ABORIGINAL INTERMARRIAGE AND ECONOMIC STATUS IN WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES

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The strength of the Aboriginal domain in western New South Wales is suggested by the fact that 94 per cent of children from intermarriages are classified by their parents as Aboriginal. Census data also indicate that people in mixed marriages in this area are economically better off, especially in regard to housing, than those in marriages where both partners are Indigenous. This raises questions about possible transformation of the Aboriginal domestic moral economy and the place of sharing within it.

A significant feature of Aboriginal life in much of settled Australia remains under-researched. The 2001 Census indicates that 68 per cent of Indigenous couple families — some 45,000 couple families — include a non-Indigenous partner. This is the highest level recorded so far for any census-identified Indigenous population. At the 1996 Census, the proportion was 64 per cent, in 1991, 51 per cent, and in 1986 it was 46 per cent. While this has the appearance of a trend, it should be noted that non-demographic factors have contributed substantially to growth in the census-identified Indigenous population, and it is distinctly possible that many new identifiers in the population have increasingly been drawn from mixed couple families. Whatever the reason for the increase, only few analyses of the characteristics of mixed couple families exist.[1]

This exploratory paper is based on a limited set of 1996 Census data from western New South Wales chosen because of the combination in this region of sizeable Indigenous numbers and a diversity of social and economic circumstances. This provides a context for the exploration of differentiation within the Aboriginal population. The main finding is that people in mixed marriages are economically better off, as measured by selected conventional social indicators, than those in marriages where both partners are Indigenous, especially in regard to home ownership and purchase.[2]

WESTERN NEW SOUTH WALES

From the perspective of Aboriginal incorporation into wider social and economic structures, the western region of New South Wales has intermediate status. It was, and remains, sufficiently remote from mainstream social and economic life as to enable the retention and development of wholly Aboriginal institutions and domains. At the same time Aboriginal people have long been drawn into the wider world through a mix of mechanisms including child removals, resettlement schemes, employment and education. In many ways, the historical experience straddles the boundary between Rowley's 'colonial' and 'settled' Australia, displaying economic and demographic aspects of the former and administrative and social tendencies of the latter.[3]

The north-central and western border region of New South Wales (NSW) is bounded by the Bourke Regional Council Area — an administrative unit of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). This is mostly arid pastoral terrain, although the Darling-Barwon river system provides for substantial acreage of irrigated cropping along its various channels. Otherwise, the region is pock-marked by mainly

small-scale mining operations. Because the population is widely dispersed, service industries generate the other major source of economic activity, and this gives rise to a number of important regional centres including Walgett, Coonamble, Cobar, Bourke, Brewarrina, Wilcannia and Wentworth. Demographically, though, the mining town of Broken Hill dominates and accounts for more than one third (38 per cent) of the region's total population of 56,600.

SOCIOECONOMIC DIFFERENTIATION IN WESTERN NSW

According to census data, a total of 7,344 individuals in this region (13 per cent of the total population) identified themselves as Indigenous in 1996. This makes it similar to the remoter northern parts of the continent in having relatively high Indigenous representation. Indeed, away from the main population centre of Broken Hill, almost one fifth of the population is Indigenous. Brewarrina has the highest proportion of Indigenous people, with 55 per cent reporting Indigenous origin. In Walgett and surrounding areas it was 47 per cent, and in Bourke, 31 per cent. In line with trends generally in outback Australia, it is also the case that the Indigenous proportion of the total population in such towns has steadily increased in recent years with an ageing non-Indigenous population being gradually replaced by a youthful Indigenous one.[4]

We define intermarriage here as formal or de facto marriage between Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons. In the Bourke ATSIC Region, a total of 1,051 Indigenous couple families were identified in the 1996 Census. Of these, 43 per cent involved a union between Indigenous and non-Indigenous partners in 1996. Fifty-nine per cent were unions between Indigenous women and non-Indigenous men and 41 per cent between Indigenous men and non-Indigenous women.[5]

The first point of variation between Indigenous families and mixed families in the Bourke ATSIC Region arises from an examination of their respective geographic distributions (Table 1). While both are more widely spread than the non-Indigenous population, which is focussed mostly on Broken Hill, Indigenous families are scattered among the Riverina towns of Wentworth, Coomealla, Dareton and Robinvale, as well as in Bourke, Brewarrina, Walgett and Wilcannia. These places account for 54 per cent of all such families. By contrast, mixed families are more concentrated in Broken Hill, and to a lesser extent in Cobar and Coonamble. These places account for 40 per cent of all such families. Broken Hill and Cobar are by far the largest towns in the region and have the lowest Indigenous share of population, six per cent and five per cent respectively.

With regard to social and economic status defined by census-derived social indicators, the general pattern is one whereby mixed families, and the households they comprise, occupy an intermediate position between their wholly Indigenous and non-Indigenous counterparts.[6]

Overall, Indigenous families are 42 per cent larger than mixed families, with an average of 4.4 persons per family as opposed to 3.5 persons (non-Indigenous families in the region have an average of 3.1 persons per family). Mixed family sizes are therefore closer to the average family size of non-Indigenous families in the region than they are to that of Indigenous families. This difference in family size is partly a consequence of

Table 1: Rank distribution of Indigenous and Mixed couple families in Bourke ATSIC Region, 1996

	Percentage distribution of Indigenous families		Percentage distribution of Mixed families		Percentage distribution of non-Indigenous families
Wentworth rural	13.4	Broken Hill	17.4	Broken Hill	45.6
Walgett town	12.9	Coonamble town	12.3	Wentworth rural	14.9
Brewarrina town	10.6	Far West rural	10.0	Cobar town	11.4
Bourke	10.2	Cobar	9.6	Walgett rural	7.7
Walgett rural	7.4	Walgett rural	9.4	Far West rural	4.9
Wilcannia	7.0	Wentworth rural	8.1	Coonamble town	4.3
Goodooga	7.0	Bourke	8.1	Bourke Town	3.4
Broken Hill	6.9	Brewarrina town	4.7	Walgett town	2.6
Coonamble town	6.0	Lightning Ridge	4.7	Lightning Ridge	1.9
Brewarrina rural	4.7	Walgett town	4.5	Brewarrina rural	1.0
Collarenebri	3.2	Coonamble rural	4.0	Brewarrina town	0.8
Coonamble rural	3.2	Wilcannia	3.0	Collarenebri	0.6
Far West rural	2.7	Collarenebri	2.3	Wilcannia	0.4
Lightning Ridge	2.5	Goodooga	1.3	Coonamble rural	0.2
Cobar	2.3	Brewarrina rural	0.6	Goodooga	0.1
Total	100.0	Total	100.0	Total	100.0
Total (number)	597		454		9,945

Source: For Tables 1 to 6, Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996 census unpublished data

their social composition. More than one-quarter (29 per cent) of mixed families are comprised of couples only, compared to 20 per cent of Indigenous families (Table 2). While this may reflect subtle age variation between couples, the fact that one fifth (22 per cent) of Indigenous couple families with children also include additional family members, compared to only six per cent of mixed families, represents a real difference in composition. In this regard, mixed families more closely align with the non-Indigenous profile.

While mixed family residential units tend to be smaller and less socially complex than Indigenous families, they also tend to have higher income levels and are not far short of non-Indigenous families in this respect. However, families

Table 2. Family composition by family type: Bourke ATSIC Region, 1996, per cent

	Per cent of families in each category		
	Indigenous	Mixed	Non-Indigenous
Couple only	19.8	28.6	44.3
Couple with children <15 years	41.0	44.5	32.4
Couple with children <15 years and others	21.5	6.4	2.5
Couple with dependent students aged 15-24 years	7.7	10.8	11.3
Couple with non-dependent children	10.0	9.7	9.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total (number)	597	454	9,945

generally in the region have incomes below Australian standards (Table 3). On the other hand, average household incomes are quite similar across family types (Table 4). This partly reflects the larger size of Indigenous households (dwellings) with 10 per cent of these containing more than one family compared to only two per cent of mixed households. This reduced differentiation at the household level may also reflect the equalising impact of welfare payments, which in part are based on the number of dependents, but are also means-tested against family income. To this extent, the contrasting distributions of median family and average household incomes by family type may be an indication of greater dependence on welfare payments for income among Indigenous families.

Table 3: Median annual family income by family type: Bourke ATSIC Region and Australia, 1996

	Indigenous	Mixed	Non-Indigenous
Far West NSW	$28,028	$32,812	$33,800
Australia	$26,104	N/a	$38,272

Table 4: Median annual household income by family type: Bourke ATSIC Region and Australia, 1996

	Indigenous	Mixed	Non-Indigenous
Far West NSW	$31,200	$33,540	$34,788
Australia	$28,080	N/a	$32,864

Table 5: Housing tenure by family type: Bourke ATSIC Region, 1996

	Per cent of families in each tenure		
	Indigenous	Mixed	Non-Indigenous
Fully owned	14.8	30.9	58.8
Being purchased	6.3	22.7	21.1
Rented	70.0	39.3	14.7
Other	8.9	7.1	5.4
Total	100	100	100
Total (number)	597	454	9,945

A key indicator of economic status in Australia is the level of home ownership. The relative absence of Indigenous people from the property market limits their options for achieving greater financial security and equity. Alongside a history of institutionalised housing arrangements, this absence is a consequence of their limited financial capacity. Thus, the relative lack of home ownership is both a cause and effect of low economic status among Indigenous people, especially in terms of inter-generational flows of income. As a consequence, Indigenous people as a group are far more likely than non-Indigenous Australians to be resident in rented accommodation. However, there are other factors which influence this outcome. In particular, on Aboriginal land in NSW, as in many other parts of the country, the absence of a privatised housing market reflects the communal nature of land ownership. In such locations, rental accommodation is the only option and this is invariably provided by Indigenous housing organisations.

Against this background, it is significant to note a striking difference in the housing tenure of Indigenous families compared to that of mixed families (Table 5). Almost three- quarters (70 per cent) of Indigenous families occupy rented accommodation compared to only 40 per cent of mixed families, although both groups are far more likely than non-Indigenous families to be in rented accommodation. Given the overall younger age profile of the Indigenous population and the time taken to pay off a mortgage, the potential to match non-Indigenous home ownership rates is constrained demographically — an effect partly manifest in the much higher rates

of non-Indigenous full ownership. When it comes to home purchasing, mixed families stand clearly apart from Indigenous families. A crucial factor here is family income, as this provides the basic capacity to service a mortgage and to finance home maintenance. Because Indigenous family incomes are the lowest in the region, at a stroke this explains a good deal of their relative absence from home ownership or purchasing. However, other more historical and culturally-based factors may also play a part, as suggested by the tenure pattern of rental dwellings (Table 6).

Table 6: Landlord type of rental dwellings by family type: Bourke ATSIC Region, 1996

	Percent of families in each category		
	Indigenous	Mixed	Non-Indigenous
Private landlord	14.2	34.1	44.4
State Housing Authority	29.5	23.4	7.1
Community Housing	43.4	19.1	0.7
Employer	3.4	16.0	39.6
Other	9.5	7.4	8.2

Of particular note is the concentration of Indigenous families in community rental housing (shown in Table 6), as this contrasts starkly with the rental pattern of mixed families who are most likely to be renting from a private landlord or the NSW Department of Housing. Also of interest is the much higher proportion of mixed families renting from an employer leading to the conclusion that mixed families display a degree of independence from the community-based institutional arrangements that typically surround wholly Indigenous families and households.

CONCLUSION

In their national survey Birrell and Hirst note that the lowest rates of intermarriage are in regional Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory.[7] The rates of intermarriage in western New South Wales, which are substantially lower than in regional Queensland, confirm that the isolation of this region gives it some of the characteristics of remote Australia with its significant Aboriginal domains, and underlines the diversity within regional Australia. The strength of this domain in western New South Wales is suggested by the fact that 94 per cent of children from intermarriages are classified by their parents as Aboriginal as against a national figure of 87 per cent.

In 1980, Charles Rowley revisited his 1965 study of the place of Aboriginal people in Australian society.[8] A key finding was that the main area of great improvement in Aboriginal people's lives in country towns and rural areas of New South Wales was in housing. Given the strength of the Aboriginal domain, as suggested by the level of parental identification of children as Aboriginal, an interesting question is raised by the level of home ownership among the mixed couples: how is this taking place?

In the past strong commitment to the Aboriginal domain has usually been seen as incompatible with the accumulation of assets because of the egalitarian ethos, maintained in large measure by the pressure to share. Is the accumulation possible because, although these families are identifying their children as Aboriginal, they are not closely linked to other Aboriginal people in the area, or are they able to still maintain close ties with other Aboriginal families yet find ways to accumulate? If this latter situation is the case it raises questions about the transformation of the domestic moral economy and the place of sharing within it.

References

[1] B. Birrell and J. Hirst, 'Aboriginal couples at the 2001 Census', *People and Place*, vol. 10, no. 3, 2002, pp. 23-28; B. Birrell, 'Intermix and Australia's Indigenous population', *People and Place*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2000, pp. 61-66; J.B. O'Reilly, 'Demographic implications of Aboriginal out-marriage', *Journal of the Australian Population Association*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1994, pp.149-59. Earlier comments on mixed marriages are to be found in D. Barwick, A little more than kin: regional affiliation and group identity among Aboriginal migrants in Melbourne, Unpublished PhD thesis, Australian National University, 1963, who reported that 38 per cent of marriages in her Melbourne sample were mixed; A. K. Eckermann, 'Group organisation and identity within an urban Aboriginal community', *In Aborigines and Change : Australian in the '70s*, R. Berndt (Ed.), Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1977, p. 296, who in 1969-1971 reported 54 per cent of her sample in a Queensland city were mixed; F. Gale, *Urban Aborigines*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1972, p. 154, in her large Adelaide sample survey in 1966 found 51 per cent mixed; see also J. Inglis, *In Aborigines Now*, 'Dispersal of Aboriginal families in South Australia (1860-1960)', M. Reay, (Ed.), Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965, pp. 115-132.

[2] A similar observation using early data had been made by J. O'Reilly, 'Aboriginal marriage patterns and labour market performance', unpublished paper, Canberra, 1994. In Australian Bureau Statistics census terminology, a couple relationship is one based on a consensual union and is defined as two people usually residing in the same household who share a social, economic and emotional bond, usually associated with marriage, and who consider their relationship to be a marriage or marriage-like union. This relationship is identified by the presence of a registered or de facto marriage. A family based on two such persons may include any number of dependents, non-dependents and other related individuals. It is not necessary for a parent-child relationship to be formed — a couple family can consist of a couple without children present in the household. An Indigenous family is one where either the reference person or spouse indicates that they are of Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander origin.

[3] C. Rowley, *The Remote Aborigines*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1971

[4] K. Ross and J. Taylor, 'The relative social and economic status of Indigenous people in Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett', *Center for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) Working Paper*, No. 8, CAEPR, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000; J. Taylor, 'Transformations of the Indigenous population: recent and future trends', *CAEPR Discussion Paper*, No. 194, CAEPR, Australian National University, Canberra, 2000

[5] This intermarriage rate is relatively low in the New South Wales context as the rate elsewhere in the State was 73 per cent in 2001. See B. Birrell and J. Hirst, 2002, op. cit.

[6] In census terminology a family is defined as two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years old, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household. A household is defined as a group of two or more related or unrelated people who usually reside in the same dwelling, who regard themselves as a household, and who make common provision for food or other essentials for living.

[7] B. Birrell and J. Hirst, 2002, op. cit., p. 28

[8] C. Rowley, *Equality by instalments: the Aboriginal householder in rural New South Wales, 1965 and 1980*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1982, p. 26