadian Arctic (Peter Jull, pers. comm.). These differences in ownership have important implications in terms of the practical control of the support organisations, and also in terms of community perspectives on their operations.

All four organisations profess a commitment to providing services which will enable the community stores within theirambits to operate efficiently and meet their customers demands to the best of their ability. The scale of their operations varies considerably. Both ACL and ANICA are very large organisations, particularly considering the environment within which they work.

21
## Table 1 Summary of characteristics of store support organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA)</th>
<th>Arctic Co-operatives Limited (ACL)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Role</td>
<td>To further Aboriginal social and economic development.</td>
<td>To foster Native self management, control and participation in business; to encourage the growth of identity and political power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope/Membership</td>
<td>10 community stores, 5 of which are ALPA owned. Retailing.</td>
<td>38 community co-ops. From producer co-ops, now combined with retailing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment and Training</td>
<td>All managers still non-Aboriginal. Community-based store training school (from 1981); now mostly on-the-job training. Community education, including nutrition encouraged.</td>
<td>Most managers still non-native, but also many experienced native staff. Periodic training schemes. Community education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Arrangements</td>
<td>More than 15% profits to stores for disbursement by local community. Remainder for investment, on-going costs etc.</td>
<td>Essentially non-profit making. But redistributes components of profits as available to members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government/other external funding</td>
<td>Little government funding now. Mission influence strong.</td>
<td>Government backs Bank Loan for stockpiling; and occasionally training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other business interests</td>
<td>Wholesale warehouse until 1987. Now investment in Darwin real estate.</td>
<td>NWT Co-op Business Development Fund — Scheme which administers government loans to member co-ops. Arts and crafts buying and selling (7 retail outlets, some in southern cities.) Tuttavik arts and crafts run with FCNQ.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federation des Co-operatives de Nouveau Quebec (FCNQ)</td>
<td>Alaska Native Industries Co-operative Association (ANICA)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To foster self-management and provide efficient retail services.</td>
<td>To provide efficient and appropriate retail services in native Alaskan community.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 community co-ops. From producer co-ops, now combined with retailing.</td>
<td>36 village stores: Retailing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mostly Inuit managers. Annual training courses at various levels.</td>
<td>All managers local, mostly non-native and community appointed. No specific training courses.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essentially non-profit making. Surpluses returned to members as Federation share capital.</td>
<td>All profits to be distributed to member co-ops, for further redistribution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government has backed bank loan for transport. Now relatively unimportant apart from NEDP loan.</td>
<td>Government initially funded purchase of shares by members.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel agency. Tuttavik arts and crafts with ACL. Outlet in Montreal.</td>
<td>Art and craft buying and selling.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
They currently each provide services for almost 40 separate village co-operatives and are heavily involved in both purchasing and marketing for a wide range of aboriginal arts and crafts. ACL runs seven separate arts and crafts stores, some of which lie outside the Northwest Territories in southern cities such as Edmonton and Montreal where the tourist market is larger. In contrast FCNQ and ALPA are much smaller, the former providing for the needs of 12 village stores and the latter dealing with only ten stores. In cultural terms these two organisations are less heterogeneous than the two large companies. FCNQ's members are all from closely knit communities, predominantly Inuit, while ALPA has traditionally focussed on Arnhem Land communities.

The main role of all of these organisations is providing support for community co-operatives/stores. ACL and ALPA further spell this out in their objectives which stress commitments to furthering the 'social and economic development of Aboriginal people' (ALPA 1972) and by 'providing leadership and expertise to ... safeguard the ownership participation of northern people in the ... commerce of their country, to assure control over their own destiny' (ACL 1990, 15). FCNQ also sees these broad development perspectives as a vital element in its charter, and has extended these interests into the Federal/State political arena, focussing on the James Bay land claims settlements and their aftermath (see below, Jull, pers. comm.). ANICA, however, appears to have a narrower and more pragmatic view; its role is primarily that of providing services, and by implication does not extend into the broader arena, with all its social and political connotations. These differences in role are of major significance in considering how these organisations fit into the current frameworks of social and economic development within their regions (see below).

**Current operations**

*Services provided*

All four organisations provide similar services for their clients (Table 1). They act as clearing houses for the ordering of stock, nowadays by sophisticated and highly efficient computerised methods which allow for rapid identification of the most appropriate suppliers and which should also allow for accurate and up-to-date accounting systems. Their financial support services are designed both to accord with the limited experience of many of their clients, and also to ensure that the necessary checks and balances are continually applied so that any problems in operation are quickly identified.
All the organisations also co-ordinate the transport of supplies to their member communities, a particularly arduous and costly task considering the severity of the problems posed by vast distances and physical isolation. And all are also heavily involved in providing a variety of services designed to promote aboriginal involvement in store employment at all levels, and to improve management in particular.

The details of these operations obviously vary in some quite significant ways. For example, in terms of transport, the problems posed by both the vast size and climatic problems of the Arctic regions of North America are much more significant than those posed by Arnhem Land, and the Canadian and Alaskan operations have had to develop complex methods of dealing with these. ACL caters for communities which not only lack all-weather overland transport routes but also only have sea or river access for about three months of the year. Air freight is extremely costly. As a result the co-operatives want to buy as much as they can in bulk, to be transported by barge during the brief northern summer between ice break-up and the freeze. This requires a huge financial outlay, which individual communities cannot meet and which is therefore carried by ACL, with a bank loan guaranteed through Federal government funding. In general only fresh goods and other necessities which have 'missed the boat' are sent in by air. FCNQ faces similar problems but is slightly less disadvantaged because its member co-operatives are closer to its centre of operations. ANICA, until the early 1980s, was faced with transport problems very similar to those of ACL—using barges during the very brief period when sea and river access was possible. However, with the introduction of US Mail's Bypass air freight service, which provides extremely low rates for goods packaged in containers of at least 1000lbs, this has become unnecessary. 85% of ANICA's freight to member villages now goes by air. The Anchorage ANICA office has become not just the co-ordinating point for orders but also a plant for packing these into 1000lb bundles, and is now effectively the practical lynch-pin of the whole operation.

ALPA's transport difficulties, in comparison, are much smaller. However each store does need to carry approximately 25% of its stock at any one time in order to deal with periodic isolation in the Wet season and this does impose a significant logistical and financial burden. Ceremonies, which can periodically involve high levels of population fluctuation in any community, also make it difficult to predict demand from time to time and make it necessary to increase stocks. As with ACL, ALPA takes responsibility for business operations associated with this stockpiling.
Store management and its support

ALPA appoints and employs the managers for its stores; however in the North American organisations it is the member co-operatives which take these responsibilities. This difference reflects the ownership relationships between these organisations and the stores which they serve. It raises important issues with regard to local control, particularly aboriginal control over both the community stores and over the support organisations. It may also create problems for the management of the support organisations. ACL, FCNQ and ANICA are all concerned that, because they do not select and employ local managers, they may not be able to keep the operations of member stores sufficiently in check. As managers of these organisations point out, their own operations depend heavily on the commercial viability of their members. All try to prevent problems by providing a structured managerial advisory system, with a team of area managers who are responsible for a group of member co-operatives and who regularly visit them to monitor performance. For ACL, with almost 40 members throughout the whole of NWT, this daunting task requires approximately 12 managers, and is a major cost to their operation. Financial aspects of this monitoring are particularly important. Improved telephone systems and the use of computer records for ordering and transactions have greatly assisted this component of the system and head office control over the financial operations of each store is now much more effective.

Aboriginal employment

Most FCNQ co-operatives have Inuit managers and many have been run by Inuit since the early years of their establishment. ACL and ANICA co-operatives also employ some aboriginal managers, although many store managers are non-aboriginal. This contrasts to ALPA stores, none of which are currently under Aboriginal management. In the case of ANICA this difference partly reflects the fact that Alaskan educational systems have, for the last three decades, enabled aboriginal people to obtain secondary training in their communities and thus given them the basis for advancing the technical skills needed in store management. In Arnhem Land these opportunities have, until very recently, been much more limited. However the northern Canadian situation is very similar to that in Australia, and hence the contrast between ALPA and FCNQ does not reflect a difference in educational opportunities. It stems from a difference in the policy of the
organisation. In all four groups of stores other staff, ranging from cleaners to check-out operators and office staff working on orders and bookkeeping, are now largely aboriginal people.

**Training for aboriginal employment**

Training schemes aimed at increasing levels of aboriginal employment play extremely important roles. Of all these organisations, ALPA has apparently shown the strongest commitment to training schemes, albeit, as discussed earlier, with mixed results. FCNQ has also shown an on-going commitment to training, but its schemes have on the whole been more urban-based than those of ALPA, taking place at the Montreal head office rather than in the community. Since most of these co-ops already have Inuit managers, training would appear to be successful. Its success must also be gauged by the fact that many other Inuit who today run community council offices and other businesses originally trained by working for the co-op. The association continues to provide training and in 1989 head office in Montreal ran a general managers' course. Others offered in recent years included courses for general employees and for those working in tourist ventures such as hotels.

ACL has also conducted structured training schemes, but this has been an occasional rather than continuous effort. Its main contribution to manager training came through a four year scheme funded from 1979 by the Federal government's Special ARDA scheme (ACL 1983). It was, as Abele (1989) records, highly successful and resulted in an additional 20 Inuit and Indian people trained to take on major responsibilities in their co-operatives. Unfortunately this momentum was not maintained, principally because the funding agency, the Federal government, had other priorities, and these achievements were soon undermined because of a lack of resources for continuing the initial efforts. As Abele (1989, 82–9) points out, store managers in Arctic communities are extremely isolated, and problems of access to ACL's head office coupled with social and psychological pressures caused by lack of confidence inevitably led to erosion of the aboriginal managerial workforce. It is unclear to what extent members of this original training group are still involved in store-work. However, although their loss is unfortunate for ACL, it must be remembered that the experience which they gained would still have been valuable both to themselves as individuals and to their communities. Realistic assessment of the success of ALPA's training programs should also acknowledge that, although many individuals trained in storework are no longer employed in the stores, their overall experience must be helping the overall process of community development.
All of these organisations perceive on-the-job training as the main way in which their aboriginal store staff gain experience. The success of this type of program, however, depends heavily on the commitment and ability of the individual store managers and also on the time that they can devote to the job. ANICA, for example, have been concerned that the experience and ability of their store managers is very mixed and thus that on-the-job training is often ineffective. They attribute this to the fact that the community co-operatives, and not ANICA, appoint their managers and hence that some may lack the necessary skills. Although ALPA exerts greater influence over the appointment of managers, it has still been unable to ensure that they are all experienced, particularly in the unique requirements of the job in an Aboriginal community. Other studies of Aboriginal community stores (Young 1984) have also shown that it is difficult to obtain managers with the right attitudes and experience. Examples of inefficient and dishonest managers occur all too frequently; and unfortunately such people have often been remarkably successful in finding jobs in other Aboriginal community stores, before the deficiencies which led to their dismissal have been discovered. Poor communications between Aboriginal communities partly accounts for this. Lack of good on-the-job training also reflects the day to day demands of the manager's job, which at times is very highly pressured. However other factors include the reluctance of store managers to train others to take over their jobs, and the persistence of entrenched perceptions that Aboriginal peoples cannot cope with the manager's job and in fact do not want the responsibility which it entails (see Wells 1993, 79–86). In 1990 ALPA attempted to test some of these assumptions in their Galiwin'ku store by appointing Aboriginal staff as section heads and giving them a high level of responsibility for the whole operation when the manager was on leave.

*Other business conducted by store service organisations*

All these organisations are involved in other forms of business apart from the support of basic retailing. Many of these activities serve to enhance their incomes and hence to increase their overall profitability. They include marketing their services to others apart from their members; becoming wholesale suppliers in their own right; administering loans to members; buying and selling arts and crafts; and investing in other opportunities such as the real estate market (Table 1). Commercial activities less directly concerned with ALPA's own profitability include the promotion of community development through measures such as supporting family-based enterprises.
Entering the wholesale business would seem to be a logical step for organisations which co-ordinate orders for large quantities of goods within a limited range. However so far ALPA is the only company which has ventured into wholesaling and that side of its business has now ceased. Its experiences in this area demonstrate many of the pitfalls which are likely to occur. ALPA's Darwin warehouse dealt mainly with variety goods and clothing, and could be used by buyers from non-ALPA as well as ALPA stores. During the mid 1980s ALPA tried to expand its activities and, along with establishing an East Kimberley office to meet training and service needs in the whole Kimberley region, made a bid for purchase of a local Darwin wholesale grocery company, Hickmans. Its bid rested on receiving Commonwealth government funding through the Aboriginal Development Commission and, because of delays in making the funding decision, was ultimately unsuccessful. Subsequently, in 1985, ALPA did gain control over another grocery wholesaler which, as Wells (1993, 111-117) discusses, allowed them to offer their own and other stores a full range of appropriate stock. It was anticipated that this new ALPA wholesale company, North Centre West, would be able to attract the custom of a high proportion of Aboriginal community stores and that it would prove to be a very profitable business in the long term. However these plans failed to come to fruition. The small population of Australia's north, coupled with high freight costs and the fact that all major suppliers are in distant cities in southern and eastern Australia, make local wholesaling a risky business. In 1986 ALPA was forced to acknowledge the difficulties faced by their wholesaling operation and sold the whole business to Independent Grocers Co-op., a much larger southern-based operation. Moves into the wholesale market in remote Canada and Alaska, where the situation is very like that of ALPA, would undoubtedly face similar problems.

Unlike its North American counterparts, ALPA has made its normal services available to other stores. These can include accountancy, management advice and control (including assistance in obtaining experienced non-Aboriginal staff), and training programs. Stores can opt for whichever components of these services they require and pay accordingly. These consultancy services have been made available partly because of ALPA's original policy of ultimately transferring ownership of their stores to the community councils and continuing their existence as a resource agency. So far only two ALPA stores, Warruwi and Yirrkala, have achieved this changeover. In both cases ALPA has been keen to maintain their support, according to community needs. Warruwi has accepted this but the offer was declined by the other,
Yirrkala. Another reason for ALPA providing its services to other stores is that the organisation acquired a good reputation for performing this role and was asked on a number of cases to come in as 'trouble-shooter' when a store faced financial ruin. In 1992 four stores with no original ALPA connections-Belyuen and Umbakumba in the Northern Territory and Noonkanbah and Warmun in Western Australia—were under contract to receive ALPA management consultancies. This included accountancy services and also help with recruiting and training managers and staff and with the co-ordination of ordering and supply systems.

As yet ALPA has had no significant involvement in the buying and marketing of locally made arts and crafts, an extremely important enterprise in all the communities in which its stores are located. In Arnhem Land this job has generally remained separate from the retailing industry, and is carried out by local Aboriginal organisations specifically set up for this purpose, or by external operators based in Darwin or further afield in southern cities. In 1989 ALPA did indicate an interest in this industry by participating in discussions over the possible purchase of Arunta Art Gallery and Bookshop in Alice Springs. As Wells (1993, 144–145) records, this did not eventuate and no further moves in this direction have as yet been made.

In Alaska and Canada art and craft buying and selling have been very closely associated with the retail activities of the village co-operatives. Indeed almost all the original members of both ACL and FCNQ began as producer co-ops, with arts and crafts being a major form of produce. With the limited number of tourists penetrating into Northwest Territories the creation of networks linking the Inuit and Indian producers of soapstone carvings, paintings, sealskin clothing and moosehide moccasins and other footwear with southern cities was essential. Prior to 1982 two separate organisations, Canadian Arctic Producers, wholly concerned with arts and crafts marketing, and Canadian Arctic Co-operatives Federation Ltd, a retail support group, operated in NWT. ACL was formed through the amalgamation of these groups. By 1984 the company owned and operated a number of arts and crafts 'Northern Images' stores, some in larger Inuit communities such as Cambridge Bay or in small northern towns like Inuvik but also in cities like Edmonton and Montreal. These stores operated arts and crafts buying systems within their regions and local craftspeople also brought their wares in casually. The company tried to maintain good contact with southern dealers who could assess customer demand, and a main task was despatching products to central locations in Northwest Territories and thence to other parts of Canada. These outlets, seven in number, now come under a subsidiary company, Tuttavik, recently
formed through amalgamation with the arts and crafts business of FCNQ. Unfortunately this company has recently been adversely affected by the downturn in demand for products, partly a result of recession but also caused by the disappearance of a market for goods made from skins and pelts, particularly sealskin. The successful banning of these and other products such as ivory has been directly responsible for forcing many northern aboriginal artists to depend on welfare for survival (Wenzel 1991).

ANICA's arts and crafts marketing operation is small compared with those of its Canadian counterparts, although it provides an important service for aboriginal producers in isolated parts of Alaska. It operates from the Anchorage office, run by a buyer who, after over a decade's experience, has a profound knowledge both of quality and price and also of the market. Most goods are sold from the Anchorage office to other dealers. In 1989 these sales brought in between $200 000 and $300 000.

ALPA has recently begun to make significant investments in real estate in Darwin. From the company's point of view this signifies a logical use of surplus profits, and it helps to ensure future commercial viability. Also, as the 1992 Annual Report stresses, it provides the company with higher levels of investment return than would be obtained through banking. However many ALPA community members find the principle of investment decision difficult to understand. They are concerned that ALPA's profits, only part of which are returned every year to the communities, are being used for purposes, such as buying flats in Darwin, which confer little obvious immediate benefit to them. People have wondered why the money is not recycled into the stores instead, to improve buildings and equipment, or perhaps to allow for lower prices through increasing the range of freight subsidies. Such feelings suggest communication problems within the ALPA system, between the head office, the ALPA stores and the Aboriginal people concerned, both directors and community residents (Crough 1992, Wells 1993).

During the last five years ACL has become involved with the distribution of government loans to its member co-operatives. The Northwest Territories Co-operative Business Development Fund (NWTCBDF) was set up with Federal and NWT government capital of $10 million in 1986 to administer loans and other financial services to member NWT co-operatives. Subsequently its operations have been financed through ACL and member contributions and by 1990 NWTCBDF had been able to lend over $42 million to its members (which included all but five of ACL's members). Borrowers have apparently become more and more reliable in repaying their loans, according to ACL
(1990) because people understand that the money they are borrowing essentially belongs to all the members of the group—it is not government money, obtained without hard labour.

Since 1987 ALPA has sponsored a range of family-based enterprises, including a Takeaway outlet, a fuel depot, a video-hiring business, a local bus company and a fishing business. In all cases ALPA has granted loans for establishment, purchase of equipment and other initial costs. These businesses, as Wells (Wells 1993, 119–121; 145–147) records, have had mixed commercial success and in some cases little cash has been repaid to ALPA. Other difficulties have concerned competition for the funds, and the feeling that applications from some communities were being received more favourably than others. Galiwin'ku in particular, where the presence of the Training School has ensured a strong level of management support, is seen to have been very favourably treated.

Financial arrangements

The differences in the structure of ALPA and of the North American organisations has a marked effect on their financial operations, particularly on those concerned with transfer of cash between the centralised organisation and the outlying community stores. Although the local community councils own the ALPA store buildings, or are in the process of repaying government loans, ALPA owns the stock in its five stores and, through its managers, can exert a significant amount of control over their operations. ACL, FCNQ and ANICA are essentially owned by their member co-operatives, and their level of control over these groups may in theory be quite limited. In practice, because directors of these co-operatives are well aware that the wellbeing of the service organisation is entirely dependent on the survival of the individual stores, it is considerable. Directors have proved quite capable of closing down co-ops which are not financially viable. As Stager (1982) notes, such a step proved to be a great shock to the Directors of the newly formed ACL in 1982, but subsequently all have striven to ensure that those co-ops for which they are responsible never again be allowed to develop losses so great as to force closure.

All these organisations have primarily emphasised that they are non-profit groups in which the support of their members is more important than the generation of surplus cash. Such aims are in line with the principals of the co-operative movement in general. In the Australian context they also accord with the promotion of community development, a goal strongly emphasised by the Uniting Church. However, as Crough (1992) points out, ALPA's
emphasis on mutual support stresses the interdependence of the five stores as businesses, rather than the responsibility of the association to its individual members. This perhaps partly explains the failure of ALPA to generate enthusiastic support from all of its individual members; many people would find it difficult to accept that they should support an ALPA store so that all the ALPA stores survive. The issue of ALPA’s perceived high prices for food and other necessities is an ever present concern which, whether or not it is totally justified, colours people's perceptions of the role of the organisation.

The relatively low cash incomes of aboriginal consumers makes the maintenance of low prices a priority. This may well mean that none of these organisations should aim for high profits. In earlier times profit levels were indeed low, and considerable losses periodically occurred. Between 1980 and 1985 ACL, for example, never made net earnings of more than $300 000 per year, although its annual sales rose from $10 million to $20 million; in 1982 to 1984 it incurred significant losses (over $500 000 each year). Its recent strong performance, which led to net earnings exceeding $1 million in 1989 and 1990, has occurred because of a radical restructuring of the company, including rationalisation of office and warehousing space, which cut costs by over one third. ACL’s financial instabilities followed an earlier pattern of indebtedness carried by its predecessors, Canadian Arctic Producers (CAP) and Canadian Arctic Co-operatives Federation Limited (CACFL), losses which were only countered by the intervention of government funding, principally from Federal sources. Between 1978 and 1983 the government established a Co-operative Development Fund which provided finance of the order of $15 million to bolster the activities of ACL (then CAP and CACFL) and FCNQ, on the principle that the survival of the community co-operatives was absolutely essential for the health of northern development. Although, following Stager’s (1982) review of that scheme, government assistance was rationalised to place emphasis principally on transport and bulk-buying subsidies (for example, the ACL sea-lift), some government input into the income of these groups remains. It is now however minimal for FCNQ (see below). Altogether the precarious nature of businesses such as these in the locations and cross-cultural situations within which they operate is an abiding factor which cannot be discounted.

With small profits the issue of redistributing cash and/or shares from the central organisations to the stores with which they are associated has not always been important. However it appears to have become more prominent in recent times. Here the difference between ALPA’s situation and those of the North American organisations becomes significant. ACL, FCNQ and
ANICA are all examples of what has been described by ACL Directors (ACL 1991) as second order co-operatives, ones which are owned by lower order community co-operatives, and which have been formed to provide their members with additional benefits stemming from bulk-buying and better co-ordination of services. They are therefore expected to disburse their surpluses, once contingencies have been covered, to members in the form of dividends, shares or other forms, depending on decisions taken by their Boards of Directors. Amounts vary greatly, according to other needs. In 1990, for example, ACL distributed $500 000 in such dividends and a further $250 000 was added to the NWTCBDF for increasing the capital available for loan by individual co-operatives. Once member co-operatives have received their shares of dividends, if any, they are then responsible for deciding how to carry out their own distribution. Both ANICA and ACL now have centralised accounting systems which can provide stores with records of individual expenditure in the store. These can then be used to calculate the amount of dividend going to each individual member. Obviously those who fail to patronise the store regularly should receive less benefit.

The system whereby a portion of ALPA’s profits are distributed to those communities in which its stores are situated has, as Wells (1993, 156–160) shows, caused confusion and some bitterness. In 1991 the five communities with ALPA stores shared over $187 000. Subsequent redistribution of these monies, both for community purposes and for individual payments, has usually been the responsibility of the community councils, and arguments concerning inequities in this area are always likely to surface. The fact that these sums are not exceptionally large, and that they represent only a proportion of ALPA’s profits, is recognised. It is this which has led to concern in the communities over ALPA’s investment policies, particularly its ventures into Darwin real estate. People have found it difficult to accept that an Aboriginal organisation is buying high standard residential accommodation to rent out when they themselves have to make do with much more basic housing. Similar criticisms have been made in the past in relation to CACFL, which at various times has had plans for expanding its operations in a number of areas—setting up a travel agency; extending the scope of its warehousing; taking over some part of the Shell fuel distribution contract in NWT; and running its own air services (Stager 1982, 87). As with ALPA, the company saw all these activities as contributing directly to improvement in the services it provided. However the member co-operatives were less convinced. These questions highlight the general problems which many aboriginal people face in understanding the need to preserve enterprise liquidity through
investment. ALPA's 1992 Annual Report attempts to clarify some of these issues. However these questions also focus attention on the reality of the avowed non-profit-making motive of the organisations and of the interests which they promote, issues which are explored further below.

Another financial consideration concerns the payments which member stores make for the services provided by the central organisations. These vary considerably. ACL members each contribute 7% of their takings to the company while the level for FCNQ members is around 6%. ANICA charges member village organisations 9.75% for its services while ALPA takes a 1.5% levy on the revenue of each of its member stores. The main concerns, certainly voiced both in Canada and in Australia, are that people get value for money. People rightly worry about the high prices which they are asked to pay, management problems which are supposed to be offset by advisory and training services, and the apparently 'high' lifestyle which they see when they visit head offices in Darwin, Winnipeg and Montreal. Even when there is no problem in justifying costs, all of these questions have to be realistically answered and this can be a very difficult proposition with a clientele which has had little opportunity to gain an understanding of the basics of business operation. Measures taken by dissatisfied member stores, particularly in NWT, have included bypassing ACL and buying and transporting their own stock in the hope that they can bring prices down. This is a particularly important issue in this region because of competition with the Bay/Northern Stores (see below). On the whole the problems that these breakaway stores have encountered have been even more severe and some have decided to return to the fold and provide full support for ACL.

In Alaska and Canada, where the community co-ops run a number of different types of enterprise, the relative success or failure of each component of the business has financial implications. For ALPA, with stores almost solely concerned with retailing, this is not a main consideration. The Canadian and Alaskan co-ops are also involved in arts and crafts purchasing and marketing, other forms of local production such as fishing, running hotels and other small businesses such as bakeries, and fulfilling contracts for other local companies, often in the construction area. Some of these, such as the hotels, usually make money. However others, notably the marketing of arts and crafts, often impose a considerable financial burden. Managers of the member co-ops of both FCNQ and ACL must pay cash to carvers and artists when they receive the goods but the delay before the item has actually been bought by a customer may be very lengthy. This causes a cash flow problem. Many co-ops have tried to solve this by paying for FCNQ and ACL services in kind, ie,
carvings, rather than in cash. Those companies must then shift their stock of carvings to get the money back. The amount of cash tied up in this way has at times been very significant. In 1982 carvings in FCNQ's inventory were worth at least $3 million, an asset which substantially exceeded the total annual sales of the company. Shifting these goods has not been easy. Recent problems have reflected recession and the collapse of the fur and ivory markets. There have also been difficulties with quality control. Co-op managers, the buyers on the spot, are not all experienced, either in assessing quality or knowing demand. As Stager (1982) comments, everyone in remote Inuit communities is a potential carver but some are more skilled than others; and when co-op managers are confronted with co-op directors determined to sell their own products it is very difficult to refuse. It is also important, because the Bay is competing with you, to ensure that you get the best items, and you will have to pay for them. ACL's assets in 1990 included an arts and crafts inventory worth approximately $2.8 million.

Competition with other retail stores

ALPA stores, unlike the village co-ops in Alaska and Canada, virtually monopolise the retailing trade in their communities. This lack of competition has been an advantage to the Association. Because custom is assured, prices can be set to cover costs which might be excluded from strictly commercial ventures, such as employing a larger staff than necessary to allow for time lost in training, or accounting for higher levels of shrinkage. However lack of competition may well be a disadvantage to consumers, many of whom, in these relatively isolated communities, cannot easily go and buy elsewhere. They are thus stuck with ALPA's prices and also with the stock which ALPA carries. Younger people, for example, have commented on the unfashionable nature of clothing. Despite efforts to explain exactly how ALPA's prices are determined, described in detail by Wells (1993, 133–36, 160–1), customers' perceptions that they are being asked to pay too much for their purchases seem likely to persist.

Competition, however, as the Canadian co-ops have found, can pose considerable problems for aboriginal stores. Many members of both ACL and FCNQ have competed with the Hudson's Bay Company (the 'Bay') ever since their establishment. This company has had all the advantages of access to a national trading network which can make significant savings through bulk purchase of goods for all its stores, and which produces items under its own labels. In general this has made Bay prices cheaper than those charged by the co-ops. Moreover the early role of the Bay as the trading outlet for the
products brought in by aboriginal hunters and trappers created a very close relationship between the company and the communities in which its stores were located, and some older people still preferred to shop there. However, as people have increasingly identified with and appreciated the significance of their own co-op, attitudes have changed and many aboriginal stores now seem to compete successfully. The 1987 sale of the Bay's Northern Stores division, the result of a decision to cover some of the debts of the company's struggling southern operations, may further decrease the cost advantages which the group has held over the co-ops. The Bay's successors, a new company formed by a consortium of former Bay northern managers, is smaller and may be less competitive.

ANICA village co-ops also have to compete, although not with a rival large-scale company. Most Alaskan villages have several retail outlets, both aboriginal and non-aboriginal owned. This reflects the local land-holding situation in Alaskan villages, which, in contrast to that in most Australian Aboriginal communities, does not exclude outsiders from purchasing property and setting up their own enterprises. However, although some villages may have four or five shops this does not mean that they all compete. Most, recognising the problems posed by the limited size of the market, specialise to some extent through offering additional services such as tourist accommodation or providing guides for big game hunters and fishers.

Major comparative issues

Organisations such as these face a number of different challenges. Some, such as the problems related to remote location and small population, are common to all businesses operating in outback Australia or in the North American Arctic. Other common issues concern competition with others offering similar services. However other sets of challenges are more specifically related to the unique situation of these companies: that they are operating in places where commercial businesses must function in accordance with the cultural context of the community which they serve. Political and social factors are particularly important and the aspirations of aboriginal people for achieving a way of life which accords closely with what they most desire must be stressed. All of these companies, in some degree, profess to support the ideals of aboriginal self-management and/or self-determination.

This brief comparison between ALPA and its counterparts in the North American Arctic highlights a number of important topics. These include the issue of aboriginal control over the organisation's operations, the problem of
reconciling its social and economic functions and responsibilities, the need to ensure its financial stability, and its broader political significance, particularly in terms of development. All of these issues involve some form of conflict. On a more local scale, similar conflicts were already identified in the earlier comparison between ALPA and the central Australian organisations. The fact that both comparisons identify similar issues suggests that these are indeed topics of great relevance to ALPA both at present and in the future.

Aboriginal control in policy and operations

Achieving self-management is obviously dependent on aboriginal people being able to exert significant control over the policy and operations of the association. Here there are considerable differences, primarily between ALPA and the three north American organisations. For a number of reasons, including the way in which ownership is vested and the relationship between the associations and the stores for which each provides services, the level of aboriginal control exerted in the Canadian and Alaskan groups appears to be stronger. While in reality this may be incorrect, the differences in origins of the organisations, particularly ALPA's mission-oriented foundation, are significant. Other important issues include official aboriginal representation on decision-making committees and the power to influence decisions; and aboriginal employment at all levels.

Decision-making: representation and exerting influence

Major decisions concerning the operations of all four organisations come from a Board of Management on which the majority of members are of aboriginal origin. These directors are elected by their communities (eg, in ALPA, FCNQ, ANICA), or by regional groupings of communities within which their local store falls (ACL). They are responsible for disseminating information in both directions, from member community to central organisation and vice versa, and theoretically they form the network essential for the efficient working of everybody concerned. Such a structure should ensure a high level of aboriginal control from the top. In practice this control may be much less marked. Directors vary a great deal in their understanding of the questions with which they are dealing and fellow non-aboriginal workers pressure them to accept ideas which perhaps do not reflect what they really want. One problem occurs at the level of the local community store/co-op, where the manager, still likely to be non-aboriginal, strongly influences policies and decisions; a local store committee, with membership restricted to aboriginal residents of the community, can be effective in transmitting the ideas of the
local people to the store manager. ALPA stores generally lack such committees, although there have been past moves, initiated by ALPA, to establish them. The fact that the idea came from ALPA rather than from the community may help to explain their lack of effectiveness. In contrast to the situation in many other Aboriginal communities, ALPA stores do not, in the conventional sense 'belong' to the residents of the community. Other problems in communication stem from the boardroom of the head office where general managers and other key non-aboriginal staff such as accountants can be very influential. These powerful individuals can exert authority even when they do not have voting rights on the Boards of Management.

Methods of enhancing aboriginal control into decision-making have included holding board meetings in the communities rather than at head office in town; and using meeting structures which allow for extensive discussion and consultation. However even when such approaches are taken it is very easy for non-aboriginal executives to run meetings and exert a very strong influence on the agenda.

Key issues here are not only proper communication between those employed by the company and its directors, and between directors and members of the community, but also the level of understanding and experience of directors and the general public. ALPA, ACL and FCNQ have all made efforts to increase such understanding, either developing separate materials for dissemination of information to directors and communities, for example through videos or news-sheets; or running information and orientation courses for directors. This was an important component of ACL's training program in the early 1980s. At that time Stager's report indicated that such a program was more necessary in this organisation than in FCNQ because the co-ops in the FCNQ region had been established earlier, were predominantly under aboriginal management and the community residents had a good grasp of what co-ops were all about. Recent discussions with residents in communities with ALPA stores (Crough 1992) have suggested that the information which ostensibly flows to the local level is not usually in a form which can be easily absorbed, and that there is a serious lack of understanding of the most fundamental issues, including who actually owns ALPA. Wells (1993, 133–36), however indicates that ALPA management have used many methods to try and remedy this lack of understanding, and certainly discussions in the 1992 Annual Report provide further evidence of current awareness of the problem.
Aboriginal employment

The employment of aboriginal people at all levels in their local stores/co-ops is obviously a vital element in self-management. The scale of employment itself is very important and, in the Canadian Inuit communities, the cooperatives together would provide more jobs than any other organisation. Moreover the skills which people have gained while working for the stores and coops can certainly be applied in other positions, and so the impact of these organisations on aboriginal employment and the acquisition of skills is more extensive than it might appear. This important contribution should receive more attention when the relative success or failure of storeworker training is assessed. Merely to comment on whether those individuals who have undergone training are still employed in the stores is insufficient.

Aboriginal employment at managerial levels in both the stores and in the central service organisations is an extremely important point. None of these organisations employ many aboriginal staff in their head offices, particularly at the uppermost levels. As Stager, commenting on communication problems between ACL and its member co-operatives in 1982, has stated, this would be a very important way of improving aboriginal and non-aboriginal relationships within the company. Negative comments on the dominance of 'white faces' in Yellowknife/Winnipeg and Darwin have been common. It is unfortunately still unlikely that there are many aboriginal people, particularly from these remote communities, who could take on the job of General Manager of a company like ACL or ALPA. However there is scope for employing aboriginal people in other key roles, and encouraging them to eventually take on prime positions. ALPA has taken note of this need through its appointment of Aboriginal staff in key positions such as Manager, Business and Cultural Relations and understudy to the Chairman.

The achievements of these organisations in installing aboriginal store managers are very mixed. They range from FCNQ stores, many of which have had aboriginal managers from the beginning, to ALPA stores, none of which have ever achieved Aboriginal management. The reasons for these differences are complicated. FCNQ co-operatives, as the first in northern Canada, received a great deal of effective support from both government and business organisations in the early days (Iglauer 1966); and employing Inuit managers was a major component of this. Maintaining this has been a source of pride, although it has perhaps caused some problems, including over conservatism. Stager (1982 43-4) comments that in 1981 a number of aboriginal managers in these stores had held their positions since the 1960s
and, although this provided for valuable continuity usually lacking with non-aboriginal managers, it did create problems because they had not received sufficient on-going training. FCNQ held its first official managers' training course in 1981. A year later Stager recommended that although this was a positive step, more effort was required and that FCNQ should bring younger, more highly educated people, interested in positions with the co-ops, to Montreal for intensive training.

Both ALPA and ACL have put considerable effort into management training for aboriginal staff but both have suffered from severe frustrations. Of the 48 people who attended ACL's courses from 1978, 28 remained by 1981. Five of these had become full co-op managers and a further five were expected to take up these positions in the near future. A further eight were managing departments of co-ops and the remainder were in training (Stager 1982, 121). In 1982 ALPA's training school similarly emphasised Aboriginal management but this has never been achieved. Some of the reasons for this have already been summarised. However in the case of ALPA there is perhaps another important point which should be made. ALPA's avowed commitment to Aboriginal self-management is offset by the feeling that providing an efficient service to customers should be the prime goal. This means that the transfer of responsibility to Aborigines who are still fairly inexperienced may not be supported (see Wells 1993, 161–64).

ALPA has also, in the recent past at least, seen commercial success as a major aim because this ensures future financial viability. This has worked against cost-cutting, and has also affected the attitude towards the eventual takeover of stores by community-based organisations. In 1983 ALPA administered a 'take-over' fund into which a proportion of the profits earned by each store was put as a sum towards the eventual purchase of the assets of that store by the community council. In 1984 the Dhanbul Council in Yirrkala completed that process by acquiring the store for a sum of around $90 000 to cover transfer of the assets. This process received no further encouragement. The directors of the other five stores were advised that they should consider staying together to keep ALPA strong, rather than following in the footsteps of Yirrkala (ALPA Annual Report, 1984/5) and the fund was renamed the 'community reserve fund', set aside for community projects. Subsequent restructuring of ALPA's operations aimed at creating a 'thinner, stronger ALPA' (ALPA Annual Report, 1987/88; see above) seem to have relegated plans for Aboriginal control in management and ownership even further into
the background. This is a very complex issue. However, comments made
during interviews conducted for this study, suggest that the issue of
community takeover of ALPA stores is still very much alive.

The issue of aboriginal control, in management, decision-making or policy,
does not appear to have been so contentious for ANICA. As discussed earlier
the main thrust of this organisation has been the provision of efficient services
and it is therefore not surprising that management training has not been a
priority. In effect each village co-operative chooses its own manager,
aboriginal or non-aboriginal. The latter have dominated, and altogether it
seems that, as long as the shop is well run, customers will be content. This
attitude partly reflects the existence of other shops in most communities;
many of these competing businesses are smaller than ANICA stores and are
aboriginal-owned and operated.

Social and economic roles and responsibilities

All the organisations discussed here have professed a general determination
to promote aboriginal social and economic development. Specifically they
provide services which support retail stores in remote communities. These
aims, which combine social and economic goals, present them with a
dilemma. In order to encourage social and economic development they must
consider their own operations and those of their member stores and co-
operatives in the context of the aboriginal community to which they belong.
Cultural and economic characteristics of that community must be taken into
account. However, as I have acknowledged elsewhere (Young 1981, 1984,
1987), this can create conflict within the operation of the organisation. Most
have, at different times, attempted to deal with this by emphasising either the
economic or social role at the expense of the other. Commonly it is the
economic role which is stressed. Commercial viability is obviously vital to the
survival of all of these companies, and their failure has repercussions not only
on their own staff but much more widely. If they fail to perform efficiently
their member stores may well suffer reduced profits and may be faced by a
host of problems stemming from poor and unsupervised management. They
in turn may fail and go bankrupt. For a poorly resourced remote aboriginal
community heavily dependent on purchased foods the closure of the store can
be extremely serious.

Mere commercial viability may not, however, be enough. These organisations
are also seen as profit-making enterprises, designed to generate an income of
economic benefit to aboriginal people. It is here that the principal dilemma
presents itself. The generation of such profits, above those needed to ensure a
certain level of stability and to counteract the vulnerabilities inherent in all
such businesses in remote areas, theoretically can provide aboriginal people
with a source of income which does not come directly from the government
and which therefore may enhance self-determination. But it has costs. It can
only occur with highly efficient business practice, and ultimately passing on
costs to the consumers. Since aboriginal incomes in these remote communities
are on average only about 60% of those of non-aboriginal people, any practice
which places prices above the minimum must be questioned. In addition the
stress on highly efficient and technologically sophisticated business practice
inevitably, at least at present, leads to higher levels of non-aboriginal
employment and must defer aboriginal takeover at the management level.
Aboriginal control is going to decline.

These organisations, through their role as employers, and their support of a
wide variety of activities which provide a livelihood for many families, clearly
play key social welfare roles in remote aboriginal communities. However,
although this is extremely important at the general level, undue stress placed
on social factors in the operation of these organisations also has costs.
Although it is very important to increase aboriginal control and employment
in all ways, social practices such as employing people because of their family
connections rather than their skills, or failing to separate the responsibilities of
the job from those owed to one's family can spell disaster. Altogether all these
organisations have to achieve a balance between economic and social
responsibilities, a goal which is extremely hard to achieve. Many of the
conflicts which arise within them, at all levels, are directly related to different
perceptions on the part of management, directors, store staff and customers on
where that balance should lie.

Dependence on outside funding

All of these organisations have, at some time, had considerable assistance
through outside funding, generally from Federal government sources. This
has ranged from money to cover vital recurring needs such as backing the
huge bank loans required by the Canadian organisations to pay for their costly
sealifts in the short northern summer, to periodic funds to assist with training
and, on a smaller scale, to pay for meetings and workshops. Such assistance
has undoubtedly made it more possible for the organisation to keep its other
costs down, and hence has cut the costs which would otherwise be borne by
the consumers. However to some extent it creates dependency and leads to
surveillance by government and a degree of external control which must
detract from aboriginal social and economic development. ALPA's case has been of interest here. In the early 1980s the Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC) provided funds for the construction of new store buildings in some of the communities in which ALPA ran the store. Those funds were granted to the appropriate Aboriginal community councils, not to ALPA. When ALPA later applied independently for funds to finance its expansion as a wholesaler, ADC's decision was delayed at least partly because of uncertainties about ALPA's constitutional status as an Aboriginal organisation. Although, through modifying its constitution, ALPA later clarified that question the organisation has since deliberately set itself aside from government, stressing its independence from such sources of funds (Wells 1993, 93–98). This means that not only does the Association control its own policy, but also that, if it is efficient, it can operate knowing that each year the money for its continuation is assured. This is in contrast to government-funded operations, which may well have to make fresh applications for funding at frequent intervals, and for which forward planning is greatly hampered by uncertainties about how much money there will be. The disadvantage, however, is that there is a great temptation to increase profit levels, a strategy which may in the end detract from the value of the service offered to aboriginal consumers. ALPA's increasing stress on profit-making could certainly be interpreted as one of the costs of maintaining independence from external support.

Political roles

Potentially these organisations also perform political roles within the regions which they serve. This has been much more important with FCNQ and ACL than with either ALPA or ANICA. This can be a touchy issue. FCNQ came into existence before the initial negotiations between the Cree and Inuit and the Quebec government over hydro-electric development in the northern part of the province. Stager (1982) argues that the political experience which the Inuit gained while establishing their own co-ops and setting up FCNQ was extremely helpful in empowering them in the subsequent discussions which led to the James Bay Agreement. However although the co-ops and FCNQ were obviously already making important contributions to social and economic development in the region they were not directly represented in the land claim negotiations. The James Bay Agreement subsequently led to the establishment of organisations such as Makivik, specifically charged with economic development, but with no official linkage to FCNQ. Not surprisingly relationships between these groups have been somewhat
strained. Jull (pers. comm.) comments that the strain has continued and anticipates that FCNQ's political role could re-emerge in the complex arena of Canada-Quebec relationships. He also comments that many Inuit have been unhappy with the political machinations of FCNQ and that the organisation has lost critical support in some communities. ACL, being an institution of the 1980s and hence of the later era of comprehensive land claims, has benefitted from these lessons and has been represented in the recent negotiations for the Nunavut settlement.

Neither ALPA nor ANICA have had explicitly political roles on a regional level. However there is no doubt that at least at the community level such roles are important, as another channel through which scarce resources flow to individuals and groups and through which distribution is controlled. ALPA's current arrangements for paying rents to the traditional owners of the land on which its shops are located, an obligation under the terms of the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, is a demonstration of this. Local politics are also likely to influence aspects such as who becomes a director, or who is employed.

**Development: top-down and bottom-up approaches**

Ultimately the original reasons behind the establishment of ALPA and of the three North American organisations must explain some of the differences between them. ALPA was essentially an externally imposed organisation, stemming from decisions taken largely within an existing non-Aboriginal institution, the Methodist mission. In contrast ACL, FCNQ and ANICA all came about from the inside, in order to meet needs which aboriginal peoples perceived to be important. Despite ALPA's subsequent efforts to give Aboriginal people a high level of control over its operation and to consult closely with them on all sorts of aspects, there has been continuing confusion over its goals. Comments made in the course of this study (Crough 1992; Wells 1993, 126–139) show that many Aboriginal people still perceive ALPA to be a 'Balanda' organisation. Reiteration of the question 'Who really owns ALPA?' is a clear demonstration of this. Although it would be wrong to assume that the influence of external bodies, including both missions and government, has been unimportant in the North American Arctic, the reality of the ownership situation as regards both stores/co-ops and their service organisations is more clearly defined. People in northern Quebec, the Canadian Arctic and in Alaskan villages with ANICA stores, generally know who owns both their own local store and ACL, FCNQ and ANICA—they do.
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References


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Greg Crough and Christine Christophersen

Introduction

The research for this chapter was undertaken in the first half of 1992. A longer version of the chapter was presented in draft form to the directors and management of the Arnhem Land Progress Association in July 1992. The draft report generated considerable discussion and tension between some of the directors, the management and the researchers. Ultimately ALPA decided to withdraw from the project. Some of the material included in the draft report has been omitted primarily because it was no longer relevant in the light of changes made by ALPA following the presentation of the draft report. For example, some of the comments of the researchers were addressed in the format and presentation of the 1991–92 Annual Report.

The research was primarily undertaken in each of the Arnhem Land communities where ALPA operates. It involved interviews, both structured and unstructured, with most of the ALPA directors, store managers, store workers, members of the community councils, and a number of other residents of these communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Discussions were also held with the directors during their regular visits to Darwin, and the views of most of the senior staff were obtained, both formally and informally.

The intention of the research was to obtain the opinions of Aboriginal and other people living in the communities where ALPA conducts its business about the organisation. The researchers were very well aware of the difficulties of interviewing Aboriginal people. However, one of the researchers has close family ties with Aboriginal people in a number of the
Arnhem Land communities, and this provided the researchers with a degree of access to Aboriginal people that enabled in-depth discussions of the issues to take place.

The views attributed to Aboriginal people in this chapter are as close as possible to what was actually said during these discussions. The discussions were not recorded, but detailed field notes were compiled. To preserve the confidentiality of the discussions, the names of those people quoted have not been included in the text. The researchers are mindful of the fact that different questions may have elicited different answers, and that some of the people may not have fully understand our questions, or the reason we were asking the questions. However, we believe that we have made a genuine attempt to seek a wide range of views of Aboriginal people on what are often very complex issues. Some of the financial aspects of the business are complex, and at times we were aware that some very sensitive issues were being raised.

This particular aspect of the overall ALPA research project was not intended to provide a comprehensive overview of the organisation. This would have been impossible given the time constraints of the research, budget constraints, and the difficulties of organising meetings and discussions in a considerable number of Aboriginal communities. A comprehensive history and broad overview of the organisation has been provided by Samantha Wells in her book *Taking Stock: Aboriginal Autonomy Through Enterprise* (1993), which was also published by NARU.

**ALPA the organisation**

The Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) was established by the United Church in North Australia in 1972. Although new store buildings have been constructed in some of the communities, for a number of years ALPA operated from the original ration and Methodist Overseas Mission stores (Wells 1993, 41). ALPA operates and manages retailing businesses in five Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities: Galiwin'ku (Elcho Island), Ramingining, Gapuwiyak (Lake Evella), Minjilang (Croker Island), and Milingimbi. ALPA also manages five other stores on behalf of Aboriginal community councils, including Umbakumba (Groote Eylandt), Belyuen, Warruwi (Goulburn Island) and Noonkanbah and Warmun (Turkey Creek) in Western Australia. These stores are referred to as consultancy stores.

ALPA is operating stores in a complex social, cultural and geographical environment. The fact that it is has survived for twenty years is a tribute to
the management and staff of the organisation. Despite the close links between the major communities in Arnhem Land, patterns of traditional ownership, family obligations, and the like, are extremely complex. Each of the larger communities is different in some important respects from the others. Operating a commercial business in such an environment is fraught with a range of difficulties.

With total sales of $11.7 million in 1991–92 (to 30 April), and more than 80 Aboriginal employees, ALPA is one of the largest organisations operating and managing retail stores in Aboriginal communities in Australia. It is also a very profitable organisation, with a net profit of almost $694,000 in 1991–92. Even though ALPA’s net profit fell in the most recent financial year, in the past four years ALPA has recorded very large profits, including a profit of more than $1 million in 1990–91.

However, in the period 1983–84 to 1987–88 operating profits only totalled $155,000, and the organisation incurred operating losses in three of these five years. The improvement in the viability of ALPA in more recent years can largely be attributed to changes in the senior management, and a redirection of the Association’s priorities. In recent years management has focussed more on the core aspects of the Association’s business and on improving the financial viability of the organisation. Many of the grandiose expansionist schemes of the mid-1980s (Wells 1993, 118), such as the establishment of business links with Timor and the diversification into wholesaling, have been abandoned.

ALPA is incorporated under the Northern Territory Associations Incorporation Act 1978. This legislation does not allow the incorporation of an Association which restricts membership only to Aboriginal people. The fact that ALPA, while it remains incorporated under the Northern Territory legislation, cannot have a membership which is restricted to Aboriginal people, has created some difficulties for the Association and the directors. ALPA’s board and senior management have had considerable problems in clarifying the situation with respect to membership by non-Aboriginal people, and Aboriginal people who were born in Arnhem Land but who are not at present residents of these communities.

One of the most important features of ALPA is that it combines the financial affairs of five community stores into one organisation. The commercial success of the Association as a whole is dependent on the financial performance of each of the stores, and on the strong financial controls exercised by the head office in Darwin. By operating as a group, the
Association achieves financial and other benefits for the individual stores and their customers. For example, bulk purchasing reduces ALPA's costs, and assists in the negotiation of lower barge freight rates. In addition, because the financial resources of the individual stores are combined into one Association, the overall group resources can be used to assist any stores that may be experiencing difficulties at any particular point in time. Essentially the 'ALPA system', as it was described by a number of managers, means that the independence and autonomy of each of the individual stores is reduced, in return for mutual support.

ALPA's centralised management and accounting systems undoubtedly provide considerable benefits. The experience of stores in many other Aboriginal communities is very uneven, and at times even well-managed stores have experienced financial problems. ALPA's stores have not been immune from these difficulties. However, ALPA has the management expertise and accounting systems to detect these problems reasonably promptly. Further, ALPA has, particularly in the last three years, been able to accumulate sufficient financial resources to finance the operations of any store while it attempts to trade its way out of its difficulties.

In evaluating ALPA, and to obtain a better understanding of the comments made by many Aboriginal people about ALPA reported in this paper, a distinction has been made between ALPA the organisation (an association), and the business that ALPA is running. Much of the confusion that is evident in the comments from people we talked to stems from their lack of understanding about ownership, membership and control of the Association itself, as against the management of the business. It is not hard to see why many Aboriginal people living in remote communities might find this distinction hard to comprehend.

The distinction between ownership and control of the Association and management of the business is important. As will be noted later in the paper, some people working with ALPA believe that if Aboriginal people were to take full control of the Association, this would necessarily mean that only Aboriginal people could work in the operations and management side of the business. That is obviously not the case, as the example of many Aboriginal organisations attests. The issue is rather one of accountability and responsibility of the staff, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, to the directors and the members of the Association.
Is ALPA really an Aboriginal organisation?

They say it's a yolngu organisation but we don't know about that (ALPA director).
It's a balanda [non-Aboriginal] organisation with a black face (ALPA director).
They are using our black shirts to get ADC [ATSIC] money (ALPA director).

If the conditions of the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Act 1989* were applied, then ALPA would probably be regarded as an Aboriginal organisation. Sub-section 89 (1) of the Act states that:

For the purposes of this section, the following conditions are qualifying conditions in relation to a body corporate:
(a) all the members of the body corporate are Aboriginal persons or Torres Strait Islanders;
(b) a substantial majority of the members of the body corporate are Aboriginal persons or Torres Strait Islanders and the body corporate is controlled by Aboriginal persons or Torres Strait Islanders.

Although ALPA does not qualify under paragraph (a), since non-Aboriginal people can be members of the Association, it is probably true that the Association is in a strict legal sense controlled by Aboriginal people. However, this has been a source of considerable uncertainty in the past (Wells 1993, 94). Understanding the true nature of ALPA is difficult and going beyond the legal niceties presents a rather more complex picture. After several months of research, dozens of interviews, and the perusal of considerable amounts of documentation, the organisation is still hard to fully comprehend. This is partly because of some of the contradictory elements in the way it behaves. On the one hand, it clearly does not operate like a profit-maximising organisation, despite the record profits in recent years. It provides a wide range of social and economic benefits to Aboriginal people in the communities where it operates. It generates considerable employment, the dividends are often a welcome addition to the funds available to the councils, and the stores are well-maintained and most stock a wide variety of products. The organisation also financially assists Aboriginal cultural and social events.

On the other hand, ALPA seems not to have realised all of its potential and its own objectives. After twenty years there are still no Aboriginal managers, the chairman is a non-Aboriginal person, and there is a high degree of paternalism in the way that much of its business is conducted. There is a lingering suspicion, expressed to us by some people we interviewed, that the Church still has too much influence. Although this is formally not correct,
An Evaluation of Store Enterprises in Aboriginal Communities

Church values remain obvious in certain aspects of the Association's business. According to the minutes of the Special General Meeting convened to discuss the ALPA constitution in November 1984, the chairman indicated that:

... although the Church's name is no longer mentioned in our Constitution, we believe that the Spirit of the Church is in ALPA, and we will do our best to keep it there.

The role of the Church was raised in a number of the communities that have withdrawn from ALPA. As one very senior Aboriginal leader suggested:

The history of handing ALPA stores over to the people has taken too long. The church and ALPA took over Aboriginal resources and captured them and put a strain on the community. They formed ALPA, not because they particularly wanted to develop indigenous operations, but they needed to get free government money.

The role of the Church is a subject that is very sensitive with some of the people who have been associated with ALPA for many years. Numerous times we heard strong assertions that the Church does not control ALPA, and that ALPA is an Aboriginal organisation. ALPA staff cite numerous cases of differences between the Church and ALPA over the years to illustrate ALPA's independence from the Church.

A major part of our discussions with people in the Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities focused on the question: in what sense can ALPA be regarded as an Aboriginal (yolngu) organisation? There is a strong suspicion amongst many people that because ALPA was established by the predecessor of what is now the Uniting Church, and still retains links with the Church (mainly though individual staff members and some of the directors), that it is still in some way controlled by the Church.

From the responses received during the community consultations, it is clear that this is a very complex and sometimes controversial issue. Unlike many Aboriginal organisations, certain aspects of ALPA's structure, management and operations present a confusing picture to the outsider. However, not all Aboriginal organisations operate the same way or have similar organisational and management structures. Clearly there is no such thing as a model 'Aboriginal organisation'. In general, however, most people we spoke to in the Aboriginal communities said that ALPA operated 'like a balanda organisation', but were not sure whether it was an Aboriginal organisation. Some of the staff in the stores indicated that they were often criticised by people in the community for 'acting like the balanda'. Many people did
appreciate that ALPA needed to operate like a 'balanda organisation' to survive for as long as it has.

One of the most significant comments we heard in a number of communities was that many people wanted to understand more about what they referred to as 'the behind business', 'the business in the background'. There seems to be a strong perception that the full story about ALPA is not being told to most of the Aboriginal people in the communities. This perception probably relates to the way that ALPA was established in the first place. While not all Aboriginal organisations are open and accountable to their constituencies, there is a widespread perception that ALPA is more secretive because in some way the Church still plays an important role.

The role and legitimacy of Aboriginal organisations in service delivery was examined by Commissioner Johnston in his National Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Many of the Aboriginal organisations in Australia were established by Aboriginal people themselves, usually with the intention of delivering services in a way that mainstream service providers could not. As Commissioner Johnston remarked:

Whilst it may well be true that Aboriginal processes traditionally emphasized local autonomy, and no doubt still do, one of the most remarkable developments in the past twenty years has been the growth and effectiveness of Aboriginal organizations ... in my opinion self-determination cannot be a reality if governments fail to recognize that Aboriginal people have clearly voiced their preference for using Aboriginal organizations; not only as their negotiators, but as the agents for delivering services (Johnston 1991, vol 4, 24–5).

It is generally the case that organisations that have been established by Aboriginal people have maintained a high degree of credibility amongst Aboriginal people. Despite their success, however, there are many problems with Aboriginal organisations, as Commissioner Johnston indicated:

Obviously not all of the organizations have been successful; in some cases factionalism, inexperience, poor advice and financial irregularities have reduced their capacity to serve their constituency. Not all of the organizations are, in fact, accountable to the people they are meant to serve (Johnston 1991, vol 4, 6).

Who owns ALPA?

The individual residents of the five Arnhem Land communities are eligible to become members of the Association. The membership can include both
Aboriginal (yolngu) and non-Aboriginal (balanda) people resident in these communities. But the legal details of the ownership of the store buildings out of which ALPA operates its business in each of the communities is confused, mainly because at the time of writing there were no formal lease agreements in place between the Aboriginal land owners, the community councils, and ALPA. When ALPA was established its membership also included some of the residents of Warruwi and Yirrkala, but both communities have subsequently withdrawn. There is no provision in the present rules of the Association for new members from other communities.

ALPA is registered for taxation purposes as a public benevolent institution. This means that as long as ALPA distributes its surpluses (profits) according to certain defined criteria (for 'community purposes'), the Association is not liable for income taxation on its profits. This is a significant benefit for the organisation, and provides a much larger amount of discretionary income that can be distributed in the communities.

It is important to discuss ownership, particularly when the organisation claims to be an Aboriginal organisation, because of the issues associated with the accountability of the organisation and the staff to its Aboriginal constituency. References to the concept of 'accountability' were very widespread in much of the written material prepared by the management for the ALPA directors. Indeed, it has been one of the three key words promoted by ALPA:

> Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might: integrity, accountability, responsibility (Paper from Chairman to Central Committee c.1985).

What is the relationship between accountability and ownership when there are legally no owners of ALPA? ALPA has some individual members, not owners. The two are continually confused. For many years the members of ALPA could include employees of the Synod of the Uniting Church. In the original rules of the Association, the eligible members included employees of the Arnhem Land Civic and Economic Development Council Incorporated, but a few years later they were amended to read:

i) Aborigines who are residing in an aboriginal community where a retail outlet of the Association is located.

ii) Employees of aborigines or aboriginal groups or organisation in Aboriginal Communities, employees of the Synod or any other approved persons who are residing in an Aboriginal Community where a retail outlet of the
Association is located provided that salaried staff and officers of the Association shall be precluded from membership.

iii) The Ministers of religion and their staff and assistants associated with the work of the Synod in Arnhem Land in an Aboriginal community where a retail outlet of the Association is located.

The set of rules from which this quote is taken is undated, but from references in the text, it must be dated around 1978. It was not until 1984 that the membership rules were changed to delete references to employees of the Synod.

On the front cover of the 1990–91 *Annual Report* and on its letterhead, ALPA proudly announces that it is 'owned by the yolnu residents of Minjilang, Milingimbi, Ramingining, Galiwin'ku and Gapuwiyak communities'. This would suggest that ALPA potentially has thousands of individual owners, since the Aboriginal population of the five member communities is about 3,500 people. The statement obviously ignores the fact that the non-Aboriginal residents of these same communities can also be 'owners'. But how is ALPA 'owned' by the residents of the member communities? There are two main concepts of 'ownership' that can be discussed. The first relates to the formal ownership details of the Association. The second is a broader concept of ownership, which is directly affected by the first form of ownership. That is, do Aboriginal people in the member communities actually think that ALPA is their organisation? There is no doubt that this issue is a source of considerable confusion and misunderstanding in each of the communities.

When ALPA was originally established, a considerable number of individual residents in each of the member communities were signed up as members of the Association, and apparently paid a small joining fee. ALPA's constitution has, however, restricted the voting rights of the individual members, and proxies are appointed to represent, and vote on behalf of, the members in each of the communities. It appears that the last time that ALPA actually named individuals as members of the Association was at the annual general meeting held in July 1981. The minutes of the meeting record the names of about 370 people on whose behalf a number of proxies were appointed to vote at the meeting.

It is not surprising that very few Aboriginal people interviewed as part of this research understood that they were 'owners' of ALPA, since in a legal sense many of the residents of the communities are not owners and never have been. For most Aboriginal people in a community, their only direct relationship with ALPA is shopping in the store. The store building is an
essential part of the infrastructure of an Aboriginal community. ALPA, as an organisation, however, is much more remote, in the same way that corporate structures are to most non-Aboriginal people. While most people would have some understanding of the workings of a Woolworths or a K Mart supermarket, in all likelihood their understanding of the companies which own the supermarkets would be very limited.

It is not difficult to see how many Aboriginal people can appreciate that the store building is owned by the community council, or that the land belongs to the traditional owner(s), but find it much harder to understand the concept of owning an organisation which has its head office in Darwin. The distinction was clearly made by some people. However, most people we spoke to did understand that their community was part of ALPA, even if they did not understand what 'ownership' meant. There did seem to be a general understanding that the main reason to be part of ALPA was to support, and at times receive support from, the other stores. 'Yolngu helping yolngu' was the way it was frequently described.

A good example of the responses we elicited comes from one of the meetings in Ramingining. The following conversation reflects the views expressed by a considerable number of Aboriginal people in all of the communities:

'Who owns ALPA?'
'The council owns the building, and ALPA owns everything inside the building.'
'But don't you own ALPA?'
'No. ALPA is a balanda organisation'
'But ALPA says that it is owned by the yolngu people of Ramingining.'
'We don't understand this.'

During the same meeting, a number of people expressed the view that if people in Ramingining decided that they wanted to withdraw from ALPA, the community or the council would have to pay ALPA money for the stock and fittings inside the store.

One of the problems with clarifying the situation of ownership relates to people taking goods from the store without paying for them. One senior staff member said that in explaining that ALPA is 'owned' by Aboriginal people in the five communities, a perception could be created that there is no need for the 'owners' to pay for goods. However, it is unlikely many people in a community would actually do this.
The rights of traditional Aboriginal land owners

There is a further point to add on the question of ownership. Who owns the ALPA store buildings and other facilities? When buildings are constructed on any land, whether the land is Aboriginal land or not, if lease agreements are not entered into, the land owner would also own the building.

The implications of the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act for land tenure in the larger Aboriginal communities still have not been properly examined and discussed. It has been argued that one of the reasons the legislation has not significantly impacted on the income levels of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is that a substantial proportion of the most valuable land, in the larger communities, was retained by the Crown and the churches. In the case of the churches, most of the facilities were transferred to the community councils, or to ALPA, following the passage of the Act.

Governments, and many other interests, seem to assume that Aboriginal land is some form of public purpose land. When houses, schools, police stations or other public facilities are to be constructed on Aboriginal land, it is generally the case that no provision for either the cost of leasing the land for the project, or the necessity of obtaining permission from the relevant Land Trust as required by the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act, is made. The traditional Aboriginal land owners of closely settled areas are not benefiting financially from urban development on their lands to anywhere near the same extent as would be the case if the same kinds of improvements were being made to land owned by non-Aboriginal people.

By the late 1970s ALPA was beginning to receive demands from traditional Aboriginal land owners for rent for the land on which some of the ALPA stores, and the Galiwin'ku training school, were built. ALPA was probably one of the first organisations to deal with the rights of traditional Aboriginal land owners under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act. At the Executive Meeting in February 1980 it was decided that rent would be paid to the councils, and it would be up to the councils to negotiate with the traditional Aboriginal land owners. It is not clear why ALPA decided to pay rent to the councils, since the land is not owned by the councils. It may have been based on the belief that the store buildings were owned by the councils. This has been a contentious issue in some communities in the Northern Territory.

Various meetings were held between ALPA and the Northern Land Council to discuss leases for the stores. We have been informed that no formal leases are presently in place for the stores. One lease was drafted by Northern Land
Council for the new Milingimbi store, was submitted to ATSIC, but was never formally signed. It is not clear, in the absence of leases, what the legal position about the ownership of the stores might be. ALPA management has indicated that 'verbal agreements' with land owners are sufficient. The minutes of the February 1985 meeting of the ALPA Central Committee (what is now the board of directors) record 'ALPA and the Central Committee's' attitude towards the matter:

ALPA accepts that traditional owners are to be recognised, but ALPA and Central Committee also realises that the money must come out of the stores. ALPA does not accept that any leases should increase annually ... It was resolved by the Central Committee that a flat rental would be paid annually with no increases from inflation.

Rent is of course a quite normal operating cost for most businesses. Many critics of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act maintain that traditional Aboriginal land owners are unreasonable in their demands for negotiated payments, whether these payments are rent, royalties, or other payments. By requesting rent payments for the land on which the stores are built, traditional Aboriginal land owners are acting in exactly the same way that any land owner would. The payments to the land owners need to be taken into account in the commercial operations of the business.

Further discussions took place at the February 1986 Central Committee meeting. However, it was not until the 1989–90 Annual Report of ALPA that the Association publicly declared its policy on paying rent.

After consultation with traditional owners a new system of payments was devised by the Board. The system accounted for the landowners' desire to see some equity in payments and ALPA's concern over the relative size of communities and the business ability to pay. Councils are now paid a base amount of $3,000 per annum plus 1% of profits. These payments are made quarterly for distribution to landowners. They represent a significant increase on previous levels.

For some stores, ALPA makes direct loan repayments to ATSIC on behalf of the councils, while for some of the other stores payments are made to the council directly, which then use the money to service the loans. It is not clear that the rent payments by ALPA are being made to the right people or organisations. At the time of writing, there were no formal head-lease agreements in place between the councils and the traditional Aboriginal land owners, and no formal sub-lease agreements were in place between ALPA and the councils. If no formal lease and sub-lease agreements were in place, it
could be argued that the store buildings and the houses legally belong to the land owners, according to the provisions of the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act*.

It is not surprising that ALPA took quite a number of years to deal adequately with traditional ownership and leases for the stores and other facilities. Government departments and authorities have been extremely reluctant to recognise the rights of traditional Aboriginal land owners. It appears from reading some of the documentation that ALPA has been extremely reluctant to *formally* address these issues. It is not obvious why this is the case. It may well be that ALPA's philosophy and policies for promoting 'community' development do not sit comfortably with the rights of traditional Aboriginal land owners. This is a complex matter, with a long history. It relates to the history of these communities. It relates to the lack of control Aboriginal people have had over their lives since colonisation. *The Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act* was explicitly designed to assist Aboriginal people to control their lives and gain legal title to their traditional lands.

Aboriginal communities are very complex, with various types of tensions, competing groups, and power structures which are often difficult for non-Aboriginal people to comprehend. Certainly the profitability of a store can be seriously undermined by 'excessive' demands put on it by land owners or councils or other groups in the community. But in some senses this is no different from the situation that applies in non-Aboriginal society. Many people complain that their rents are too high, that landlords and land owners are charging exorbitant rents. But in the end the situation is usually resolved.

ALPA has attempted to grapple with the situation, but it appears, from the comments we received in each of the communities, that ALPA, like a number of other organisations and government departments, has still not been able to effectively resolve the problem.

The presentation of financial information by ALPA

During the consultations we received numerous comments about the inadequacy of information presented by ALPA. Many of the directors stated that they did not understand the information presented during meetings of directors. The following were comments made by four directors:

> If the yolngu cannot understand what the balanda are saying, then the balanda should change what they are saying.
The meetings are bad run, and the balanda do all of the talking. The information is difficult to understand and confusing. They treat us like children.

I've been with ALPA 18 months now on the board and I still don't understand what's going on. When you go to a board meeting the balanda are on one side and the yolngu are on the other—and it's terrible. They speak to us like we are myalls. They talk down to us, not talking to us as equals.

ALPA thinks it has addressed it with graphs in the reports. But the accountant uses all these words that we can't understand.

The following comment was made by the principal of the school in one of the communities:

If there was more information from ALPA, about profits, dividends and things, ALPA's credibility in the community might increase.

After one of the researchers explained the distinction between rent and dividends during one community meeting, it was stated:

Well we didn't know that. It's never been explained to us clearly like that before. It has to be stressed to ALPA that each landowner [for the store and the barge landing] has to get a separate cheque. Now that we know that it's a different story I'll negotiate with the clan and tell them that the dividend money is for the whole community. It would be good if someone from ALPA came out to explain this. We need to be given time to work through it all. It's a very good idea if you come back with simple materials to explain this to us again later when we've had time to think about it and talk about it.

**Do the 'communities' own ALPA?**

It appears that one of the reasons for the lack of understanding about the ownership and control of ALPA is the emphasis put on the word 'community' by certain ALPA staff, and in its printed material. In the 1989–90 Annual Report, the Chairman's Report included a number of statements about Aboriginal communities, including the following:

The heart of the community is really the willingness and the energy coming from the young people within the community to learn and work and take responsibility.

The Chairman returned to this theme in his Report in the 1990–91 Annual Report. The report includes a discussion under the heading 'The Ideal Community', and concludes with the following statement:

The real question that must be determined is 'what do people see as the ideal community in which to live'.
Although there is nothing necessarily objectionable about these statements, the appropriateness of the use of the term 'community' has increasingly been questioned. Smith provides an interesting discussion of the use of the concept by government departments and other policy makers. He notes that since the early 1970s, when service delivery and policy in relation to Aboriginal people were being discussed, the term 'community' began to replace terms such as settlement, mission and pastoral properties. The new terminology accompanied the new government policy of 'self determination'. Its use was clearly meant to imply civil equality, democracy and free choice. By the mid-1970s there were 'Aboriginal communities', 'Aboriginal community councils', 'Aboriginal community development programs', 'Aboriginal community groups and/or associations', and 'Aboriginal community resource and training centres'. A very significant component of the Commonwealth Government's spending on Aboriginal affairs programs is the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP).

It seems that for this particular group of people 'community' suddenly became a self-evident cultural characteristic. It would seem it was the medium through which to deliver all sorts of policies and services in a manner which would automatically be culturally appropriate, democratic, ensure equal access and at the same time be politically and socially acceptable to the majority of other Australians (Smith 1989, 4).

Smith reviews the writings of a considerable number of authors, and suggests that the larger Aboriginal settlements, such as Maningrida or Galiwin'ku, should be seen as highly artificial collections of 'families'. Outstations, on the other hand, represent the territorial grouping of one family. The use of the term 'community' often implies that 'geographic communities' and 'socially organised communities' are the same. What it ignores is that:

... dominant or prominent families or clans can, out of family interest, deprive other families of equal access to goods, services, jobs, training, transport and so on ... many geographic communities/towns are not 'self governing social units', but rather can often be collections of families, language groups, or clans who can be in competition for resources (Smith 1989, 17–20).

More recently, Tim Rowse has reviewed the use of the term 'community'. He also refers to the problems embodied in the concept, but also notes that there still remain the problems of

... how the essential services of such places are designed, funded and managed, a problem of (self-) government, in other words ... The dualities between indigenous and introduced political structures which are revealed in
my discussion so far should be recognised as a deep structural legacy of the colonial encounter. The indeterminate relationship between the 'Aboriginal domain' and that which now encloses and penetrates it (albeit, in some cases, while seeking to enable) will be with us for a long time (Rowse 1992, 57–8).

The relationship between the councils and the community

The concept of the 'community' becomes particularly important in relation to the payments of dividends. ALPA pays dividends to the councils in each of the communities. Because ALPA has to be concerned about its taxation status, it is important that the dividends are used for 'community' purposes. This is presumably why the dividends are paid to the councils, since it is assumed that the councils represent 'the community'. In some communities, that may be a questionable assumption.

However, it is also important to recognise that ALPA is in a difficult situation. Establishing which organisation is the most representative of all of the groups and families in a community, particularly for the purposes of paying dividends, is not easy. The organisations based in the community generally represent different groups and different interests. It seems that ALPA has taken the view that the councils best fit this representative role.

In some of the communities, the councils are functioning reasonably well. The council may be responsible for a wide range of functions, and be undertaking these quite successfully, given its limited resources. In other communities, the councils are not functioning well at all, and some of the service delivery responsibilities are being handled by other organisations. In all of the communities there are quite a number of Aboriginal organisations performing 'community' functions, including the council, the outstation resource centre, the health clinic, and the women's centre. The council is often not the most representative body, and should not be the sole arbiter of 'community' priorities. The different organisations do not always agree on 'community' priorities, since they often represent different power groups, or clan groups in a community. Some are under the influence of certain non-Aboriginal people who often have their own agendas.

ALPA, by deciding to pay dividends to the councils, is assuming that the councils are the only organisations that can decide how these funds are utilised. In some cases, this may not be appropriate. In a number of communities, representatives of some of the other organisations were very critical of the council for the way it was using the dividend money. Some
people were critical of ALPA for allowing this to happen, and not recognising that the other organisations should be involved in the decision-making.

At times the ALPA dividends have been used to supplement the operating budgets of the councils. At various times, most of the councils have been in financial difficulties, and the availability of untied dividend payments from ALPA can be a welcome addition to their resources. There is no doubt that these and other funds have been used to disguise financial mismanagement in some councils, by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. However, in many other cases the funding has enabled the councils to provide services desperately required in the community.

The position of the chairman of ALPA

According to the rules of ALPA, the chairman is 'appointed' by the board of directors. The rules do not require the chairman to be a member of the Association, a director, or an Aboriginal person.

When the position of the present chairman was raised in discussions with ALPA's senior management, the response was often very defensive. The present chairman has been in the position for a long time, and many people associated with ALPA hold him in high regard, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. He has presided over the development and growth of an organisation during some very difficult periods. No one should underestimate the difficulties of operating commercially viable stores in remote Aboriginal communities. ALPA's commercial record is almost unparalleled when it is compared with the record of many other projects that have been established in Aboriginal communities.

In raising this matter, our intention was not meant to be personal. Aboriginal society, in some respects, has come a long way since ALPA was established in the early 1970s. There are thousands of Aboriginal organisations in Australia. Some have been remarkable successes (Coombs 1993), others have failed spectacularly. Most are run by hard-working, often highly stressed, and usually highly motivated people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. Aboriginal people are recording significant achievements in all aspects of Australian society. The question for ALPA, and particularly for the directors, is given all of the developments in Aboriginal society, is it appropriate for an organisation that claims to be an Aboriginal organisation, twenty years after it was established, to retain a non-Aboriginal chairman?
An assumption has been made by some people in the organisation that a change from a non-Aboriginal chairman to an Aboriginal chairman would necessarily require the removal of all of the non-Aboriginal staff. The response is interesting, because it provides an insight into the thinking of some of the senior ALPA staff. There is a strong view amongst the senior staff and some directors that the chairman of ALPA should not be a 'meeting chairman'. The position should be occupied by a person who intends to actively promote ALPA's 'developmental' functions. The chairman provides the leadership in carrying out these functions. It seems that there is a strong view amongst certain people associated with ALPA that without a (particular) non-Aboriginal chairman, these functions would no longer be undertaken, and there would be no need for the non-Aboriginal staff in the organisation.

In all of the communities, we asked many people, and particularly the directors, what they felt about the position of chairman. Why has ALPA never had an Aboriginal chairman? ALPA is very unusual, perhaps unique, in being an Aboriginal organisation with a non-Aboriginal chairman. Of course, many Aboriginal organisations have non-Aboriginal employees, and many often have non-Aboriginal general managers.

A previous group manager outlined his views on the chairman's position at the Annual General Meeting in August 1986:

ALPA is unique in that it has a cross-cultural Board with a European chairman whose strengths are passed on to the Board in communications, teaching and understanding in acceptance of products.

There is a view held by certain people associated with ALPA that it is also unique in having both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working in the same organisation. The implication is that other Aboriginal organisations do not have non-Aboriginal employees. This view is probably indicative of the lack of knowledge of a number of the senior staff about the activities of Aboriginal organisations. Many of these organisations employ Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. In fact, some of these organisations are often criticised by their constituents for not employing more Aboriginal people. ALPA is not unique in having Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together.

ALPA management have stressed that it is not possible to compare ALPA with other Aboriginal organisations since these organisations are dependent on government funding. It is not clear why the source of funding should be relevant to a discussion about the role of the chairman. Other Aboriginal
organisations are subject to a high, some would say excessive, degree of accountability, from both the funding bodies and their constituencies.

We received a considerable number of comments about the role of the chairman. No one we spoke to said that they agreed with the position being held by a non-Aboriginal person. However, a number of directors did say that they had been told that the chairman of ALPA needed to have a wide range of skills, which it is claimed most Aboriginal people still do not have. The directors said that they were told:

Yes, a yolngu can do the job, but you need to be aware that the person must have skills in retailing, business and accounting.

This was also confirmed by a director in one of the other communities:

I was a bit surprised when I went to the first board meeting when I found out that the chairman is a balanda. They told me that it's ALPA policy to have a balanda chairman. We can't do things on our own. When we tried to get a yolngu chairman, we were told that ALPA would go down and there would soon be no ALPA.

Some ALPA directors did suggest that much of what ALPA does is new to Aboriginal people, and they needed to be better trained:

Yolngu understand cultural business, but need to be educated about balanda business.

A number of directors indicated that they are unhappy with the 'politics' associated with the chairman's position. We asked a number of directors why, if they felt this way, they did not do something about the situation.

I have just found out how much it costs ALPA to have George as the chairman ... The directors have the power to do something, but there is a lot of politics associated with the chairmanship. I raised the issue of the balanda being chairman, and was accused of being racist. The board includes some of the strongest yolngu people in Australia, and there is no reason why any of them could not be chairperson. Qualifications and ability are not the problem.

Another said, when asked why there is a non-Aboriginal chairman:

It is the directors' fault.

A number of directors were also critical of the way board meetings are conducted:

The Chairman and the General Manager do most of the talking, and the yolngu directors never meet without the balanda present.
The need to have meetings with only Aboriginal people present was stressed to us frequently. A number of directors at times do not feel comfortable expressing their opinions in a meeting where there are non-Aboriginal people present. Two directors from another community also referred to the conduct of board meetings, in relation to the size of the dividends payments:

We have lots of ideas for future things like basketball courts and things like that. ALPA tells us as directors to go back and get things right, but nothing changes. How can we increase that dividend?

He just won't let us question this in the meetings. In the meeting we just get told what we'll get. ALPA has got flats in Darwin now. That's a lot of money in those flats. What good is it to us?

One of the directors said that he felt it was a strong matter of principle that there should be an Aboriginal chairman. As ALPA itself has stressed in much of its written material, he regards it as an issue of leadership.

There is a lot of mystification about ALPA. This is partly because ALPA does not have a yolngu chairperson, yolngu store managers, and is not showing leadership to Aboriginal people.

One director, however, was confident that the situation would change very soon, because a trainee chairman was working in the ALPA office in Darwin. This position was raised by a number of the other directors. The following answer was given by someone associated with ALPA, but not a director, when asked why there is a non-Aboriginal chairman of ALPA. Although it is a legitimate view, the answer still does not clarify why Aboriginal people are prepared to elect Aboriginal chairpersons in other contexts.

They don't trust each other. They feel comfortable with George because he is an outsider, and will not be affected by considerations of a particular community. And he has been around a long time.

One of the board representatives from one of the stores where ALPA operates consultancy stores was probably confirming at least part of this statement, or reinforcing the view that the chairman and the management are perceived to be running the Association:

If we want to change something, we go to ALPA, not the directors. It's not really an Aboriginal organisation in that sense.
The ALPA ethos: a people development organisation

According to Gatjil Djerrkura, a former director of ALPA in 1980,

ALPA is part of a process which secures the development of Aboriginal people in Arnhemland in such a way that it is contributing towards the learning experiences for the people. It is good to know that we have stores in Arnhemland to which the people feel they can relate; not completely run on a commercial basis but trying to relate to the people in the community as much as possible.

Perhaps the main point to come out of the discussion about the role of the chairman is that all organisations operate according to the rules, written or unwritten, of a particular 'culture', or ethos. ALPA's culture, despite the fact that it is running stores in Aboriginal communities, does not derive to any significant extent from Aboriginal cultural and social values. One reason that it is difficult for the directors to act on some of the matters they raised with the researcher is that to do so would necessitate a change in the 'culture' of ALPA.

ALPA has operated the way it has for a long time, despite many changes. Many of the people involved in the organisation have known each other for more than twenty years. Some of the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff have close personal relationships. It is not easy to modify these old allegiances and patterns of behaviour, let alone change them dramatically. Indeed, such change may not happen.

The role of the chairman and the general issue of leadership is very important, and was raised a number of times by ALPA management and the chairman himself during our discussions. In fact, there seemed to be general agreement that the chairman of ALPA does not require special retailing or other commercial skills. In fact, the present chairman insisted he is not particularly interested in retailing. The role of chairman, he argued, is to assist 'the economic and social development' of Aboriginal people, with particular emphasis on social development.

A number of times it was suggested that running the stores, and the commercial aspects of ALPA's operations, are really a secondary consideration to some of the Darwin-based staff. ALPA has refined its management and accounting systems to such an extent that the retailing operations are relatively straightforward. The training of the staff to undertake most of the jobs in the stores is regarded as being relatively easy, and ALPA's methods have been adopted by some other community stores, store organisations and educational institutions.
The view that the retailing side of the business is a secondary consideration underestimates the difficulties of running stores in Aboriginal communities. It tends to overlook the contribution ALPA has made to the Aboriginal people in these communities by operating and maintaining profitable and well-managed stores. The stores are a key part of the economy of these communities, and their performance affects the lives of nearly everyone in the community. The problem is that this is not enough to satisfy the personal objectives of some of the people associated with ALPA. Some of the non-Aboriginal head office staff of ALPA and the chairman place much greater emphasis on ALPA's role as a 'people development' organisation. According to the Chairman's Report for 1986:

ALPA sees itself now more strongly than ever before, as having the role of a 'People Development' enterprise. The only real need for ALPA to exist is that through its operations the people of the member communities gain the experience and skills that will equip them to understand modern business practice and handle more of their own affairs in the future.

More recently, during informal discussions, it was stated that if ALPA was only about running retail stores in Aboriginal communities, all of 'us' (the senior non-Aboriginal staff and the chairman) would leave. People development means improving the skills and changing the attitudes of the Aboriginal directors and staff. It means the development of a work ethic amongst the Aboriginal staff. As one of the staff members put it in 1985, it means generating 'Alpathusiasm'. It means teaching Aboriginal people how to use dividends 'properly', and teaching people in communities respect for the property of other people.

Quite considerable efforts have been put into inculcating these values into the hearts and minds of everyone associated with ALPA. The attitudes of many of the store managers reflect these values. Even managers who have had no previous experience in working with Aboriginal people and in Aboriginal communities seem to hold these values. There is of course a benefit in employing managers with these values, particularly honesty, since it helps to ensure the viability of the organisation. The sorry experience of community councils employing managers who turn out to be dishonest is widespread. ALPA should to be congratulated for trying to ensure that it employs staff who are, to the extent that it is possible, honest.

A perusal of ALPA's training literature shows that educating Aboriginal people into thinking in a particular way has been a key part of ALPA's training programs. A senior staff member said the training of store workers to
undertake the retail functions is not the most important part of the training. Indeed, there is a strong indication that this broader aspect of training will become even more important in the next few years. This partly explains some of the ALPA senior management's attempts to find ways of integrating Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal concepts of 'economics', so that concepts such as 'responsibility', 'obligations', 'honesty' and 'integrity' can be explained to staff and the people living in communities where ALPA operates.

When the primary purpose of ALPA is seen in this light, then the role of the present chairman begins to be clarified. The chairman's position, as it is presently conceived by ALPA management, is not primarily to assist the running of a commercial retailing business. This is the function of the Executive Director and the staff. The documents from meetings of the Central Committee and directors, some of which are quoted from in the following section, show clearly the role of the chairman and the general manager in 'educating' and 'developing' the directors.

One of the key mechanisms for spreading the ALPA 'ethos' is through the discussions over the use of the surpluses (profits). Having relatively large amounts of money to distribute is a relatively recent phenomenon, since ALPA's financial position has improved markedly in the past three or four years. The deliberations over the distribution of the dividends, and the decisions regarding the establishment of reserves for particular purposes, are an important part of the meetings of directors.

If there were no significant financial surpluses to distribute, then the board meetings, and the organisation itself, might significantly change their character. If, for example, prices were reduced to substantially eliminate profits (subject to allowing sufficient funds for reinvestment, re-equipment, and the maintenance of an appropriate level of reserves), then where would there be an opportunity to discuss with the directors concepts of responsibility, integrity and honesty? What opportunity would the managers have to complain about the 'misuse' of dividends to the staff and other members of the community? ALPA would (hopefully) be operating profitable, commercially viable retail stores, but its senior management and the chairman, and some directors, would be limited in their ability to 'develop' people in the communities.
The control of ALPA and the role of the directors

In discussing whether ALPA is an Aboriginal organisation, quite clearly the role of the directors is very important. Considerable stress is put on the role of the directors in setting the policies of ALPA, and it was stated to us a number of times that if anything is wrong with the organisation it is up to the directors to resolve the problem. During the mid-1980s, the minutes of annual general meetings and Central Committee meetings indicate how ALPA has tried to define the roles and responsibilities of the directors. The minutes of the 1987 Central Committee meeting outlined the rules for directors:

We have talked today about ALPA's results, and ALPA is in the hands of the Directors. Balanda has rules for their Directors—made by the Government, and they are very strict. Directors must understand that they represent others, ie, the people who own the business. Some people are born traditional leaders, others may have enormous potential even though they are not born leaders. If we are running a business, it may be that someone who is not a born leader understands business. We must try to get around these problems. This is the reason for rules for Directors. Once we agree on the rules we must keep the rules.

The Rules are:-

(a) Directors must have INTEGRITY, ie, be HONEST in all things.
(b) We have to act in the INTERESTS of the community.
(c) Set an EXAMPLE—be RELIABLE.
(d) Directors must have ONE MIND—one voice (ie, as in the 5-year plan.)
(e) HONESTY WITH EACH OTHER.
(f) Be MODERATE (patient).
(g) TRUST each other.
(h) WILLING TO CHANGE.

The word 'integrity' has figured prominently in the minutes of many of these meetings. The following is taken from the minutes of the 22 October 1985 Central Committee meeting, and is set out basically in the same way as it was in these minutes:

I represents right at the very beginning the great Words of our Lord himself

I am the Way  I am the Truth  I am the Life.

N  is for NOW. Now is ever present.

T  is for TRUST. ALPA has a Great Trust.

E  is for ENERGY. Very little is ever done by tired people.

G  is for GIFTS. Each one of us have different gifts.

R  is for RECEPTIVE. We must each develop the capacity to listen.

I  means each INDIVIDUAL. ALPA is made up of individuals.

T  is for TRAINING AND TEAM-WORK.

Y  is for YOLNGU AND YOUTH.
Integrity is like the air we breathe—With it we have life and can grow and be strong—Without it our days are limited and life will drain from us.

There is a lot of talk in the papers and at meetings about the directors taking more responsibility for running the organisation. The issue is obviously strongly connected to the position of the chairman. As noted above, most of the directors expressed their concern about the chairman's position, and were aware that they could appoint an Aboriginal chairman. However, many did not feel that in practice they could do anything about it.

It should be noted that the general manager has raised the issue of the role of the directors in an association compared with a company. In a letter to one of the store managers (8 August 1989) it was stated:

We are endeavouring to have our directors see the responsibility of their position and report to the members of ALPA in the same way that any other Board of Directors report to their share holders each year.

While this may be an admirable objective, it is highly unlikely to happen until the confusion over ownership and membership is clarified.

Clearly the role of the directors is a complex matter. But as one would expect with any organisation, Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, the performance of individual directors varies considerably. Some of the directors take a very keen and active interest in the stores in their community, and are in constant contact with the staff and the manager. Others seem to have a less active involvement. The overwhelming impression gained from our discussions with directors was that they see their role as travelling to board meetings, the agenda is already determined, there is a complex array of rules and regulations in place to govern their own behaviour and how the organisation operates, and they basically endorse whatever the management want.

One of the directors had apparently raised some of his concerns with management, and been told:

The directors can make policy, but they cannot make decisions.

This was seen as a very important issue. Concern was frequently expressed about the appointment of store managers, but also many other aspects of the business were raised as being beyond the control of the directors. Many directors felt that they could influence the less important aspects of ALPA's business, but not the larger issues.

The conduct of the board meetings was a matter raised frequently in these discussions, as a number of the quotes above have suggested. Some argued
that there should be meetings of the Aboriginal directors held before the full board meetings. However, it was pointed out that even when the Aboriginal directors discuss issues, often in language, and reach some agreement:

When we tell the balanda what the yolngu want to happen, the balanda change the story.

It is apparent that many of the directors are reluctant to express a critical point of view when the non-Aboriginal staff are present. It is not immediately apparent why this is the case, since some of the directors are involved in a range of Aboriginal organisations, although the present system does benefit many of the directors. One of the directors said:

We need to get our act together. We want to be put up at the same level as the balanda. Yolngu people need to come out of the bushes. The directors should ask more questions.

Another suggested that there are real problems when directors do speak up, or are critical of the organisation.

The balanda staff should not be frightened of us ... I don't feel comfortable with them. Every time you stand up to them the rumours start. When yolngu stand up, they try to buy them off or the rumours start.

Another director suggested that he felt the same when he raised a particular matter, and was told:

'You can't do that. We will fly you in to town to talk about it.' This happens all of the time. They try to buy us off, keep us separate, offer us trips and things.

Another former director said:

The Church training did not really help Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land to develop. People are very backward and conservative. People in Arnhem Land are prepared to sit back and let the balanda do most of the work for them, as long as things are going well.

Further in relation to the Church, one of the directors indicated perhaps what seems to be the general feature of ALPA as an organisation:

ALPA is not Church run any more, but people still think of Aboriginal people in a paternalistic way. The thinking of the balanda has not changed in any way. Control is the key issue, and this is what the yolngu need to get.
While speaking of control, at a recent meeting of the directors, the chairman indicated that he thought Aboriginal people had come a long way, and that they really were in control of ALPA:

Ten years ago this meeting would have been only the senior staff and the managers. Now yolngu people are here making decisions.

The directors, the councils, and the 'dividends'

In our discussions in the communities, the role of the directors was raised frequently by many people. More often than not, these people were critical of the role and activities of some of the directors. There is no doubt that the most contentious issue raised was the control of the distribution of the dividends by certain individuals and the councils.

In a normal private company, shareholders receive dividends payments directly, and there is a clear relationship between ownership and profitability. In the case of ALPA, this linkage is very confused. There is considerable, and quite understandable resentment and confusion in all of the communities about payments resulting from ownership of ALPA as an organisation (dividends), and from the ownership of the stores and the houses for the managers (rent). The role of the councils in some of the communities complicates matters even further. It is hard to ascertain whether the perpetuation of the confusing situation is deliberate, an oversight, or perhaps it is too difficult to resolve. One senior staff member when asked about this situation did, however, say that one of the reasons ALPA has been successful is precisely because it is confusing to outsiders. By keeping details of the ownership, financial information, and structure difficult to understand, the demands on its resources and community pressure are reduced.

ALPA is like a cloud-shrouded mountain in New Guinea. Everyone knows there is substance behind the clouds, but no one can work out its shape.

The confusion over ownership, and the perception of ALPA in each of the communities, is strongly influenced by the payment of 'dividends' and rent by ALPA to bank accounts which are controlled by representatives of the councils (usually the ALPA directors) in each of the communities. The situation is further complicated by the payment by ALPA of the 'rent' for the stores to the councils. Part of the payments that are classified as 'rent' are often actually loan repayments on behalf of the councils. During discussions in the communities, a number of cases were raised by people claiming to be traditional owners who have not received any payments from the council.
The decision to pay both rent and dividend payments into the 'same special bank account' was made at the meeting of directors in December 1989.

Apart from the 'dividends', the board has also decided to make payments into a number of reserves and funds. Many of these have very admirable objectives, and include the:

- **rotating reserve**: in August 1989 it was resolved that 20 per cent of this reserve would be paid to the councils each year, and a further 'dividend' payment of 5 per cent of store profits would be paid into the reserve for each council;

- **education reserve** (balance of $100,000): for scholarships for students wishing to undertake tertiary studies;

- **year ten awards**: six awards, of $250 each, 'for Aboriginal students who achieve success in their Year ten JSCC exams and go on to Years eleven and twelve';

- **youth fund**: 1 per cent of profits top-up funding 'for communities who have a program of benefit to young people'.

It is apparent that the criticism of the use of the 'dividends' is greater when the council is not performing its service delivery functions adequately. Where a council is perceived to be operating well, there is much less criticism of the distribution of the dividends. However, in some communities, where the council is experiencing difficulties, for whatever reason, the distribution of the 'dividends' then generally becomes a source of considerable complaint in the community.

In all of the communities, there appears to be virtually no understanding of how directors come to be on the ALPA board. A number of people, when asked, said:

The same directors have always been there, and they always come from the same family.

One employee of ALPA said:

Some people end up owning the 'rights' to ALPA. Why is it that only certain people end up getting elected to the board of ALPA and getting considerable power in the community? These people worked for the missionaries in the past.

There is a strong view in all of the communities that dividend money is *community money*, and a very strong perception that a lot of the money is being
paid to certain individuals. This matter has been discussed at numerous board meetings, but as one director suggested to us:

Sometimes dividend money only goes to one person, sometimes to top-up council funding. The ALPA board and the council should work together to educate the community about how the dividends are used. I feel sad when the chairman says that nothing can be done about how the dividends are used. Something has to be done, and people can and should be educated.

It is apparent that ALPA management has raised this issue frequently with the councils. A recent example was a letter from the Executive Director (formerly the general or group manager) to one of the council presidents (5 December 1991), which accompanied a quarterly dividend cheque:

May we remind the Council of our recent discussion relating to funds being spent for the benefit of the community as a whole—to serve the interests of the community as a whole—to recognize all clans. This is the challenge Rev. Dr. Djiniyini Gondarra issues to Balanda and Yolngu within ALPA. We will develop ways of understanding this and reporting how we use these funds. Benefit may be community projects, youth activities, ceremonies, capital works, or asset purchases.

However, the same person at the Managers' Meeting in September 1991 said the following:

Our protected tax status demands we pursue public benevolent activities with our surplus funds. Sometimes we may tend to look at how dividends are used and misused and question this. It's not our place, we work for these people and how they use their surplus funds is their business. If you worked for any other company and weren't a director you'd have no say in fund allocation, ALPA is no different. Having said that; it is of concern and in fact ALPA's board has been challenged to not operate on a mine royalty mentality but rather to teach people to be responsible with dividend money. There will be some tension but councils in each community are addressing the issue, as is our newly formed Women's Committee.

We received a number of suggestions aimed at reducing the problems associated with dividends. At a meeting of women in one community, it was said:

The dividends money has to be used for community purposes. A women's committee should be set up in each community to decide how the money is to be used. We could set the priorities.
An Evaluation of Store Enterprises in Aboriginal Communities

None of the women at this meeting were aware that ALPA had established a Women's Committee. Another suggested:

It is not right that only one family gets all the money. We have eight clans in this community. We need to set up a committee with all of the clans on it. It can decide how the money is to be split up.

The following quotes are taken from three staff members in one store, who seemed to have a reasonable understanding of the difference between dividends and land owners rent, and the financial issues associated with their store, said:

The dividends money should stay in the community. They should be used more for ceremonies and funerals, and making small payments to old people who need money. Then people would see the benefits of owning ALPA. People would not accuse us of acting like the balanda. Where does the money go? Too much of the money is spent outside of the community. Too much money is spent on charters, hiring cars, the chairman. And why did ALPA buy a block of flats in Darwin?†

None of these staff could believe it when we told them how much money was paid as dividends to their council in the previous financial year. One of the managers commented:

The profits we are generating need to be going into the community in a more recognisable form. For example, I'd feel much better about this work if I could see the profits going into, say, an ALPA pre-school or something like that. That would be better than it going into real estate in Darwin.

Another manager suggested that:

Most people do not expect to get dividends, even though they are supposed to own ALPA.

ALPA and Aboriginal economic independence

There is no doubt that ALPA has been generating considerable income for the councils in each of the communities, and has assisted the formation and development of a range of family-based enterprises. It is interesting that one

† ALPA actually owns just two or three flats in Darwin, not a 'block of flats'.

80
of the directors, when asked why his community remained in ALPA and did not withdraw like Yirrkala, stated:

It's OK for Yirrkala to go their own way. They had mining money behind them. Our community needs ALPA money.

Another director said:

It is the only money that comes into the community that has no strings attached.

A former senior staff member indicated:

The main thing that attracted communities to ALPA was that they were broke and they needed help and the Government wasn't forthcoming, and so they saw ALPA as a backup rather than the Government.

ALPA has placed very considerable emphasis on economic independence for Aboriginal people and Aboriginal communities. Indeed, this was indicated to us a number of times by the directors, although very rarely was it mentioned by other people in the communities. Even as late as 1987, ALPA was claiming that it was the only 'Aboriginal organisation non-Government funded'. As one director commented:

We want to tell the Government we are not using the taxpayers' money; we are using money from our own enterprise.

ALPA senior management, and some of the directors, argue that it is not possible to compare ALPA with other Aboriginal organisations because all of the other organisations are dependent on government funding. Although ALPA is not funded directly by grants from the government, its business depends on people spending their income, which is predominantly from government transfer payments, in the shops which were built with loans from the Aboriginal Development Commission and ATSIC. At the July 1986 Central Committee meeting, the reasons for running an Aboriginal-owned business were outlined:

1. Independence—not seeking Government 'handouts'
2. Aboriginals' future
3. Equal citizens
4. Employment opportunities for Aborigines
5. Training
6. $$ $$ $$ for Aboriginal use
7. To keep pace with Australia's economy
8. A future for your children
9. A contribution to racial harmony by a joint venture
An Evaluation of Store Enterprises in Aboriginal Communities

This was put more eloquently by the group manager at the ALPA Annual General Meeting in July 1985:

It is with excitement and anticipation that in the coming years we will continue with enthusiasm and determination to provide the solid base of a commercial organisation that is patriotically Australian, that unites all members of the community into acceptance of Aboriginal people in the commercial world, and acknowledges their growing skills, and which gives them the ability to stand competitively in the commercial arena.

It is apparent from reading some of the ALPA documents that ALPA has a view that, at some stage in the future, government funding for Aboriginal people will be reduced. This seems to be behind much of the thinking about the need to achieve economic 'independence'. ALPA's statements about economic independence and self sufficiency, in general, are totally consistent with those of the Commonwealth Government's Aboriginal Employment Development Policy, the goals of which were announced in October 1987. According to the Prime Minister:

The Government and the Aboriginal people are committed to a shift away from the welfare dependency of the past towards measures to enhance Aboriginal economic independence (Commonwealth of Australia 1987, III).

Without in any way suggesting that this is not an admirable objective, by using these terms the Government, ALPA, and of course many other commentators, are reinforcing particular stereotypes of Aboriginal people. The use of the term 'welfare dependence' ignores the fact that many of the payments made to Aboriginal people are citizenship entitlements. Further, as Commissioner Johnston argued:

It is important to recognize that a high level of dependence on publicly funded services is not something peculiar to Aboriginal people. We are all dependent on numerous public services which some of us subsidize indirectly through taxation. Public transport, roads, airports, sewerage, garbage collection, water, electricity, telecommunications, health care, education, child care facilities, police and the government authorities which regulate our markets are just a few of the services without which we could not enjoy the life style we do. The fact that in many places Aboriginal communities provide these services for themselves through more direct government funding does not make them more dependent than the majority of the population who lives in cities and towns (Johnston 1991, Vol 4, 368).

It is largely government money, in the form of social security or CDEP payments, which supports the economic base of the communities. There are other funds coming into communities, particularly from sales of arts and
crafts, and other commercial agreements. These may be quite large, such as for example at Ramingining. But the largest proportion of the income of the community is derived from governments. Given the remoteness of these communities and the limited economic opportunities, it is unlikely that this situation will change for some considerable time.

There is clearly a strong anti-government line running through the thinking of many people associated with ALPA, including the directors. It is reflected in much of ALPA’s written material, particularly that relating to its relationship with the Aboriginal Development Commission, one of the predecessors of ATSIC. There have apparently been considerable difficulties in the relationship when ALPA has approached the government for funding for the construction of new stores. The researchers were told a number of times that the ADC had made the loans conditional on the community withdrawing from ALPA. However, it is difficult to assess the generality of this position, since it seems that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs at times encouraged ALPA to expand into other communities, particularly in Western Australia.

The anti-government views by some of those associated with ALPA can be seen in the comments of one of the directors at the April 1987 meeting of the Central Committee. The comments provide an interesting addition to the discussion about how ALPA operates as an Aboriginal organisation:

ADC has allocated money to start a Baruwei store in Katherine. It is labelled an Aboriginal store; the same way as ADC is labelled an Aboriginal funding body, but we know that the Government is behind these two organisations and it is the job of ADC to maintain the store and the money at Baruwei.

A problem with ALPA’s approach and its statements is that the money being paid by ALPA to the councils is to a large extent not a net addition to the funds available in the community. This statement should be qualified, however, since ALPA’s operating structure and purchasing power have enabled it to obtain freight and fuel rebates, to reduce administration costs, and the reinvested profits generate investment income. These cost savings and income are net additions to the funds available, and either reduce costs or should enable the people in each of the communities to obtain goods at a lower cost.

But ALPA’s dividends, which comprise the main part of the payments, come out of the profits generated in the store. In a sense, ALPA can be regarded as a taxing agency. Residents in each of the communities spend money in the stores, resulting in the turnover of $11.7 million in 1991–92, and a net profit of $694,000. The board of directors then makes decisions about the disbursement
of the profits. Part of the profits was allocated for reinvestment (re-equipping
the stores, some home units in Darwin), and part is paid into the various types
of reserves, and part is allocated as dividends to the councils.

Apart from the fact that the dividends, to a large extent, represent a
recirculation of community funds, there is also the strong and widespread
perception amongst many people we spoke to in the communities that the
dividends are controlled by a small number of people associated with the
councils, and that the funds are not being appropriately utilised.

A number of people did comment on the benefits ALPA produces for the
community. This included the subsidisation of outstation stores, the
promotion of healthy food, the subsidisation of small businesses in the
community, and funding for other small-scale projects. The problem with
some of these projects is that the same small group of people is often involved.
That is, ALPA is providing funding and other financial benefits to some of the
people and families who are already inordinately benefiting from the
dividends. One of the former directors in fact said that these small-scale
enterprises, particularly family-run stores, are the future for the communities,
rather than the larger ALPA-type stores.

ALPA was alright for its time, but now it is time to bring it into line with
yolngu thinking. What would happen if a competitor set up in this
community? The land owners could call for tenders to operate the stores, or
establish new stores. They should be able to do things cheaper than ALPA.

One of the store workers, when asked about the funding from ALPA, said:

ALPA keeps the community's money in the community longer.

It is interesting that the rhetoric expressing the lofty ideals of Aboriginal
economic independence and the growth of ALPA as a commercial enterprise
seem to have been tempered in recent years. This is despite the fact that
ALPA's profitability has dramatically improved in the past three years.
Compared with the relatively restrained comments in the most recent annual
reports, the following is from the minutes of a meeting of the directors in
August 1987:

From our ALPA 'starter motor' we look to investing in Timor. Most of the
group here are going to look at the prospects. We must assess the viability of
the project. This project COULD be worth $700,000 p.a. (or more.) In
addition, cypress is being investigated in Arnhemland; we could re-generate
the sawmill, cut the timber. (Bunnings will buy the timber, sawdust, and bark
for mulch.) From our stores we could get another $200,000 p.a. making a total

84
of $1,000,000 each year, and at the same time our family enterprises are growing. The vision is even bigger. The five communities can be the wealthiest communities in Australia; and the money is not coming from royalties, but from businesses. The people have the resources, they have the land; the timber, the fish, the manpower AND the brains. These things can make people wealthy.

Timor needs cattle. We have land and we have cattle. If we could make enough money out of the furniture and timber, we could set up an abattoir in Kupang that could sell meat to the U.S. and Japan utilising their labour (their wages are $2.00 per day.) One of Australia's problems is its unions, and people demanding more and more money ... This could be the first Aboriginal organisation to go 'international', with unlimited potential. Australia in the future, cannot depend on government funds. We must support ourselves and be independent; be proud of what we achieve, and so thence being truly free.

What the directors made of this is not clear from the minutes, except that the first director to speak brought the focus of the discussion down to a more realistic level by talking about 'small businesses' run by families.

Training and the Aboriginal staff

ALPA has put a lot of emphasis on training (Wells 1993, 72–93). Indeed, a number of times in the documentation it is stated that ALPA's primary objective is 'the development of people'. An important component of this is training of Aboriginal staff. Another important component is the training of directors. As was previously noted, there seem to have been incredible efforts put into getting the directors 'to accept their responsibilities'. The senior management of ALPA stressed that they have no intention of putting Aboriginal people into positions for which they are unsuitable or unqualified. Training is therefore absolutely essential.

There are no joke jobs in this organisation.

During our visits to the communities, training was raised quite frequently. More often than not, the issue was raised in terms like 'Aboriginal people need more training'. However, we did receive a range of other responses, which are worthy of reporting here. During a meeting with the staff in a number of stores, a number of staff talked about training. Some were very critical, and said that the training that was undertaken by the Aboriginal staff was never appreciated by ALPA. That is, because there is a new store manager every two or three years, this person usually has to be trained by the existing staff.
Ironically, the following statement by the chairman at the 1984 Annual General Meeting summarises what many of the staff said to us:

Of the many skills necessary to operate a store in an Aboriginal Community, there are some that ONLY the Yolnu have, and Balanda can NEVER have. There are NO skills that Balanda have which cannot be learned by Yolnu with time and hard work.

In two meetings with staff in different communities, the following comments were stated in almost identical fashion:

The balanda manager is trained by the community to fit in. They are told about yolngu customs, family business. This is never seen as training by ALPA.

Indeed, many of the managers we interviewed stressed how much they appreciated the assistance given to them by the staff. All were very supportive of the procedures outlined in the store manual, but the staff were essential for understanding how to deal with many day-to-day community matters.

The turnover of managers was also perceived to have another negative effect on the staff, both by the staff themselves and by others. For example, a non-Aboriginal adult educator in the school in one of the communities commented:

The problem with ALPA is that the managers are moved every few years. Each new manager comes in and trains the staff all over again. There is no accreditation or record of the training the staff have already had. They are understandably bored and have low levels of productivity.

The same person was very critical of ALPA training methods. He said that because ALPA has private-provider status, it seems very reluctant to involve outsiders in training and education of the staff. The school has apparently approached the store manager a number of times. On each occasion the manager said he wants to do the training in-house.

ALPA has a siege mentality. They seem to think that you are checking up on them.

He suggested that the school could arrange for all of the training necessary, and could arrange for the staff to undertake training elsewhere. He said he believed this would be important for the staff, since they could mix with Aboriginal people from other communities, and learn a lot of things that would be useful for the stores. His view was that ALPA’s training of store
workers is far too limited, and although a career path is in place, very few people are progressing. When questioned about these comments, senior ALPA management were very critical, and believed the comments were naive. They felt that most adult educators do not have any significant contribution to make to the training of ALPA store staff. In fact, ALPA has been asked to assist design educational courses for community store workers. ALPA management believe that ALPA has more to offer other organisations and educational institutions than they have to offer ALPA.

Part of the reason for this view is that ALPA senior management does not believe it is difficult for most Aboriginal people in the communities to acquire the skills necessary to undertake most of the tasks in the stores. In fact, ALPA management is very critical of the TAFE Certificate Courses for store workers, which they believe provide much more training and education than is necessary to undertake most of the jobs in a community store. ALPA was heavily involved in the design of aspects of this course.

We also interviewed two experienced Aboriginal staff in two stores, one of whom had worked with ALPA for more than ten years. To some extent they felt that the turnover of managers might affect their careers. One of them is now planning to leave.

One of the managers, who in general was very supportive of ALPA, said that ALPA's biggest problem is that it starts things and never finishes them. He pointed to a number of practices of the head office with respect to staff, which were started, continued for a few months, and then abruptly stopped, without explanation. One staff member did comment, however, that the reason ALPA seems not to pursue some issues for long is because the management is responding to the needs of Aboriginal people, as expressed by the directors. The fact that ALPA changed some aspects of its business on a regular basis reflected the priorities of some of the directors at a particular point in time. The reason for the stop-start nature of many initiatives was, according to this staff member, because Aboriginal people did not want the particular policy change to be continued.

However, there is also evidence that ALPA has experimented with a range of training methods in the twenty years of its existence. Many methods have been tried, they have more often than not failed, and the training has moved on to another approach. Quite a number of the managers stated that even though ALPA is supposedly responsible for its own training, their own personal experience was that training was difficult to undertake properly. One manager commented that he never has enough staff at work to
implement any sort of meaningful training. The manager ends up being a labourer, rather than a manager/trainer. A manager in another store said that he was far too busy to implement any sort of training program other than basic essentials.

A number of managers, when asked about ALPA's nutrition program, also said that this was hampered by the difficulties of getting all of the staff at work and on time. The nutrition program was working in a limited fashion, and in some of the stores there was a reasonable range of prepared food available from the take-away section. However, in a number of stores the program was implemented only very spasmodically. There is no doubt that the nutrition program could be very important, particularly in communities where kava consumption is very high.

It does not seem that the constraints on the nutrition program are primarily inadequate staff training, or the willingness of customers to purchase the prepared food. A number of managers said that they could sell as much food as the staff could prepare, if a sufficient number of staff were at work on any particular day. The difficulties of getting staff to work on time and in sufficient numbers seem to be the biggest frustration of many of the store managers.

When we questioned some of the staff about this matter, most agreed that the reason they did not turn up to work, or turned up late, was not generally due to problems in the store itself. The reasons were more related to family business, health problems, looking after old people, kava and playing cards. One of the Aboriginal store supervisors said that one solution to this problem could be to employ more single staff, who do not have their own children to look after. There are quite a lot of younger people who have a reasonable degree of education who could work in the store, although whether they feel sufficiently motivated to do so is another matter. Two managers were critical of the appointment of the new Adult Educator, who has subsequently resigned. One commented:

The new training officer, based in Galiwin'ku, will not help staff get to work on time. This person will help with training, but it is more important that the manager is working with the people who are being trained.

The other said:

The new trainer will be training staff in all of the stores—including staff who have been working for ALPA for more than ten years!
A number of directors queried this position as well, and commented that the training centre at Galiwin'ku was a waste of money.

When is ALPA going to recognise the efforts of the yolngu who have been working for many years for ALPA?

One former director commented on the almost 'permanent state of training' endured by many Aboriginal people.

Huge amounts of money are going into Aboriginal organisations for training. Students are graduating from places like Batchelor College, but where are they going to?

One of the long-time Aboriginal staff members did make a number of other suggestions with regard to training. He thought it would be a good idea for the Aboriginal staff to work in different stores, to broaden their work experience and also to reduce the boredom. Boredom is apparently one of the main reasons for the high staff turnover in a number of the stores. As was the case a number of years ago, the Aboriginal staff could also be taken to visit stores in the larger urban areas, and perhaps be given work experience placement in some of these stores. It was also suggested that some of the Aboriginal staff could be taken to the warehouses of the wholesalers in the cities, to see the range of goods available, and perhaps to be more involved in the ordering. At the moment, these staff are consulted in some of the stores, but many feel that this is not sufficient. This comment was made in the context of a discussion about the relatively limited range of clothes in most of the stores. This situation has improved in recent years, however, and a larger range of stock is now available.

We are a new generation.

The range of clothes was commented on by many people, although some of the managers indicated that the situation was changing quite quickly. Some managers felt that the range of clothes and some other goods being offered were far too boring:

These people are listening to three FM radio channels, watching television, and travelling all over the place. Yolngu know what is going on in the outside world.
Training and the non-Aboriginal staff

As was noted in the previous section, the managers are subject to informal training when they arrive in each new store. Numerous people said that they felt that formalised cross-cultural training for all new non-Aboriginal staff was essential, whether they worked in the stores or in the Darwin head office. As one director put it:

Yolngu are told how to be like balanda, but the staff are not told anything about yolngu culture.

This view was strongly confirmed by two other directors, and all three stated that all non-Aboriginal people wanting to work with ALPA should be interviewed by a committee which includes a number of directors. Apparently the interviews and selection committee for the new executive director included some of the directors, and this was warmly welcomed. It is a practice of many other Aboriginal organisations.

A number of directors and others in the communities complained that new store managers were never properly interviewed by Aboriginal people in each of the communities. While most of the managers seem to have a reasonably good working relationship with the directors and the community, there is still a widespread view that:

The managers come out with their views already determined by the management in Darwin.

Another director, echoing some of the sentiments expressed by ALPA management a few years ago, said that it was good to have Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together, 'side by side'. However, for this to become a reality:

Cross cultural training for the balanda is essential. Balanda do not understand that yolngu are working in a cross-cultural environment. Yolngu are working in two worlds. Why don't the balanda understand this?

A number of the managers have never worked in an Aboriginal community, have never worked for an Aboriginal organisation, and have little understanding of the complexities of the communities. One manager, for example, said to us:

I can't understand why yolngu spend all of their time teaching children know to hunt and fish. Why don't they value education. They will never get
anywhere until they value education. Balanda can hunt and fish, they don't need to be taught, so why do yolgu spend all of their time learning how to hunt and fish?

In reporting on this, it must also be said that most of the managers were very respectful of Aboriginal culture, even if they could not understand certain aspects of it. There was a recognition, for example, of certain codes of behaviour, much of which they were told by their staff. Some managers stressed their 'social' role, the importance of getting along well with people in the community, even sometimes at the expense of profits. The sort of behaviour expected was outlined in a minute to one of the new store managers (26 November 1991) from ALPA head office:

While I feel that your procedural orientation is complete I perceive there is a need for you to observe what is happening around you and for you to act with more sensitivity. New managers are under constant scrutiny by staff and community at all times. Double standards, including taking fruit, drinks or pies for one's own use and at the same time expecting staff to pay for them, is foolhardy to the extreme.

It is also important to note that most of the managers said that they felt like they were working for Aboriginal people and an Aboriginal organisation, even if their immediate management support was non-Aboriginal people. All suggested that the ALPA management is continually stressing that the non-Aboriginal people are working for the communities, and it is an Aboriginal organisation that they are working in.

Will there ever be an Aboriginal manager?

This question is one that was raised by nearly every person we spoke to in the communities. Every Aboriginal person we spoke to said that there should be Aboriginal managers, which is perhaps not surprising. Some could understand why there were no Aboriginal managers, while others had great difficulty understanding that after twenty years ALPA has no Aboriginal managers. One director commented:

I am not surprised that the balanda in Darwin do not think that yolgu can run the stores. How would they know any better?

In every community we visited there was at least one person who had been working with ALPA for a number of years, some for more than a decade, who had been expected to become managers, but for one reason or another were still not managers. Some of these people were already taking considerable
responsibility for running the store, particularly the financial aspects, and during the Store Managers' meeting in mid-1992 all of the five main stores were to be run by the Aboriginal staff with no manager present. Some of these people want to be promoted to managers.

The issue of Aboriginal store managers is not simple, because it relates to other complex social and cultural issues in the community. Clearly there are Aboriginal people who have sufficient qualifications and experience to manage the stores. Some of these people are in Arnhem Land. Some are already working for ALPA. Many of these Aboriginal people are elsewhere in Australia. A number of ALPA board members could not believe that Aboriginal people with such qualifications and experience existed. It is highly unlikely, however, that an Aboriginal person from somewhere else in Australia, would be acceptable as a store manager in any of the five Arnhem Land communities where the members of ALPA reside.

A former director did comment on some of these matters:

There is no way that balanda are going to change the employment opportunities. The balanda hold the purse strings, and as long as it is like that the yolngu will never get their own independence. There is no way we can break down the barriers, even in ALPA, which is supposed to be a yolngu organisation. But it is not only the fault of the balanda. The workers are restricted by the elders in the community, and the directors.

In a number of communities it was pointed out to us that twenty years ago much of the work in these communities was actually carried out by Aboriginal people. Many of the older buildings were built by an Aboriginal workforce, usually under the supervision of non-Aboriginal people, but not always. Now very little of the existing work is undertaken by Aboriginal people. Two reasons for this were advanced. One is that government departments, and their contract specifications, really do not provide any opportunity for Aboriginal people to become involved. The budget constraints on each project usually exclude Aboriginal workers because of their apparently lower level of productivity. This point was raised by the chairman of ALPA in the 1989–90 Annual Report, which featured on its cover a building team comprised largely of Aboriginal people, in Milingimbi many years ago:

Each community must rethink its own situation. It may wish to go back to the slower method of building homes, building roads and creating other community utilities but using its own people to plan and carry out the work involved. If this process is adopted, considerable training will have to be
undertaken which will involve a large cost. The alternative is for jobs to be contracted out and aboriginal people continue to sit idly by, without being involved in their planning, or learning the skills necessary to run a community.

The second reason is the increasing need for accreditation. This point was raised a number of times. It is true that government departments and authorities are expecting higher and higher levels of formal accreditation. While Aboriginal people are being trained and educated, to a degree at least, very few of these people seem to be securing the employment opportunities that are available in communities. The one major exception seems to be in the schools, where increasing numbers of Aboriginal people are employed.

A third reason suggested by some non-Aboriginal staff was that it is easier for Aboriginal people to have non-Aboriginal people in these positions. It was indicated that essentially people in Arnhem Land are used to having non-Aboriginal people do most of the work, and why should they wish to change the situation, particularly given the responsibilities that went with the position of manager.

One of the directors was very critical of the lack of Aboriginal store managers, and said that it was 'rubbish' that there can be no Aboriginal managers.

'Family business' can be sorted out. ALPA's problem is that it does not identify yolngu who have vision, capabilities, and develop them to take over all areas of ALPA's business. ALPA's training has failed because it has not started with the way yolngu think. It needs to start there and work through the way balanda think.

He also suggested that 'management' is not a concept alien to Aboriginal people.

Yolngu ceremonies are managed. Everything has to be organised, including feeding and transporting people. Everyone knows their place, know what to do, when to do it. And balanda tell Aboriginal people that they cannot manage a commercial business!

When we had discussions in one of the community schools, the adult educator said that the Northern Territory Government had, only until very recently, maintained that Aboriginal people could not run the schools in the communities.

But look at this school. The principal is yolngu, three-quarters of the staff are yolngu, and soon more than 90 per cent will be. And the school is getting
significant additional responsibilities under devolution. We have to hire staff, do all of our own ordering. We aren't given any additional resources, but we have to cope.

One of the former directors suggested that there is not likely to be an Aboriginal store manager, but that this was not necessarily such a bad thing. He suggested that perhaps the days of the large scale store, such as those operated by ALPA, were coming to an end, and that small family-based businesses in the communities were the way forward. If this is the case, then there will be numerous opportunities for Aboriginal managers. In fact, many of these businesses already exist.

Quite often the comments we heard from people were couched in the following terms:

ALPA is making some mistakes. It is true that yolngu are not yet ready to run ALPA by themselves. But it is also true that they are not really given a fair go.

ALPA provides two significant advantages over other community stores that should enable Aboriginal managers to be appointed. First, a career structure could easily be established. With the differentiation between head office and store functions, trainee managers could be trained in both the stores and in Darwin. Aboriginal workers could be recruited, and gradually promoted as their experience and skill accumulates. For some reason or another, however, this has not happened to any significant extent. Second, the role of the manager is more circumscribed in ALPA than other community stores. A number of the managers indicated to us that they felt their working lives were considerably easier because of the functions performed by the head office:

The store managers are cushioned to a significant extent by the ALPA rules. These rules, which have developed over a long time, take a lot of the load off the manager. It would be difficult to run a store without the support of an organisation like ALPA. It would be too time consuming and too many demands. Most of these stores fail.

The fact that many of the functions are performed in head office in Darwin should make it easier for an Aboriginal manager to run the store successfully. A number of the Aboriginal employees certainly felt this to be the case. In a number of the stores, most of the work other than ordering is in fact already done by the Aboriginal employees.
Prices and the distribution of dividends

In many communities we heard complaints about the prices in the stores. Our discussions about prices usually also included discussions about freight rates, dividends, the role of the store managers, and the policies of ALPA head office. Quite often, but not always, the most critical people were those who buy their goods directly from Darwin and have their freight subsidised by their employer.

Many Aboriginal people made suggestions about the prices. Many of these are familiar to ALPA staff and the directors. It is clear that many people see a direct connection between the high prices and the high dividends in recent years. As was suggested above, there are many complaints over the use of the dividends, and quite often the reaction is to complain about certain aspects of the store. Sometimes it results in curses on the stores, which often require complex negotiations between certain people in the community to resolve (Wells 1993, 101&166).

There is one way of dealing with the problem of dividends and prices. It is generally accepted that the dividends, or the profits, must be used for 'community purposes'. This is difficult to define, and in some communities the dividends are benefiting a relatively small number of people. It may well be that ALPA will need to reassess its pricing policies, to substantially reduce prices and therefore profits. Lower prices for everyone demonstrably benefits the community as a whole, and may encourage some people who are buying from outside the community to shop locally. It is likely, for example, that the elimination of freight from the prices of fresh fruit and vegetables will encourage more sales from the store.

Clearly prices cannot be reduced too far because the profits of the store are affected by other issues. However, ALPA now has quite considerable reserves, which would seem to be sufficient to cover losses in any of the stores, as long as these losses did not continue for an extended period of time. A policy of structured price reductions would not necessarily jeopardise the financial soundness of the entire Association.

One of the previous sections discussed the relationship between membership, ownership, and accountability. An important point is the accountability of the staff to the membership, who after all are the customers of the stores. Despite the fact that ALPA senior staff and management talk frequently about 'yolngu
and balanda working together', when the issue of reducing prices was raised, one senior staff member commented that

If that is what they want, then they do not understand what we are doing.

This comment came immediately after a comment by another senior staff member:

There is balanda culture and there is yolngu culture, and there is us in between.

The words 'they' and 'we' have been highlighted in the above quote, because they are essential to understanding how some of the ALPA staff actually think. If ALPA is owned by the residents of the communities, then presumably the policies and activities of ALPA should actually be determined by these people. If they really are the 'owners' of ALPA, and they demand that the prices in the stores be reduced, what is the responsibility of the staff and directors? While it is certainly true that many Aboriginal people do not have a detailed understanding of the financial aspects of ALPA's business, why are their views about the prices so strongly criticised? It may well be that many people in the communities would benefit much more from lower prices than from higher profits, dividends, and the establishment of 'community purpose' funds and reserves. However, one of the senior management, when questioned about this matter, suggested that:

If they want lower prices, they can elect their own directors. They can turn up to the annual general meeting, and if they get a majority they will get lower prices.

However this issue is resolved in future, it is clear that many of the existing staff have very strong views about what the 'economic and social development' of Aboriginal people means. How broader concepts of accountability and ownership can be brought into the thinking of these staff is a fundamentally important issue.

Establishing appropriate levels of prices and dividends is not a easy to resolve, since the issue is integrally related to the need for a distinction to be made between the ownership and control of the organisation and the business. The financial viability of the Association as a whole is of course very important, but is also a matter that it quite remote from the day-to-day lives of the majority of Aboriginal people in the communities. On the other hand, the prices in the stores are a matter of very immediate concern to these people.
The ALPA rules

ALPA operates according to a set of quite precisely defined rules which govern the behaviour of staff and the managers. These rules have developed over a long period of time, and are designed not only to ensure that the organisation remains financially viable, but also assist the managers, in particular, to deal with day-to-day problems. They also enable head office management to subject the managers to some form of control, since their behaviour is supposed to be within the guidelines in the store manual. The absence of 'rules' in many Aboriginal organisations is an issue that was commented on by Commissioner Johnston:

A problem which frequently arises in Aboriginal organizations relates to the lack of clearly established internal procedures. In any organization which is committed to the principle of self determination—and is anxious to ensure that the needs of its members are met expeditiously and with minimum bureaucratic restrictions—situations will inevitably arise where the lack of established procedures may present a problem. There is a need in many organizations for a clear statement of duties of staff and management and for a demarcation of the duties and responsibilities and respective rights as between management and staff, on the one hand, and executive and membership, on the other (Johnston 1991, vol 4, 27).

Apart from the standardised accounting and financial procedures, ALPA has a number of other policies which are worthy of comment. ALPA stores do not sell alcohol or kava. Certain types of fishing nets are not sold. The policies of subsidising purchases made for or by outstation residents, and discounts for cash purchases for food for ceremonies, is commendable.

One of the most important rules is that 'book-up' is not allowed in the five main ALPA stores. The main exception is for the staff, who are allowed a small amount of credit, although this must be cleared after every pay. Some book-up is allowed in the consultancy stores, but even in these stores the granting of credit appears to be more tightly controlled than in other community stores. Pressure on the managers to provide book-up, or credit, is a common feature of organisations operating in all Aboriginal communities. The provision of large amounts of credit has undoubtedly undermined the financial viability of many organisations, with hundreds of thousands of dollars of credit being quite common.

One of the rules that was criticised a number of times is the so-called 'one-third rule'. In most of these communities, there are no formal banking facilities. The commercial banks have been withdrawing their services for a
number of years. This is often a major problem, because of shortages of cash, difficulties of cashing cheques, and the payment of accounts. The stores do offer a cheque-cashing service, at the discretion of the manager, but it is a requirement that one third of the amount of the cheque be spent in the store. For most people, this is not a serious difficulty, since they intend to spend most of the money in the store.

A number of other people, however, suggested that this was a way of controlling how Aboriginal people spend their money. While ALPA is correct to state that it has no obligation to cash cheques, the reality is that in some communities if it does not cash cheques it will have no customers. However, the one-third policy, which appears to be an unwritten rather than a written part of the store manual, does seem to be based on influencing the spending of Aboriginal people. We often heard strong statements from non-Aboriginal people, and occasionally Aboriginal people, about Aboriginal people 'wasting' their money. Using money to play cards and purchase kava were often subject to critical comments. One of the directors was strongly critical of some Aboriginal people in the communities, who themselves (he assumed) were critical of ALPA:

All these people do is sit around all day and drink kava and know nothing about stores.

In one Arnhem Land community there is no doubt that the consumption of kava has reached very serious levels, and is reflected in the extremely high rates of child malnutrition and declining sales of food in the store.

Is ALPA unique?

As has been noted in some previous sections of the paper, ALPA claims that it is unique in having Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people working together harmoniously. Part of the problem with the way this so-called uniqueness is expressed is that it seems to be implying that there is something wrong with other Aboriginal organisations. There seems to be a suggestion that only ALPA has had to deal with financial realities, the complexities of traditional ownership, the cultural difficulties of operating a commercial organisation in a traditional Aboriginal community, or problems with staff.

The other organisations are also denigrated because they are dependent on government funding. Although it is laudable to attempt to increase the economic independence of Aboriginal people, the reality is that ALPA is as
dependent on government funding for its existence as are the other organisations. The difference is that ALPA's government funding is indirect.

Because ALPA has been able to stay in business for so long is no reason not to learn from the experiences of other Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal people. In fact, although ALPA has been in business for two decades, it is only relatively recently that its financial position has stabilised. Its management has made poor commercial decisions in the past, and there can be some criticism, as this paper suggests, of many aspects of ALPA's operations.

Aboriginal organisations, and the people in them, are required to deal with issues everyday that most non-Aboriginal people never have to grapple with. It is not surprising that many Aboriginal managers of organisations are stressed. ALPA could learn from these organisations, since it is supposed to be an Aboriginal organisation which is operating on behalf of, and should be directly accountable to, Aboriginal people.

But ALPA, or the senior management at least, has in general not seen fit to engage in any effective dialogue with Aboriginal organisations. This is certainly the perception of many people outside of ALPA, both in the communities where it operates and elsewhere. It may explain part of the hostility to ALPA by certain sections of government, particularly the departments and agencies whose primary focus is delivering programs and services to Aboriginal people.

It is clear that some of the senior management have been questioning ALPA's future direction. Perhaps one way of working out policies and programs for the future might be to become more involved with other Aboriginal organisations. This could include discussions over appropriate training for the staff, management, accountability to an Aboriginal constituency, and the presentation of information to people whose first language is not English.

If ALPA is going to become an Aboriginal organisation which is owned and controlled by, and directly accountable to, Aboriginal people, then it is going to have to learn that its problems are similar to the problems experienced by many other organisations. Continuing to think that everything can be resolved by keeping the discussion in-house will inevitably fail.

**Conclusion**

The Arnhem Land Progress Association has been an important part of the life of many Aboriginal people for twenty years. It is now a commercially
successful organisation which has a strong financial base from which to develop in future years.

There has been a lot of discussion about the true nature of ALPA. Some have questioned whether it is an Aboriginal organisation at all, while the discussion in this paper suggests that many people have found both positive and negative points about the organisation.

To characterise ALPA simply, ALPA the business is not owned by Aboriginal people, and has never been. ALPA is an association which has a majority of Aboriginal members, whose participation is limited by the rules of the Association. The store buildings are for practical purposes owned by the councils, although the lack of formal leases raises some doubts about the legal position of ownership.

ALPA employs a large number of Aboriginal people, as do many other community stores outside of the ALPA structure. Many of these people have worked for ALPA for many years. The decision-making body of the Association is formally the directors, most of whom are Aboriginal people. However, in practice the major decisions are made by a small group of non-elected, non-Aboriginal staff. The major day-to-day decisions in the stores themselves are taken by the non-Aboriginal managers.

ALPA does produce financial benefits for the Aboriginal councils in each of the communities, and the distribution of funds from its reserves assists a number of Aboriginal people in each of these communities. ALPA is a very well-run and successful commercial retail organisation. However, because of its history and the long-term involvement of certain non-Aboriginal staff and the chairman, ALPA is seen by some of these people as being much more. It is principally seen as a 'community development' and 'people development' organisation. In practice, this is revealed in the long-running attempts by the management to increase the skills levels of its Aboriginal staff, and attempts by the staff and the chairman to make the Aboriginal directors think about 'responsibility', 'integrity', and 'honesty'.

Although many of the objectives and actions of ALPA are commendable, one is left with the feeling that ALPA has been by-passed by many of the developments that have occurred in Aboriginal society. The communities themselves are changing quite rapidly, as the exposure of Aboriginal people to other ideas and cultures occurs. Aboriginal people are travelling, being educated and meeting new people. Many of the younger people are beginning to realise that Aboriginal people can take important steps forward,
but that to continue to do this they will need to take control of their own lives. The struggles over land rights, adequate funding, and improved standards of government services, have resulted in important gains for Aboriginal people.

ALPA has played an important role in developing the stores in a number of Aboriginal communities. Some would like to see ALPA continue with its present ideas of 'community development' and 'people development'. Others would like to see significantly more control being handed over to Aboriginal people.

The important point about most Aboriginal organisations is that they were established because they were thought to be needed. ALPA was not established because Aboriginal people thought it was needed. The government found it easier to service people living in larger settlements, and someone had to run the stores. ALPA was established because the Church was being pushed out of the communities, and it needed another organisation to run the stores while promoting Christian values.

ALPA continues to internalise its problems: to search within for solutions. One of the reasons it has failed to resolve some of the complex issues the organisation faces has been because it has not drawn on the experiences of Aboriginal organisations. All true Aboriginal organisations have an ideology of empowering their own people.

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Since 1972 the Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) has operated well-run commercially viable retail stores in a number of remote Northern Territory communities. This admirable record has not been achieved without difficulty. Problems faced have included provision of support for ALPA’s bush stores and ensuring that Aboriginal store customers understand what ALPA is trying to do. This book examines these two issues.

Elspeth Young, Associate Professor in Geography at the University of New South Wales, University College, ADFA, compares ALPA’s store support services with those provided by other aboriginal organisations facing similar problems. Arctic stores in Canada and Alaska and desert stores in central Australia also suffer from high costs and unpredictable supply lines and their staff need strong support. While their solutions to these problems are in some ways similar to ALPA’s, differences in their approaches might provide ALPA with some alternative ideas.

Greg Crough and Christine Christophersen, Senior Research Fellow and Research Assistant respectively at NARU, examine the other problem. Through extensive interviews conducted in Arnhem Land communities they reveal that, despite ALPA’s efforts, many Aboriginal people are uncertain about the operations of the organisation and about the many facets of its role. The concerns which Aboriginal people voice, while confirming their interest in ALPA’s work, contain many thought-provoking points of relevance to all such organisations.