THE LANGUAGE OF GOVERNANCE IN A CROSS-CULTURAL CULTURAL CONTEXT: WHAT CAN AND CAN'T BE TRANSLATED

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I Introduction

In a recent book, Anna Wierzbicka addresses the proposition that English, like any other language, carries with it a great deal of internal cultural baggage.[1] She examines key Anglo-English concepts such as 'fair', 'reasonable' and 'impartial', and shows that many of these are unique to English — they have no equivalents in other European languages, let alone the languages of other, non-western cultures.

English is now the global language of governance and development, and many of the terms of the governance discourse are similarly dependent for their meaning on the cultural assumptions of English-speaking peoples. This paper explores some of the implications for governance discourse in Indigenous contexts in Australia, focusing on research with the Yolngu people of north-east Arnhem Land over 30 years, and more particularly in recent times in the context of a case study of the Laynhapuy Homelands Association as part of the Indigenous Community Governance project.

I begin with a caveat. The opposition set up in this paper between Yolngu-speakers as bearers of Yolngu culture, and English-speakers as bearers of 'Anglo-Australian' culture should not be taken to reflect a view that language and culture are somehow coterminous, or to imply support for the strong Whorfian view of language that suggests that language constrains what can be thought about. A distinction will be drawn between translation and explication, and it will be argued that whereas the former may sometimes be impossible, the latter never is. The problem lies in failing to realise the necessity for explication, and for the development of tools for explication.

II An Example of Non-Translatability

Let me start with an illustrative example of non-translatability. In 2005, during an initial short period of fieldwork with the Laynhapuy Homelands Association, I sat in on a two-day 'Indigenous Governance Improvement Program' workshop that had been arranged for the Association's Board of Directors. Near the beginning of the first session, the instructor briefly mentioned 'cultural match' and discussed the idea that there might be 'two

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[1] Anna Wierzbicka, *English: Meaning and Culture* (2006).

world views'. The handout materials for the course contrasted an idealised 'Aboriginal world view' in which 'issues of family, relationship with country, traditions, and lore [sic] all come together to provide a framework in which each person relates to each other', with the 'rules and customs' of western society based upon the principles of 'equality, fairness and democracy'.

One of the words characterised by Wierzbicka as being unique to English — fair or, in this case, fairness — is here invoked as a fundamental principle of good governance in western society. This was the end of any attempt to engage seriously, in the course of the workshop, with what might or might not be principles of governance derived from the Yolngu world view. Indeed, the phrasing above seems to suggest that whereas western society has 'principles', the Aboriginal 'world view' merely has 'issues'.[2]

Later on the first day, the workshop members broke up into smaller groups to work on particular topics[3] that were emerging from the workshop. I suggested that one group might like to look at some of the English terms that had come up so far, and think about how those might be translated into Yolngu-matha ('Yolngu-language'). I was deputised to act as the scribe for that group.

One of the words that the group decided to think about was 'honest' — a term that had been put forward by the instructor as a desired quality in people in positions of responsibility. The word had not been commented on by Yolngu during the main session, but it quickly became evident that there was no simple way to translate this word directly into Yolngu-matha.

The translation equivalents or paraphrases that people came up with were:

> *ngayangu dhunupa*
> *ngayangu wanggany*
> *ngayangu dhapinya*
> *mu_lkurr wanggany*
> *rom dhunupa*

The Yolngu-matha words in these expressions can be translated into English more or less as follows: *ngayangu* 'feeling, emotion'; *dhunupa* 'straight, right, proper'; *wanggany* 'one'; *dhapinya* 'generous, kind-hearted'; *mu_lkurr* 'head, part of the body where thinking happens'; *rom* 'law laid down by the ancestors, culture, custom, customary way of doing things'.

What are the essential differences in meaning between this collection of terms and the English word 'honest'? Dictionary definitions of 'honest' appeal to terms such as 'fair', 'just' and 'trustworthy', and oppose it to actions such as lying, cheating and stealing, for example: 'not given to lying, cheating,

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[2] In Standard English the word 'issue' has extended its range of meaning to encompass the semantic space that used to be occupied by the word 'problem'. In Standard Australian English, the word problem is now scarcely heard or written. Originally euphemistic, this extended meaning of 'issue' is now thoroughly entangled with the word's other meanings.

[3] In revising the paper for publication, I realised that I had used the word 'issues' here.

stealing, etc.; trustworthy';[4] 'showing uprightness and fairness';[5] 'fair and just in character and behaviour, not cheating or stealing'.[6] All these definitions have some things in common: they describe characteristics of the individual, they appeal to moral principles or abstract qualities of character, and they are described in terms of the behaviour that results from having the quality of honesty.

The Yolngu paraphrases are very different. Two of them at least — *ngayangu wanggany* and *mulkurr wanggany* — describe characteristics of a group rather than of an individual. A free translation might be 'of one feeling' and 'of one way of thinking'. So here 'honesty' is not being seen as a personal quality, but rather as a property of a group — something we might back-translate as 'consensus' — produced by interactions between its members.

Three of the translations are compounds with the word for 'feeling, emotion' as the first element and one has the word for 'head' which is commonly used in compounds describing mental qualities. In these paraphrases it is the mental or emotional state of the individual or group, with reference to an implied context, rather than some timeless personal characteristic that is invoked. *Ngayangu dhunupa* comes closest to having the moral qualities carried by the English word, but it is still couched in terms of emotion or feeling rather than in terms of qualities of character. All of the Yolngu paraphrases concern internal states or dispositions of the individual or group rather than their behaviour.

Perhaps closest to the English sense in some ways is *rom dhunupa*, which appeals to a set of principles outside the individual in the form of rom. But *rom*, in turn, is a very complex word that has no direct translation equivalent in English, as will be shown later. Most importantly, an appeal to *rom* is an appeal to a set of laws and principles sanctioned by ancestral forces rather than an appeal to a set of context-free moral precepts.

What these definitions suggest is that the differences between Yolngu and western ideas about governance might go deeper than terminology, and deeper even than the perceived differences in sociality that are captured in commonly cited oppositions such as 'dispersed polities' versus 'centralised polities' or 'consensus decision making' versus 'electoral representation', or 'kin-based' versus 'corporate and bureaucratic'.

III How Human Beings Are Constituted

Yolngu participate in governance structures that are founded on western principles: the Laynhapuy Board of Directors, for example, is an elected body on which those elected represent the interests of their constituents. However, Yolngu bring with them into this arena a very different set of ideas from those of English-speaking westerners about how the person is constituted as a

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[4] Marian Makins et al (eds) with G.A. Wilkes and W.A. Krebs (Special Australian Consultants), *Collins English Dictionary* (3rd ed, 1991).

[5] Arthur Delbridge et al (eds), *Macquarie Dictionary* (3rd revised ed, 2003).

[6] Della Thompson (ed), *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (9th ed, 1995).

thinking, feeling, acting and moral being, and about how the individual is nested in their social and physical universe and their culture.[7]

Because this is so, it is hard even for Yolngu with good English to understand what English governance terms, with all their western cultural baggage, really mean to English-speaking westerners. In the Yolngu view nothing happens or exists independent of its context. In western thought this is considered to be a limitation of 'non-western' thinking, but from Yolngu viewpoint it is the western way of thinking that is limited and peculiar — something that leads westerners to be without roots, almost a-social. A Yolngu man once said to me: 'We Yolngu are like the trees of the forest, because our roots go deep into the land. *Ngapaki* [white people] are like the grass, their roots are shallow and they come and go with the seasons. We withstand the fire, while they get burnt out.'

This metaphor relies for its power crucially on the word 'root'. The Yolngu-matha word *djalkiri* can be translated as 'root of a tree', but it also means 'foot', 'footprint', 'the visible and tangible evidence of ancestral presence in the land', and is also often translated by Yolngu using the English word 'foundation'. Yolngu see themselves and their social relationships as just the outward manifestation of a deeper, ancestral world, which is their foundation. The root metaphor is elaborated in many ways, some of which resonate with similar English metaphors. For example young people who are alienated as described as having been 'cut off from their roots'.

But for Yolngu, those roots are always there in the land, even if people on the surface are becoming dissociated from them. This was brought home to me forcefully many years ago when a Yolngu elder came to stay with our family in Canberra for a while. Whenever we went out in the bush he was constantly looking for and interpreting signs of ancestral presence in the landscape — particular rock formations, or the shape of a particular watercourse.[8] It was quite clear that, for him, even if there were no Aboriginal people still in the area who could interpret the landscape, those ancestral roots were still there.

For Yolngu, this is a profound difference between them and other Australians. Incomers and their descendents may live on the land, may even call it their 'home', but Yolngu come from the land, and are a part of it.[9]

IV There May Be No Universal Principles of Good Governance

[7] See Janet Hunt, 'Capacity Development in the International Development Context: Implications for Indigenous Australia' (CAEPR Discussion Paper No 278, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, 2005) 13–15, for a related discussion of cross-cultural aspects of capacity development.

[8] See Howard Morphy, 'Landscape and the Reproduction of the Ancestral Past' in Eric Hirsch and Michael O'Hanlon (eds), *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (1995) 184.

[9] In his evidence in the Blue Mud Bay native title case, one of the Yolngu witnesses put this eloquently and succinctly when he said: 'you stand for power, white people, but we stand for our land and the sea.' (Court transcript, *Gumana v Northern Territory of Australia and* Others [2005] FCA 50).

Non-Indigenous Australians from an English-speaking background tend to assume that concepts such as 'fairness' are universal. It follows that any system of governance that does not rest on such universal principles must either be 'bad' or 'unprincipled'.[10] I was once at a seminar in Canberra where Professor Wierzbicka was discussing the concepts 'fair' and 'reasonable'. One member of her audience was unable to believe that Polish (her native language) did not have such words. He implied in his comments that it was unthinkable that the language of any 'civilised' society did not encode such concepts. Her response was, as she herself observed, thoroughly Polish. She was vehemently assertive (an Anglo choice of words) in stating that it was perfectly possible to have a language, and a civilised (or, one might say, well-governed) society, without such words and concepts.

If Polish does not have them, why should it be assumed *a priori* that any other language does? Attempts at 'capacity building' that assume a set of universal principles underlying all human actions, whatever their surface form, are doomed to failure. Such an assumption is based on a perception that western notions of governance appeal to universal principles — or to principles that *ought to be*, in our minds, universal — such as fairness, and reasonableness.

The question of whether people should be *persuaded* that concepts such as 'fairness' *ought to be* universal is certainly an interesting one, but it is a different question. I am not attempting to address that question here, but to make a point that needs to be made before such a debate can even begin.

The realisation that western notions of governance are as culture-bound and relativistic as anyone else's — in other words that they are not founded on self-evident truths — is hard for English speakers to grasp. The course that I sat in on at Laynhapuy Homelands Association was, of its kind, a good one. But it treated the Yolngu participants as if principles of western governance could simply be grafted onto their existing ideas because of an assumption about the universality of concepts such as 'fairness' and 'honesty'. It was not that the instructor failed to recognise difference — after all he did acknowledge that 'cultural match' was desirable and that there might be two 'world views'. But he did not understand the nature of the difference. So when the graft fails to take, as it often does, this tends to be seen as a deficit in the Indigenous people concerned rather than in the nature of the training enterprise itself.

V Some Yolngu Principles of Governance

The contexts for governance in Yolngu society were and continue to be both local and regional. Patrilineal estate-owning clans are the building blocks. These are linked to one another in a complex regional marriage system, and by

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[10] For example, a recent publication from the Institute on Governance lists 'fairness' as one of the 'five universal principles to good governance' (John Graham, Institute on Governance, *Managing the Relationship of First Nation Political Leaders and Their Staff* (2006) <http://www.iog.ca/publications/2006_FNleader_staff_rel.pdf> at 30 March 2006.

complex ancestral ties that confer ceremonial roles. The kin network, or system of *gurrutu*, is the Yolngu 'governance environment' par excellence.[11]

At the level of the clan, primogeniture and gender are the most important determinants of ascribed leadership status, but there are quite effective checks to the automatic ascription of power to people in powerful structural positions. Personal autonomy is highly valued and may be strongly asserted (sometimes by avoidance of situations in which the power of others can be exercised).[12]

Ultimately a 'good' leader is a person to whom other people will listen, and who can create and maintain consensus — a sense of *ngayangu wanggany* or *muḻkurr wanggany*. Thus leadership is conferred conditionally and has to be constantly earned. It is a process rather than simply an ascribed position in a hierarchy, although some people do start with structural advantages. Whereas English-speakers tend to talk about the 'head' of a family or organisation, the Yolngu metaphor is *ngurru* — 'nose, prow of canoe'. The English metaphor implies a view of a leader as the apex of a vertical hierarchy, whereas the Yolngu metaphor implies a flat structure in which the leader forges ahead and others follow.[13]

On the Laynhapuy homelands, the Yolngu system of governance still operates according to these principles. It has adapted to the circumstances of small settlement life. It still depends on the same mix: 'good' leaders are those who can lead through consensus and, all things being equal, they tend to be the first-born sons of the leaders of the preceding generation. And the system is still grounded, in the sense that homelands settlements tend to cohere around the senior male members of the estate-owning clan.

'Fairness', 'equality' and 'democracy', the cornerstones of 'good' governance in western liberal democracies, have no significance in the context of this system. There is nothing 'fair' or 'equal' about male primogeniture — all people are not created equal, and leaders are not elected on democratic principles. But this system has its own set of checks and balances — leaders who lead by consensus are constrained by the need to reproduce consensus. Disaffected constituents can 'vote with their feet', withdraw their support, and align themselves with another leader. Perhaps it is checks and balances that are the universal prerequisites for good governance.

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[11] See Michael Christie and John Greatorex, 'Social Capital in the Contexts of Yolngu Life' (2004) 2 *Learning Communities: International Journal of Learning in Social Contexts* 38.

[12] For a more detailed treatment of Yolngu governance principles and the nature of Yolngu leadership, see: Howard Morphy, 'Death, Exchange and the Reproduction of Yolngu Society' in Francesca Merlan, John Morton and Alan Rumsey (eds), *Scholar and Sceptic: Essays in Honour of L.R. Hiatt* (1997) 123; Nancy M. Williams, 'On Aboriginal decision-making' in Diane E. Barwick, Jeremy Beckett and Marie Reay (eds), *Metaphors of Interpretation: Essays in Honour of W.E.H. Stanner* (1985) 240; and Nancy M. Williams, *The Yolngu and Their Land: A System of Land Tenure and the Fight for its Recognition* (1986). For an extended discussion of the principle of 'autonomy' in the Australian context see Fred R. Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics Among Western Desert Aborigines* (1986).

[13] Ironically, the English expression 'to be led by the nose' is derogatory.

VI Whose Deficit?

It has become common to take a deficit view of Aboriginal people, particularly in the field of policy making. The thinking seems to go: they lack all these things — health, education, jobs — so it must be self-evident that 'the way forward' is to make up these deficits and all will be well. However, this is not so self-evident when we realise that many Aboriginal people, in turn, have a deficit view of the wider Australian society. Non-Indigenous Australians, particularly those from English-speaking backgrounds are thought by Yolngu to lack family feeling, ties to land, and attachment to anything but money. They are judged to give undue importance to the means for getting money, that is, jobs. They are selfish and ungenerous. Anglo-Australians may see this as a caricature — but the deficit view of Aboriginal people is equally one-dimensional.

Given that Yolngu have a deficit view of wider Australian society, we might expect to find some evidence of resistance to becoming, in the words of Emma Kowal, a 'well-governing Indigenous person' if the recognition space for such a person is defined in terms of western notions of 'good governance'.[14] And evidence of resistance does, indeed exist, for example in the court transcript of the recent Blue Mud Bay native title hearing. The major discourse in the case was not so much about governance as about 'law' and what that might mean, in the context of the 'recognition space' that native title law gives to customary law.[15] Here is an illustrative passage:[16]

Counsel:	… you mentioned your law, or 'our law' I think you said. Well, what do you mean by that? What do you mean by your 'law'?
Witness:	My law.
C:	Yes.
W:	Well, what's that 'law' mean?
C:	That's right.
W:	What in your - - -
C:	That's the question I'm asking you.
W:	I'm asking too: what is 'the law' means?
C:	Well, you - - -
W:	In Balanda [English/white person's] way, what youse call it?
C:	You — you said, 'Under our law, we line the turtle shells up', as I understood you.
W:	Okay, exactly - - -
C:	That's part of your law. What did you - - -

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[14] Emma Kowal, 'Elders, Experts and Entrepreneurs: A Postcolonial Analysis of the Governance Debate' (Paper presented in the Indigenous Governance — Challenges, Opportunities and Outcomes Seminar Series, NARU, Darwin, 26 October 2005, available at <http://naru.anu.edu.au/papers/2005-10-26Kowal.pdf>).

[15] For an extended discussion of the 'recognition space' see Christos Mantziaris and David Martin in co-operation with the National Native Title Tribunal (Australia), *Native Title Corporations: A Legal and Anthropological Analysis* (2000).

[16] Court transcript, *Gumana v Northern Territory of Australia and Others* [2005] FCA 50.

W: Well, exactly what I'm talking now. When I'm using Balanda English, well, you should know better than me, you know, because I'm — I'm talking in Yolngu way too you know? My — my tongues are turning around, like, Yolngu way I'm talking, and if I'm using your English now, you should understand this is new to me … my really language is Yolngu language … And I cannot — you know, when you talk to me, you know — what is Yolngu story, what this 'law' means, you know, well, I just pick up the English, 'law'. My ngarraku rom, my ngarraku rom is different. I call it rom.

    …

C: And what does that word mean?

W: Well, I'm telling you it — the law been there forever. It was given from our ancestors to our grandfathers to our father to me. This is what I call rom and law. I'm just putting that English into my — in my way of using of — using or thinking, you know, law. You call it law; I call it rom.

This is a very complex discourse, and to unpack it completely would be a paper in itself. But one of the things that is clearly going on is a critique of the necessity for translation, and an assertion of non-translatability, or incommensurability.[17] The witness is saying, in effect, 'when I use your English word "law" I am giving it a Yolngu meaning, and it may or may not mean the same as the word means to you. You have to explain to me what you mean by it when you use it.'

VII 'These Words Are Yolngu Words Now'

Yolngu have pretty clear ideas about what skills they want to acquire, and what roles they want to fill in the organisations that sit on the interface between their culture and the encapsulating society. The same group of Yolngu governance 'trainees' said to me as we were discussing the meaning of words: 'Yolngu need to learn *ngapaki* skills like being a book keeper, a shop keeper or a teacher, for self-sufficiency, self-management and self-determination. These are Yolngu words now as well.' It is very true that Yolngu use these terms frequently when talking about governance, but do these terms mean the same to Yolngu as they do to non-Yolngu?

I suggest that when Anglo-Australians are using terms like these many have in mind financial independence from the state (self-sufficiency), the acquisition of western-style attitudes to money and management (self-management) and, increasingly, self-determination for individuals (rather than communities), couched in the language of choice.

What Yolngu have in mind on the other hand, I suggest, is acquiring what they perceive as a set of necessary skills that will allow them to roll back the involvement of non-Indigenous people in the administration of community organisations. They see self-management and self-determination in terms of taking back control, and the maintenance and strengthening of Yolngu culture, not in terms of becoming more like non-Yolngu. Non-Yolngu tend to see these

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[17] See Mantziaris and Martin, above n 14, for a relevant discussion of incommensurability.

two propositions — administrative efficiency and Yolngu-ness — as mutually exclusive, and so dialogue breaks down. But it is here, precisely, that explicatory dialogue is most necessary.

Until very recently Yolngu did not think of self-sufficiency in terms of financial independence from the state, because they viewed state support, such as the CDEP program, and housing and infrastructure support very much as 'help from the government' — as a kind of compensation for the loss of autonomy consequent on sedenterisation and colonisation. And historically this was the view from government too.

This view is undergoing change, partly as a result of recent changes in policy settings, where it is being made increasingly clear that government no longer holds this view.[18] Yolngu are beginning to talk about the need — politically — to cut loose from dependence on the state and develop local economies. It seems at first sight as if they are beginning to think of self-sufficiency in Anglo-Australian economic terms.

But this is very far from the case. Yolngu do not want just 'any job' for themselves, or for their children. They do not subscribe to the notion that paid labour in and of itself confers dignity and self respect on the labourer, nor is the job that anyone does central to how other Yolngu see them, to their sense of self or to their place in the world.[19] Getting a job is not so important so fundamental — that they are willing to put it before everything else. They want jobs that allow them financial independence from the state, but which fit in with a way of life that values, above everything else, kinship and spiritual connection to land. These are the true sources of identity and self worth.

It cannot be assumed *a priori* that when people from different cultural backgrounds use a particular form of words or a particular term that they mean the same thing by it — even if they are speaking 'the same' language. In contexts such as the training session described above both parties to the discourse to tend to make the assumption that they *are* talking about the same thing. If we add to this the fact that each side holds a deficit view of the other, it becomes clear why so little ever changes — on either side — as a result of such encounters.

VIII Conclusion: Is Productive Dialogue About Governance Possible?

In the Yolngu view, as I hope I have demonstrated, good governance

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[18] This is particularly true of the CDEP program since its move from ATSIC to DEWR.

[19] I was once discussing this issue (I use the word deliberately here) with a locally-based public servant. She likened the Yolngu commitment to ceremonial life, particularly to the social obligations surrounding attendance at funerals, to the Anglo (professional classes') commitment to work, making the point that whereas Anglo professionals organise their other commitments in life (including family commitments) around work, Yolngu organise their other commitments around funerals. This point was astutely made. One could add further: the view that work — any work — is the moral foundation of a good life is not necessarily held by all citizens of western societies. However, in such societies it is in the interests of the state and of business and industry to promulgate this view.

does not depend crucially on western notions such as 'fairness'. If effective 'governance training' is to be delivered to leaders of Yolngu community organisations, the trainers need first to cast off the straitjacket of such culture-bound notions. They have to ask: is the notion of 'fairness' necessary in this governance environment, or can Yolngu ideas about good governance be adapted to the governance needs of the organisation? If 'fairness' turns out to be necessary (for example in dealings with English-speaking, non-Yolngu, employees) then the concept has to be objectively unpacked and its usefulness in certain contexts explained. It has to be seen not as a self-evident 'good' in itself but as governance strategy for particular contexts.

As Yolngu often say: 'we live in two worlds now'. Dialogue about governance is therefore inevitable. But if it is to be productive, both 'sides' need to understand the need for explication rather than simply 'translation'. There are definite limits to translation, but explication is possible under the right circumstances.

Certain Yolngu are further down the road to understanding this than all but a handful of non-Indigenous Australians. In a situation where one group dominates another politically and economically, it is more common for 'bicultural' individuals to emerge from the dominated side — because they have to. Just as most speakers of English are monolingual because they have no need in their everyday lives to speak another language, so most members of Anglo cultures around the world have no need to be anything but monocultural. The skilled bicultural individuals who can mediate between the wider society and the local group are usually on the local side of the fence.

If there is to be genuine and productive dialogue about the governance of Indigenous organisations, all public servants and non-Indigenous employees of Indigenous organisations who interact with Indigenous people in the course of their work, and all participants in training and development enterprises — the trainers as much as the trainees — need to be aware of the need for explication. Bicultural Indigenous Australians must be actively engaged in the development of governance training, and not be simply the recipients of it. Until this happens in a serious way, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians will continue to talk past each other and blame each other for failing to understand.

Well-intentioned non-Indigenous policy-makers and deliverers, and those who deliver governance training need to train themselves to listen accurately to what Indigenous people want of their organisations, and of policy that is directed towards their 'welfare', and resist the tendency always to lecture Indigenous people about what 'they' need to build in the way of capacity. The wider society also needs to build its capacity to respect difference and give it genuine space to exist. Because when they are in a position to understand more accurately what western governance terms mean, Indigenous people might go one of two ways. They might agree to be positioned, or to work towards being positioned as 'well-governing Indigenous persons', but then again they might use the information systematically to articulate alternative models of good governance.