

Kartiya are like Toyotas

White workers on Australia's cultural frontier

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'Kartiya are like Toyotas. When they break down we get another one.'

– remark by a Western Desert woman about whitefellas
who work in Indigenous communities

UNLIKE the broken Toyotas, which are abandoned where they fall, cannibalised, overturned, gutted and torched, the broken kartiya go away – albeit often feeling they have been cannibalised, overturned, gutted and torched. They leave behind them dying gardens and unfinished projects, misunderstandings and misplaced good intentions. The best leave foundations on which their replacements can build provisional shelters while they scout the terrain, while the worst leave funds unaccounted for, relationships in ruins and communities in chaos.

There are many reasons why kartiya break down. Some break themselves, bringing with them baggage lugged from other lives, investing in the people they've come to help qualities that are projections of their own anxieties and ideals. Eager and needy, they are prime material for white slavery, rushing to meet demands that increase in direct proportion to their willingness to respond to them. They create a legacy of expectation and dependency, coupled with one of failure and disappointment.

A more common cause of breakdown is the impossibility of carrying out the work you are expected to do. Two factors in particular are not included in any job description. The first is that if the work involves interaction with Aboriginal people, which is usually the case, this interaction will be so constant and demanding that there will be no time left to carry out the required tasks. The second is that by default the kartiya's function is to be blamed for everything that goes wrong. Blaming the kartiya is the lubricant that smooths the volatile frictions of community life. For someone of robust temperament and sound self-esteem this is irritating but

manageable. If you have an overheated sense of responsibility or a tendency towards self-blame it's an opportunity to experience the high point of personal failure.

SINCE THE REVELATIONS about child sexual abuse in remote Indigenous communities scorched the national consciousness a few years ago, conditions in remote communities and towns have been back in the public eye. The flaws and failures of self-determination have been exposed, and it has become possible to speak aloud truths that until recently would have seen the speaker branded a racist, and his or her voice neutralised. That some of the most articulate and influential voices are Aboriginal has made it possible for the private conversations many people have been having for years to enter the public domain.

There is, however, one story that doesn't get much mileage: remote Indigenous Australia has a significant white population that is disproportionately influential while being unequipped, unprepared or unsuitable for the work it does. There are the good people, who are overworked and undervalued; and there are the sociopaths, the borderline criminals, the self-righteous bullies and the mentally unhinged, who gravitate to the positions no one else wants, entrench themselves and contribute in no small degree to the malaise that haunts Indigenous communities.

It is mandatory for anyone wishing to work in Antarctica to undergo a physical and psychological assessment to establish whether they will stand up to the stresses of isolation, the extreme environment and the intense proximity to other people. All the same factors exist in remote Aboriginal communities, along with confronting cross-cultural conditions. Yet there don't appear to be any recognised training programs for people who aspire to work in a community, or screening criteria to weed out the mad, bad and incompetent who prowl the grey zone of Indigenous service delivery. The remote community is a kind of parallel universe, where career paths, if they exist at all, travel laterally or downwards. The famous quip about mercenaries, missionaries and misfits has a lot of truth in it, and each type covers a spectrum, from highly functional through incompetent to downright destructive. Under pressure, both strengths and weaknesses become exaggerated, and what, in normal circumstances would be merely a character trait (stubborn, orderly, conscientious, volatile, flexible, timid) can become the quality that makes or breaks you.

This desert culture, where the power of family and country encompasses and transcends all other preoccupations, is where the crossed purposes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous expectations are at their most extreme. It's probably the zone of greatest discomfort in Australia, a place where the white noise of the kartiya world and the Babel of Aboriginal voices create a static through which we blunder, grinning and waving like mad people, signalling that we mean each other no harm, though harm frequently occurs.

The contradiction at the heart of the story is that for the quality of desert Aboriginal lives to improve in the terms demanded by humanitarian standards – in health, education, housing and the like – the people themselves must become more like us, and to become more like us requires them to relinquish the identity from which their resilience and sense of self is drawn. Without their Aboriginal identity they are reduced to society's dross: the poorest, the least employable, the shortest lived, the least literate, the substance abusers and losers and wife bashers. And one of the most powerful ways in which they keep hold of that identity is by defining it against white people.

Among the older people, holding onto traditional culture is the force in which they believe, but the young are like the young in every culture. They don't listen to us, the old people complain, while the young people move in flocks, plugged into iPods and clutching mobile phones, trying whatever drug is available, dreaming of becoming rock stars and film stars and sports stars, using sex as an antidote to boredom. The cultural structures are still there, in skin names, family relationships, identification with country. But they are loosening all the time, as the fine tough threads of high knowledge are wearing out, leaving behind a shadow knowledge that carries the fear of punishment without the protocols and understanding with which to manage it.

Against all this uncertainty, this great loose mutating cosmology, the kartiya are conspicuous and ubiquitous, busy, bossy, cranky, frequently behaving badly. They are running the schools and the offices, the clinics, the stores, the art centres, the police stations. They are the service providers and project co-ordinators. They control the money and make the rules. They live in fenced compounds with their pay cheques and cars and the choice to stay or go. They exacerbate, simply by being there, the antithesis of themselves.

There is, for the time being, no alternative. Kinship pressures make it almost impossible for an Aboriginal person to sustain a management position, and the few who take on such a role are subject to constant demands, and abuse if they refuse to comply. The mobility of people means that skills training is intermittent and commitment to work is provisional. Take the kartiya out of the picture and the Big Men, the powerbrokers, will fill the gap. This is not unique to desert Aboriginal society. It has happened in every place where a colonial power has abdicated without leaving a self-sustaining system in place.

FOR THE NEWLY arrived kartiya, bright-eyed and full of enthusiasm, the initial welcome is gratifying. She is thrilled to be taken in hand by one or more Aboriginal people who are friendly and knowledgeable, and is moved almost to tears when she is awarded a skin name.

'You Nampitjin, sister for us,' the new kartiya is informed. She feels privileged to be invited into an ancient and arcane sisterhood, and listens eagerly to the complex explanation of how she is now related to everyone.

'Sister for me and Gracie and Sabina, mother for those young girls. This old lady your mother, and same for that one over there. This little boy here, he's your *jaja*, grandson.'

Everyone is delighted, and there is much laughter and good feeling.

It takes a little time for New Kartiya to notice that while her sisters and mothers and daughters and aunts are very much in evidence, there are many others who stay away. She doesn't understand that she is colonised territory. Invisible to her, power struggles of ancient lineage and epic proportions are being played out. *This is our kartiya – hands off.*

She becomes aware of mutterings and silences, and makes an attempt to find out what they mean, but the workload has escalated to such an extent that there is no time to pay attention. The previous kartiya has not acquitted several important grants, the deadlines for which are now long overdue. Ongoing funding for the organisation is dependent on the satisfactory acquittal of these grants, but much of the necessary information doesn't seem to exist. The filing system is idiosyncratic, consisting of cardboard boxes with obscure acronyms scrawled on them in felt tip. The felt tips themselves, along with all biros, pencils and other writing implements, have disappeared. Attempts to contact the previous kartiya are met with silence: emails bounce back, mobile numbers no longer function.

New Kartiya curses Previous Kartiya as incompetent, lazy and irresponsible. According to her Aboriginal directors and helpers, Previous K also failed to pay them money they are owed. No records of these financial transactions exist.

'She took that money with her,' they announce. 'That was our money. She stole it from us.'

New K is horrified that someone would take advantage of people who live in such dire poverty. She adds 'criminal' and 'sociopath' to the list of adjectives pertaining to Previous K.

In the first days of wanting to appear willing, available and caring, New K has allowed people to use the office phone for essential calls.

'Nampitjin, I need to ring up to find out about my uncle's funeral.'

'Nampitjin, I got no money from Centrelink this week, I got to ring up and find out what happened.'

'Nampitjin, I got to go to court next week, can you ring up and charter a plane for me.'

This last request raises a flicker of alarm – surely it’s outside the jurisdiction of her job.

Her refusal is taken philosophically. *It was worth a try – you never know with kartiya what they are prepared to do.*

In her search for the missing information New K discovers caches of energy bars and Minties stashed in drawers and cupboards and filing cabinets. Further evidence of the peculiar, pathological nature of Previous K, who it turns out was also called Nampitjin.

News of the phone access has spread. People are queuing to use it for increasingly long conversations, some of which appear to be social rather than urgent. Important calls, for which New K has been waiting in order to deal with the acquittals, fail to get through because the line is constantly engaged. People waiting to use the phone enlist New K’s help to decipher letters they have received from government agencies, relating to welfare payments, court cases, child custody.

‘Don’t you have someone whose job it is to deal with this stuff?’ she asks.

‘They always too busy,’ she is informed. ‘That kartiya in the office, he always growling, won’t do nothing to help us.’

During the two-hour lunch break New K locks the office and replies to all the calls she has missed. Since she has also missed lunch she eats several of Previous K’s energy bars.

With the job comes a troop carrier, a powerful LandCruiser designed to carry a dozen people and negotiate the rough desert roads. She has never driven such a vehicle, and the first time she manoeuvres it successfully through the sandy creek crossings and deep gutters of the back road she is filled with an immense sense of achievement. Encouraged by a constant refrain of ‘Keep going, keep going’ from her passengers, she overcomes her reluctance to tackle some of the nastier patches of track, and is rewarded with their approval.

‘You good driver, Nampitjin. Now you can take us hunting.’

Part of the job brief is ‘to facilitate cultural activities’, which according to her Indigenous cultural advisors (so far consisting entirely of members of the Sambo clan, whose name skids across her consciousness like a dark blip, impossible to register) means taking them hunting, all day, every day. At first this is a thrilling novelty – this is what she is here for, to experience the desert and its people, to learn to identify bush tucker and recognise animal tracks, to have pointed out to her the evidence of ancestral travellers who left their traces in the hills and creeks and waterholes. It is here, away from the tensions of the community, that things begin to make some kind of sense: patterns begin to emerge of kinship, stories and country.

As a prelude to going hunting there is a ritual that involves an hour or two of driving around, waiting, embarking and disembarking of passengers, loading and unloading of gear, shouting, waiting, retracing tracks, shopping, waiting, arguments, sulking, more embarking and disembarking, until New K is in a state of exhausted frustration. She's learned, however, that to drive off before everyone is ready is not worth the days of growling and recriminations that follow.

The office work mounts up. By working late and inventing figures she's managed to acquit the grants, but there is a backlog of projects, cataloguing, sorting and filing, and the new grants have to be written and submitted. She discovers that the funding process functions within a self-cancelling system in which each grant is dependent on funding being guaranteed by its state or federal counterpart. So far she has been unable to find the centre of the logjam, the submission that will start the process rolling. She rings the umbrella organisations that have been set up to facilitate the process, and encounters instead several new layers of bureaucracy that must be negotiated. Helpful voices refer her backwards and forwards between agencies called FATSIC and KRAPP and WACKO. The voices all sound alike, and she begins to imagine a single office buried deep in some labyrinthine Gulag, monitored by a shabby creature of indeterminate gender shackled to a bank of telephones each labelled with the appropriate acronym.

On the days when she manages to avoid taking people hunting she starts work an hour early in order to get some essential chores done before the mob arrives, taking a circuitous route so that no one guesses she is on her way to her workplace. She walks, leaving the troop carrier locked in the compound where she lives, to avoid being flagged down and used as a taxi service. Experience has taught her that once she picks up passengers she can spend the entire morning ferrying them between the shop, the clinic, the school, the art centre and the various camps. She has learned not to turn on lights or fans, as this alerts people that there is someone in the building. It's too early to respond to the messages on the answering machine, which will have to wait until the lunch break. The supply of energy bars is running low. She will need to order some more.

She has begun to develop friendships among the other kartiya in the community. Vinnie, who runs the art centre, is eccentric but warm and sympathetic. Her assistant, Simon, is a little intimidating, with an ironic sense of humour, but is also amiable and friendly. But it is to Ben, who works on men's health, that New K is especially drawn. She tells him about her difficulties with the phone, and he suggests a solution. 'Unplug it at the wall, and tell them it's broken. Most of the community phones are broken anyway, so they won't check.'

She takes his advice, and although it means she can't use the phone herself during working hours, it makes a dramatic difference to the number of visitors to her office.

Ben has worked intermittently in the community for several years, and is well-liked by the locals for his good nature and relaxed attitude to time, work, vehicles and money – all the things that most kartiya are stitched-up and anxious about. That Ben's life resembles the lives of his Indigenous friends escapes New K's notice. What she does notice is his helpfulness, his craggy good looks, his charm and humour. She doesn't yet know that he has been implicated in liaisons with most of the eligible kartiya women in the community.

On Ben's advice she has declared a two-week moratorium on hunting expeditions, while she catches up on the paperwork.

'You have to set some boundaries,' he tells her. This is rich, coming from Ben, but New K doesn't know that. There are a lot of things she doesn't know about Ben.

ON DAY FIVE of the hunting ban, Nelly Sambo Nampitjin and her sisters descend on the office. 'You never take us hunting any more, Nampitjin.' They cluster around her, managing to appear downtrodden and intimidating at the same time. 'Those old ladies, they might die soon. Never get back to their country before they pass away.'

The old ladies in question look convincingly frail, sitting on the veranda like a pair of ancient stick insects. A passing camp dog lifts a leg, mistaking them for some kind of spindly vegetation, and is walloped ferociously with a walking stick by the less blind of the two. They are sisters born in the bush, their old minds reaching back to a time before kartiya, before missionaries and soup-soup and stock camps, before schools and clinics and art centres, when the world was a seamless fabric woven by the Law.

New K explains to the Sambo sisters that if she doesn't get the grants in there will be no money to run the office or keep the troop carrier going, which will mean no more hunting, no more film projects and recording of stories. Everything will fall down. Her job is really hard because Previous K left a big mess and she is trying to fix it up.

The mention of money and Previous K reminds everyone of the money they have been done out of, and Nelly suggests that New K might be able to make reparation. She agrees to do her best to sort something out, once she can find some record of the payments. She also agrees to take everyone hunting on the weekend instead of spending the two precious solitary days catching up with her displaced self.

Despite starting an hour early and working through the lunch break she does not seem able to make any inroads on the workload. The one person she had tracked down who had been helpful with the grant submissions has resigned, or been promoted, or committed suicide. She has noted that Vinnie and Simon are often still

at work in the art centre at ten o'clock at night. Ben has warned her that Vinnie and Simon set a benchmark of superhuman standards, which makes her feel more inadequate, since she is unable to produce even moderate results. How Ben manages to do his job and remain relaxed and sanguine is a mystery to her.

New K begins to stay late at the office, munching her way through the remaining Minties and energy bars, having ordered a new supply with the weekly bush order Vinnie gets on the mail plane. By the time she gets home she's too exhausted to cook anything, so she has a tin of smoked mussels and a double gin and tonic, and falls asleep in front of the television. Her skin has broken out in sore red pimples, and she has become alarmingly thin. Small cuts fester and go septic, and when she visits the clinic she is informed that she has a staph infection and put on a course of antibiotics. The nurse advises her to use an antiseptic soap, wash her hands frequently, eat properly and take better care of herself.

Vinnie, who is aware that things aren't going well with New K, tells her it's time she took some time out, that the only way any of them manage to function effectively is to take regular breaks away from the community to rest and recuperate.

'I can't go away,' New K wails. 'I'm so far behind with the grants – I haven't even started the planning for the next round of projects. I don't know how anyone gets anything done.'

'You have to eat properly, and take regular breaks, and make time for yourself,' Vinnie tells her, although New K can't for the life of her see when Vinnie makes any time for herself.

'I go walking,' Vinnie says. 'Nobody's interested in walking unless they're hunting.' She doesn't mention that she takes her walks at five o'clock in the morning.

'Make time for yourself,' Simon says. 'Set boundaries. Remember you're only human. Don't work too much overtime.'

'But you and Vinnie do,' New K points out.

'Vinnie and I are not good role models,' Simon says. 'I only do it because of Vinnie. We're setting up a structure that no one will be able to maintain. It's ridiculous.'

'Relax,' Ben says. 'Drop over to my place and have a joint. We can watch a movie – I've got Foxtel.'

She takes up Ben's suggestion. They get stoned and have sex. For a couple of weeks New K is happy. Ben is charming and funny and good-looking and a thoughtful lover. The workload seems manageable and the Sambo sisters make jokes that New K now has a *nyupa*. She wonders how they know, as she and Ben

have been very discreet. In week three she meets the new nurse from the clinic leaving Ben's house at seven in the morning, and learns that Ben has no idea that she takes their sexual activity as anything more than mutual entertainment. He is baffled and discomfited by her furious tears.

She feels assaulted by the landscape. Everything scratches, prickles, burns, abrades. It is all so appallingly physical. She feels the need to protect herself from it, and by implication from the people. When the Sambo sisters make jokes about her love life she shouts at them and locks the office.

Because Ben is part of Simon and Vinnie's circle, New K no longer socialises with them. Anyway, she doesn't need to, because she has a new friend. Susie Nakamarra comes into the office one afternoon when New K is struggling to draft a management plan for the next year's projects, and makes suggestions that are insightful and helpful. She fills New K in on some of the local politics, both black and white, and invites herself for a cup of tea at New K's house.

The friendship blossoms. Susie regales New K with stories of her adventures growing up in and out of the community. The stories are violent and hilarious, and open up a world both exotic and dangerous. New K fails to notice that most of them centre on the stupidity and bad behaviour of other people, and how Susie's wit and intelligence proves superior. In return, New K confides her disappointment with Ben, and Susie tells her things about Ben, that are shocking and possibly untrue.

The first time Susie asks to borrow the troop carrier New K says she's not really allowed to loan it, but she doesn't refuse outright. It's obvious that Susie is a responsible person, and it seems ridiculous that kartiya rules should apply to her. She is, after all, half white, fathered by an itinerant stockman back in the cattle station days, and has been to boarding school and trained in a variety of skills.

Susie doesn't press the request, and accepts the gin and tonic New K offers with guilty relief. It's supposed to be a dry community, but as long as people drink quietly inside their own homes they are left alone. The two women get sentimental and maudlin, and tell each other the secrets they only tell their best friends. Susie's are dark and terrible, and New K is shocked at the horrors her friend has undergone. Her own troubles pale in comparison.

On the second occasion that Susie requests the use of the troopie New K agrees. Nothing bad happens. The vehicle is returned on time, undamaged, although it is almost empty of fuel and the interior contains an astonishing amount of rubbish.

'It's the kids,' Susie says by way of explanation. 'I told them to clean it up but they forgot.'

The third time Susie borrows the vehicle two days pass, during which time New K becomes frantic. On the third day she receives a visit from the local police, who tell her that the troop carrier has been impounded in the town of Garnet, three

hundred kilometres away; its driver (not Susie, who seems to have dropped from sight) has been charged with drunk driving, driving without a licence, supplying minors with alcohol and assaulting a policeman; and New K will be required to give a statement about how the vehicle came to be in his possession.

For the next month, during which time Susie remains invisible, New K is embroiled in a mess of legal paperwork and bureaucratic reprimands, although the expected dismissal from the job doesn't arrive. She is unaware that she was the only applicant for the position, and that the previous kartiya is suing the organisation for psychological damage incurred while at work.

One morning New K encounters Susie outside the community store, and timidly suggests that Susie owes her an explanation. In retaliation Susie calls New K a racist bitch and hits her with the bottle of tomato sauce she has just bought. The nurse who patches New K up at the clinic says that Susie is bad news, and that this is the third time she has assaulted a white woman she has befriended. At this point all parties agree it is in new K's best interests that her appointment be terminated, and she flies out on the weekly mail plane.

The Sambo sisters and their extended family are disappointed to see her go.

'That Nampitjin said she was going to get our money back for us.'

'Yuwayi, she said that, but she never gave it to us.'

'Must be she kept it for himself.'

'That Nampitjin did a bad thing, keeping our money.'

The program is shut down for several months while the position is advertised and a replacement found. There is only one applicant, who is seduced by the prospect of working on the cutting edge of Indigenous culture, in a remote location imbued with the spiritual glamour of the desert. On her arrival she is delighted to be awarded the skin name of Nampitjin, and a little baffled at the filing cabinets filled with Minties and energy bars...

SOMETIMES THE PROTAGONIST has better instincts than New K when faced with Susie or her equivalent – a natural skill at recognising which boundaries must be held and which can be more elastic. He or she may have a sense of humour that thrives on the absurdities and contradictions of daily life, and a sneaking admiration for the consistency with which Aboriginal people insist on being Aboriginal. Such a person has a chance of finding some sort of equilibrium, establishing sustaining relationships and focusing on small, achievable goals. What he or she doesn't anticipate is that the insurmountable difficulties will be generated by other white people.

In a small, isolated community in an extreme environment, perspectives tilt, passions flare, petty irritations assume the proportions of murderous hatreds. The Aboriginal inhabitants, who observe whitefella behaviour with close attention, witness feuds and coups, fisticuffs and power struggles, and a constant turnover of personnel.

A certain percentage of kartiya who work in communities don't like Aboriginal people. Some of these people are paid very large sums of money to do things that can't be achieved. As it's apparent sooner or later that the projected outcomes are not achievable, it's necessary to conceal this for as long as possible. It's not the unachievable outcomes that are the issue – after all, there's a long and glorious tradition of non-achievement in the field – it's the pretence that all is well, the ticking-off of irrelevant performance indicators, the recycling of minor successes as major outcomes, the snowstorm of paperwork couched in incomprehensible language.

Into this situation comes the enthusiastic assistant, handicapped by a sharp intelligence and a tendency towards independent thought.

For the incumbent manager, who has often established some functioning structures under difficult circumstances, the suggestions and implied criticisms are irritating. It is even more irritating if the assistant shows a natural affinity with Aboriginal people, and within a few weeks forms better relationships than the manager has done in a couple of years. A standoff quickly results. The assistant is stonewalled, overridden, ignored, obstructed and undermined. In retaliation the assistant begins to alert his Aboriginal friends that things are not going as they should. This is a bad move. Regardless of the justice of his position he can't expect support from the Aboriginal people. To them it's whitefella business, best left to the kartiya to sort out, although it provides plenty of gossip and entertainment. The Aboriginal friends begin to fall away, foreseeing a power struggle in which they don't want to be implicated. After all, the manager has implemented a structure of payments and privileges, and better the devil you know...

Neither the manager nor the assistant has an intimate friend to whom they can offload their anxieties and frustrations. The manager is reclusive by temperament – it's not Aboriginal people in particular he dislikes but people in general. The assistant is outgoing and makes friends easily, but the skewed environment and the persistent yet unacknowledged persecution has thrown him off balance. His damaged confidence becomes assertive and unreliable. Forced onto the defensive, he becomes obsessed with his situation, and is exhausting company to the people who sympathise with him. No one has the energy to listen to the repetitious, circular, self-defeating diatribes. They've seen it all before, and know how it will end.

The manager is a wily bird. He hasn't reached this level on the food chain by accident. He has an instinct for the power of injustice, its capacity to send crazy those who believe that justice is an entitlement. Unimpeded by empathy or compassion,

he knows he can sit this one out while the assistant works himself into an untenable position and quits.

THE MANIPULATION OF injustice as a means of maintaining power is not only employed by the unscrupulous, who know what they are doing, but by the self-righteous, who believe that they are acting for the greater good. Among the kartiya who end up on Aboriginal communities the self-righteous flourish, feeding their sense of superiority on the conviction that they alone understand the needs of Aboriginal people, that among the opportunism and incompetence of the resident whites they alone are driven by motives free of self-interest. A particular sort of blinkered stupidity often accompanies self-righteousness, and in the smaller communities it can be toxic in the extreme.

The couple who came to be known as Super Kartiya and his Super Nyupa belonged in this category. He was a self-righteous bully and she was a self-righteous protector of the helpless Aborigines. For two years they managed a community in which I work on a regular basis, and they made it plain from the outset that part of their agenda was to drive out as many of the other kartiya as it was in their power to do.

‘I will protect these people as if they were my own children,’ the Super Nyupa announced, glaring down at me from her considerable height, the inference being that it was from the likes of me that they needed protection. I was in the community at the invitation of the traditional owners, my funding came from an independent source and most of what I did involved the traditional lands beyond the community boundaries. So long as I kept out of the new management’s way the worst I had to endure was hostile glares, limited access to the office (and my only access to a telephone) and the ambient tension that prevails in such circumstances.

Not so fortunate was my friend the architect-builder, who had been coming to the community for years, during which time he had developed a team of local builders and embarked on a project to build a community centre. He spent several months each year overseeing and completing stages of the project, applying for and getting ongoing funding, building long-standing relationships based on mutual trust and respect. It was a model of sustainable processes and achievable goals, and it was intolerable to the Super duo, who set about sabotaging it with the commitment of their high moral fervour. The money for the project had to be administered through the corporation, which allowed them to obstruct his access to the funds, refuse to sanction already-agreed projects and send him slowly mad with helpless frustration. The lacklustre response of the local mob, among whom he tried to enlist support, left him nowhere to go but away, feeling done over and betrayed.

We both belonged to a group who had longstanding connections to the place, and had formed a network of people with a range of professional skills that could be brought into play to assist the local people with their aspirations. Through a process of

consultation we had identified those aspirations, and were discussing what might be achievable in the short term when we were halted by the hostile new management. Against their determined authoritarianism our carefully moderated consultative processes didn't stand a chance. And the reality was that the community could continue to function without the long-term strategies and plans we had identified, but it couldn't operate without a bookkeeper (her role) and a works manager (his role). We were routed, and several years of work came to a standstill.

Having driven out the architect-builder and kneecapped the support network, they set their sights on the shopkeepers and the co-ordinator of the Indigenous Protected Area. The shopkeepers were easy picking, since the shop was also under the jurisdiction of the community corporation. A campaign of micromanagement saw the incumbent store managers pack their bags and go, and over the next couple of years the numerous replacements were systematically bullied as soon as they showed signs of wanting to run things their own way.

The assault on the Indigenous Protected Area required more complex strategies, as it was embedded in the aspirations of the Indigenous founders of the community, and was the only organisation that offered long-term possibilities of meaningful employment, tourism development, land management and cultural rehabilitation. The weak point, which the Super duo were quick to exploit, was that it represented the affiliations between people and country, and was therefore subject to the jealousy and suspicion that simmers around matters to do with country. Among the local people were those who felt their own power base threatened by the Indigenous Protected Area, and were readily manipulated into the plan to push it out. The story of how this was achieved is too complicated to tell here, but suffice it to say that the damage was considerable and the repercussions are ongoing.

At some point during their reign, which overlapped for a year with that of an unstable school headmistress who also belonged to the self-righteous category, I caught myself out in an interior rant about the destructive self-interested jealousies of the Aboriginal mob I was working with. It went something like this:

Why can't they see how damaging it is to spend all their energy being suspicious and resentful of one another?

Why can't they put their personal and family vendettas aside and work together towards an outcome that would benefit everyone?

Why doesn't Jakamarra understand that his morose, manipulative sulking is the obstacle that stops him from achieving what he wants to do?

Why does Nungarrayi waste her considerable intelligence thinking up new ways to persecute and undermine the sister of whom she's insanely jealous?

In the midst of all this a small voice said: hang on there, wait a minute – let's do a stocktake of the kartiya politics right now. A headcount arrived at a resident white population of twelve. The configuration of hostilities among them was as follows:

Super Kartiya and the storekeeper recently threatened each other publicly during a community meeting.

The storekeeper's wife just assaulted the Super Nyupa, who is laying charges.

The Super Nyupa and the headmistress only communicate by fax.

Super Kartiya threatened to spear the builder who replaced the architect-builder.

The nurse, who is married to the builder, is not speaking to the Super duo.

Super Kartiya has appropriated the IPA water trailer and refuses to give it back.

The headmistress has banned the IPA co-ordinator from the school, on the grounds that his relationship with one of the teachers, aged thirty, is immoral.

The teacher in question is being subjected to merciless bullying by the headmistress.

Three of the four remaining teachers have aligned themselves with the headmistress to protect themselves, and are therefore not speaking to anyone in the IPA.

Because of my support for the IPA co-ordinator and his teacher girlfriend I have recently been subjected to a drive-by-shouting from the headmistress, who specialises in this method of attack.

The Super duo have installed a screen door on the office building, and control the only key, so the rest of us can only gain access to our own offices when it suits them.

IT ISN'T ALWAYS like this. There have been times when the white population has consisted of mature, sensible, capable people who co-operate with and support each other, and the difference in the mood and function of the community is dramatic. And occasionally, when the planets are perfectly aligned and whatever unpredictable entity that rules the universe is in a benevolent mood, a group of exceptional people gathers, works together with skill and generosity, and achieves remarkable outcomes. Several times now I have had the good fortune to be part of such a team, and it's the one thing, apart from the resilience and humour of the Aboriginal people, that allows me some optimism for the future.

The high-handed behaviour and interventions of Super Kartiya and Super Nyupa finally provoked the local mob out of their passivity. It's a mistake kartiya often make, assuming that because Aboriginal people seem disengaged and uninterested, they are incapable of acting decisively in their own interests. Action, when it occurs, can be sudden and cataclysmic, and so it was in the routing of the Super duo, beheaded in a coup that drove them out of the community in a matter of days.

That they were able to reign unchecked for a couple of years shows how poorly the systems and structures imposed by government on remote communities function, and how easily they are abused. No matter how good the strategies and programs developed at the policy level, the delivery on the ground is where it counts, and where it consistently fails.

There are some exceptional people working in remote Indigenous communities. If this wasn't the case things would be much worse than they are. But too often they work in isolation, expected to meet criteria that have no bearing on the reality of the work they do, in circumstances of which their superiors have no grasp. For the petty powerbrokers this is very satisfactory, allowing them to build their personal fiefdoms and fulfil their potential as unmitigated arseholes. For the committed, hard-working, responsible individual it is demoralising and heart-breaking.

Why is it like this? Is it because Aboriginal Australia is still felt to be a retrograde country not fit for white people, a wounded, contaminated place to be avoided for fear of being contaminated oneself? Does it still occupy the dark corners of the collective white imagination?

In his introduction to the magnificent book on the Papunya art movement, *Papunya: A Place Made After the Story* (MUP, 2005), Geoffrey Bardon describes his arrival in Papunya in 1971: 'I introduced myself to a group of drunken, foul-mouthed and violent men who, as I was to learn, were the settlement's administrators.'

During the 1960s and early '70s, when my family lived in the Tanami, we would bypass the settlement of Yuendumu as if avoiding a dirty secret, a festering rubbish tip into which the worst white trash had been thrown. I have no doubt that there were some good people working there even then, but the reputation of the place was self-fulfilling. Although things have improved since those days, the legacy lingers, not only in the lack of status associated with working in a remote community, but in the lack of interest among qualified and competent people to take on the jobs.

For some years I taught drawing at a tertiary art college. Among the exercises I set was one that consisted of drawing a self-portrait, then with a few subtle modifications pushing the drawing across race and gender, so that the students ended up with a portrait that still resembled them, but was the opposite gender and of a different race. The next stage of the exercise was to make a body of art by this alter ego, which required the student to research the cultural and social influences that underscored the life and influenced the art.

My students chose to be Inuit and African and Japanese and Chinese and Indian and Native American. They did not choose to be Aboriginal. Curious, I questioned my classes on this omission. The answers I got added up to: we don't feel that we are allowed to go there; it's too dangerous; it's appropriation; it's too hard.

It seems that the young, who might be expected to carry fewer prejudices than previous generations, feel warned off, forbidden to enter the complex territory of the country's first people. How this has come about is beyond the scope of this essay, but it's another example of the unintended consequences of good intentions.

Contaminated ground, too hard, no career path, a bureaucratic nightmare, a cultural minefield; a recalcitrant and ungrateful Indigenous population who want what whitefellas have but don't want to do what whitefellas do, who define their Aboriginality against the whitefella presence in their midst. In an environment that calls for the best and brightest too often it's the sociopaths, the self-righteous, the bleeding hearts and the morally ambiguous that apply for and get the jobs, and provide the example of white society against which the local people formulate their resistance.

During the era when Australia was responsible for the administration of New Guinea, the Kiaps who worked as patrol officers were trained at the Australian School of Pacific Administration. They studied law, anthropology, language, administration, health, research methodology, reporting and people management. Anyone who works for an aid agency undergoes a thorough induction in the cultural and social environment they are about to enter, and is alerted to the challenges they can expect to encounter. I've heard it said on a number of occasions by people who have worked in extreme environments overseas – Afghanistan, East Timor and the like – that none of it compares to the difficulties they encounter in Indigenous Australia. And yet successive Australian governments don't see the necessity to train and prepare the people who work on our own cultural frontier.

This may be motivated in part by the assumption that Aboriginal people should be trained to fulfil these roles. Empowering Aboriginal people to run their own communities is one of those rhetorical platitudes that has been bandied around since the emergence of self-determination as a political ideology, and in theory it is the obvious goal towards which all energy should be directed. In practice it often results in the most competent and functional people being set up for failure.

The mentoring and support necessary to help them through the process of taking responsibility is rarely available, and when available is never sustained for long enough. In all likelihood the mentor will be one of those overworked and undervalued kartiya with their own manifold problems, and the competent Aboriginal person will already be in constant demand by every agency operating within the community, will be juggling complicated family politics and subjected to hostility and jealousy for aspiring to be like the kartiya. Being fast-tracked to their level of incompetence achieves two negative results, neutralising their effectiveness in the roles they were already fulfilling, and setting them up to fail in the jobs to which they have been promoted.

RETURNING TO THE community shortly after the demise of the Super duo, I find it becalmed. It has gone into voluntary administration and is waiting for the arrival of a temporary administrator. The shop is being managed by interim emergency storekeepers, and the most competent Aboriginal woman in the place is juggling roles as office manager, Indigenous Protected Area co-ordinator and, in the absence of white people to blame, the all-purpose community villain. It is apparent that the most useful thing I can do in the circumstances is to take over the position of temporary IPA co-ordinator, as the work I usually do is contingent on that position being filled. This frees up my friend to do some of the things she is better equipped to do, and promotes me to my own level of incompetence.

A dramatic change for the better has taken place in the school. It has a new headmaster, who is keen to enlist whoever in the community has something of value to offer the kids, and a mature and experienced staff has replaced the batch of cowed first-year teachers. The regional council has initiated a program to mentor young adults, and has put in place a skilled German woman with a natural sensitivity in dealing with cultural and social complexities. The new resident nurse is a warm-hearted, intelligent man. In spite of the difficulties at the administrative level the resident population of kartiya are decent, emotionally mature people whose first concern is to do as good a job as possible. With luck the present situation will move beyond damage mitigation to some positive achievements. But it's a fragile balance. A single individual could tilt it back into the dysfunction and unpleasantness of recent times.

Meanwhile the local people carry on with their own preoccupations, assessing how best to utilise and exploit the current situation, taking the measure of this new batch of kartiya who for brief or extended periods will control the resources of their world. Kartiya are unpredictable and unreliable. Even the best of them make promises they don't keep. It is necessary to extract the maximum value from them while you can, because tomorrow or next week or next year they will be gone, and there will be a whole lot of new ones to break in.

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