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DON'T DEPEND ON ME:

AUTONOMY AND DEPENDENCE IN AN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY IN NORTH QUEENSLAND

Julie Dianne Finlayson

June 1991

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the Australian National University, Canberra.

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DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis is my own original work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any other university or other institution of tertiary education. Information derived from published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references is attached.



Julie D. Finlayson

June 1991

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the interplay between autonomy and dependence in domestic relations in a north Queensland urban Aboriginal community. Autonomy and dependence are mutually related principles of sociality which structure not only gender roles in Aboriginal domestic life, but also the relationships Aboriginal people establish with Europeans.

This thesis offers a different view of the nature of households and the dynamics of gender relations in Aboriginal households from the prevailing emphasis on matrifocality as a dominant form in contemporary Aboriginal domestic life. Although matrifocality may be a feature of certain of the mundane dynamics of households, the model fundamentally misrepresents power relationships. In this thesis Aboriginal domestic relations and household organisation are approached through an appreciation of the historical circumstances which have influenced gender roles within the Aboriginal family. The contemporary Aboriginal family, it is argued, is more complex in its internal dynamics than was previously thought and cannot be understood without considering both the relationship between Aboriginal people and the State, and the specific cultural patterns of household life.

Today the majority of Kuranda Aboriginal households depend on welfare income with little opportunity for wage labour. Women appear to be materially advantaged by welfare benefits and to have a potential for consolidating this advantage through their prominence in domestic life. But in practice Aboriginal men dominate domestic relations and succeed in monopolising the material resources of others, particularly those resources belonging to women. Cultural ideals about gender roles in domestic life cast women as nurturers who look after children and men, as their dependents. Through these ideals men legitimate their relationships with women and lay claim to women's goods and services. In the same cultural process women themselves expect to look after and provide for others. Autonomy in such relationships emerges as the ability to appropriate and command the resources of another,

but paradoxically this is achieved often through a position of dependence. Consequently, a woman with many resources is constantly under pressure from claims by dependent men to relinquish her resources. Thus she loses any capacity for, or means to control the accumulation of goods and services.

The same principles structure wider Aboriginal social relations. Aboriginal people in Kuranda often become dependents of Europeans in a boss-dependent relationship where the primary aim of the relationship from the Aboriginal point of view, is access to the goods and services of their boss. In the domestic sphere the Aboriginal boss is usually a woman who must care for her dependents. Similarly, Aboriginal people structure their relations with Europeans by seeking a European boss, who is also like to be female, as an extension of the same principle of dependency and autonomy.

Aboriginal people develop gender relationships of this kind within their own community and they work successfully, but the same relationships with Europeans, even within the same sex, lack a mutual understanding of the basis and expectations of the arrangement. Subsequent cultural misunderstandings ultimately marginalise, not maximise, the knowledge and involvement of Aboriginal people with the wider society.

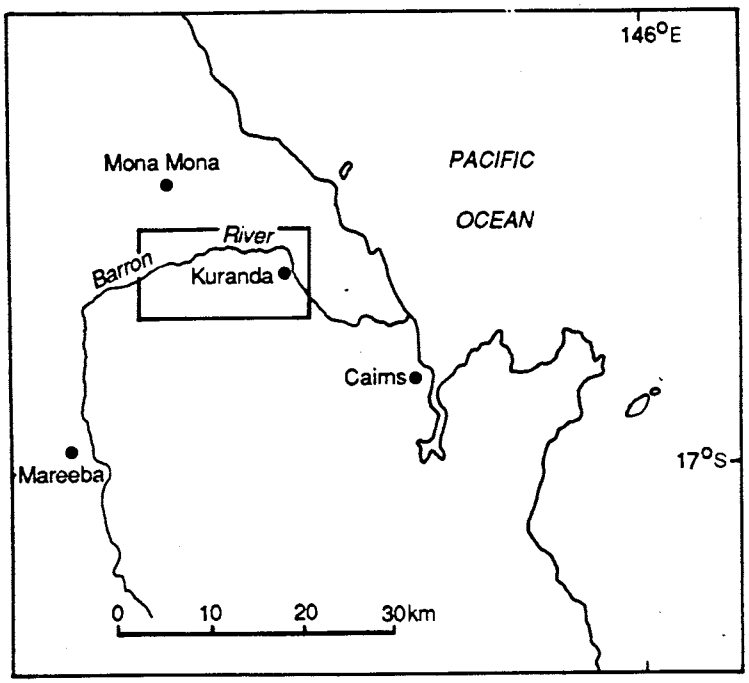

Figure 1. The Kuranda region

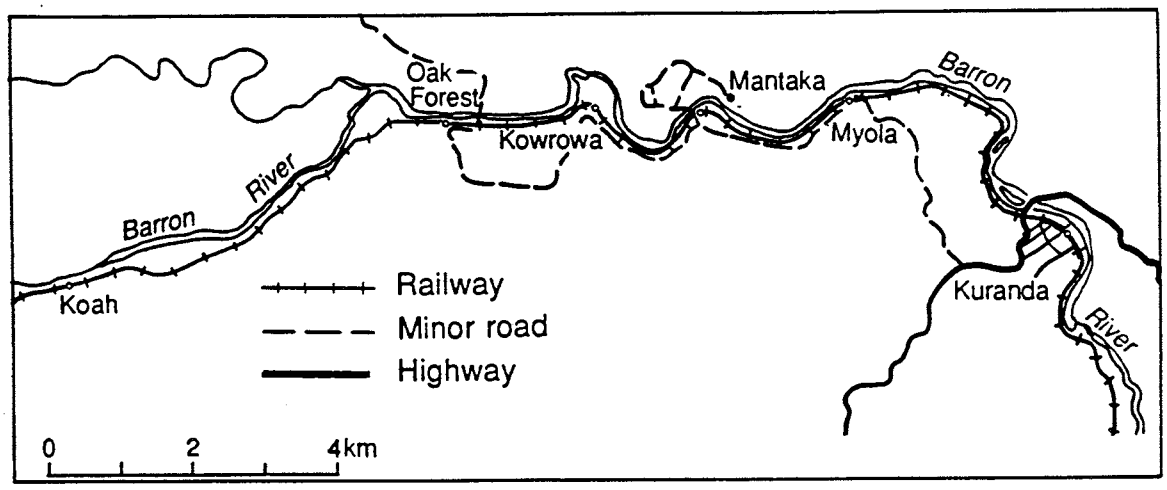

Figure 2. The study area