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An Anindilyakwa woman holding a piece of bark with medicinal properties. Photo: Giselle Cruzado Melendez

Hybrid economies in practice, Groote Eylandt, Australia

The role of social enterprises in supporting Aboriginal women

Giselle Cruzado Melendez

"Bush Medijina allows Aboriginal women to work, to set the rules and the standards for how they work. They don't have to try and fit into the non-Indigenous way of working; they sort of set their rules and standards and values."

Participant 9

Introduction

Some 15% of Australia's Indigenous people (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) live in remote areas, with limited mainstream economic opportunities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021b). "Indigenous people" refers to Indigenous groups worldwide, including both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia, while "Aboriginal people" refers specifically to Indigenous people of the Australian continent. In this context, there is growing recognition of the value of hybrid economies, drawing from each of the market, state and customary components of the economy (Altman, 2001) to meet the diverse needs of Indigenous communities. This approach is particularly relevant in contexts where Indigenous communities engage with both contemporary economic structures and traditional practices to create and nurture sustainable development opportunities.

Globally, growing attention is being paid to the role of social enterprises (SEs), both individual and community-based, in addressing socio-economic disadvantages. SEs are often defined as businesses with social purposes, using economic means to foster broader socio-economic, political and cultural agendas (e.g., Berkes and Davidson-Hunt, 2017). A broader definition of SEs focuses on entrepreneurship as "an activity, behaviour or process which can be linked to new ethical and political possibilities" (Essers et al., 2017, p. 2).

This article draws on research with an SE led by Aboriginal women on Groote Eylandt, a remote island in northern Australia. The SE, Bush Medijina, relies on a hybrid economy that combines government support, mining royalties and traditional knowledge for its operations and to deliver social benefits. At the heart of its mission is the preservation of traditional women's knowledge, and the application of this knowledge in transforming native medicinal plants into commercial cosmetic products. The article illustrates the importance of this SE in the dual roles of creating long-term value for the Indigenous women and their community, and contributing to the maintenance of land management practices that depend on traditional knowledge and cultural connectedness.

Background

Groote Eylandt, part of the Groote Archipelago, is the largest island in the Gulf of Carpentaria and is located off the east coast of Arnhem Land in northern Australia (Figure 1). It is a remote location, approximately 630 km and 1,000 km from the nearest major cities of Darwin and Cairns, respectively. Compared to other regions in Australia, most of the ecological landscapes in the Gulf of Carpentaria maintain unaltered. The region is characterized by a monsoon climate, with very hot wet and humid summers and dry mild winters. With savannah woodlands and monsoon vine forests, the gulf is home to more than 900 plant species, more than 150 marine fish species, and at least 330 terrestrial vertebrate species (Anindilyakwa Land Council, 2025).

Groote is home to the Anindilyakwa people, the Traditional Owners of the island. They comprise approximately 1,600 people from 14 clans, distributed between 7 communities; Angurugu, Umbakumba and Milyakburra are the largest of these (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021a). The Anindilyakwa people have been in contact with Macassan trepang traders, from what is now Indonesia, since at least 1600 (May et al., 2009). In 1921, the Church Missionary Society established a settlement, and, in 1963, mining exploration was followed by the development of a manganese mine (Cole, 1992).

Subsequently, Groote Eylandt has been characterized by a hybrid economy: corporate mining operations, with a predicted lifespan to 2035; the state, through public institutions such as schools, and health care and welfare providers; and the customary economy, represented by Aboriginal practices such as fishing, hunting and plant gathering. The conjunction of these three economies presented the opportunity for the Anindilyakwa people to take advantage of the flow of mining royalties to the community, and channel them into the generation of programmes that create long-lasting benefits. Royalties are distributed mainly between the Anindilyakwa Land Council (ALC) and the Groote Eylandt Aboriginal Trust (GEAT). Among other activities, these organizations allocate funds to eligible Aboriginal corporations and enterprises through annual competitive processes.

Research was conducted with Bush Medijina, which is located in Angurugu. The author visited Groote Eylandt

Figure 1. Groote Eylandt and main communities
Source: Jonah Lafferty, Anindilyakwa Land Council

between 2022 and 2024 as part of her PhD studies, and spent time with Bush Medijina participants (ten Aboriginal and five non-Aboriginal women) in their daily activities. In doing so, the author sought to understand the purpose and value of these women's participation in the SE from their perspectives.

Bush Medijina

Bush Medijina is a social enterprise led by the Anindilyakwa Services Aboriginal Corporation (ASAC); it is governed by a board of seven Anindilyakwa women elders and supported by one non-Aboriginal woman who is CEO. ASAC employs Aboriginal women living in Angurugu and non-Aboriginal women from the township of Alyangula, where mine workers and their families live. The corporation's employment options are flexible, offering full-time, part-time or casual roles. The number of employees is typically around ten women at any one time. Residence in Angurugu is restricted to Traditional Owners and their relatives. Non-Aboriginal women who live in Alyangula travel to Angurugu to coordinate with Bush Medijina members.

Bush Medijina harnesses the Anindilyakwa people's traditional knowledge of medicinal plants, which has been passed down through generations. These plants hold ecological significance (Levitt, 1981), and their use is central to preserving women's roles in Aboriginal society. According to Anindilyakwa Lore (a set of stories that involve the creation time, the connectedness of humans and non-humans, and their obligations to a particular place), certain plants are harvested exclusively by women — a part of what is referred to "women's business" — and collected in accordance with a seasonal calendar.

Native plants harvested by women are processed into skincare and hair products. The botanical ingredients are extracted through chemical processes and combined with other components, such as coconut oil, sourced from outside the island. Bush Medijina products are then sold online and to retailers nationally. All revenue generated from sales is reinvested in the corporation to cover key operational expenses and the social programmes that ASAC oversees.

Mining royalties, which are distributed through ALC and GEAT, are the primary source of funds for ASAC operations, and thus for Bush Medijina. The amount received by the corporation from ALC and GEAT varies each year, subject to the income generated by mining operations. Typically, these two funding sources contribute more than 70% of the ASAC budget (based on conversations with ASAC's CEO). Funds are distributed among Bush Medijina and other social programmes; individual allocations are not reported.

Sample of skincare and haircare products by Bush Medijina. Photo: Giselle Cruzado Melendez

The state plays various roles in the hybrid economy of Groote Eylandt. In addition to providing education, health care and infrastructure services, and jobs in government institutions, the state also manages a welfare system to support Anindilyakwa people. One example of state involvement is the Anindilyakwa Indigenous Protected Area (IPA). These 10,000 square km of land, reef and ocean are managed according to Traditional Owners' objectives by the Anindilyakwa Land and Sea Rangers. The positions and operations are funded jointly by the Australian and Northern Territory governments and the Anindilyakwa Land Council.

The Bush Medijina value chain (Figure 2) is based on a collaborative effort between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women. The non-Aboriginal women involved live on Groote Eylandt and the mainland.

Like any successful small-scale business, Bush Medijina faces market pressure to increase production in order to meet demand. To maintain its values and production levels, Bush Medijina has been promoting a market based on "conscious consumers" — one that provides products from low-volume harvesting while focusing on the social benefits generated by the enterprise.

Bush Medijina's contributions to Anindilyakwa society

Enhancing well-being

Anindilyakwa women have stressed the benefits of having a dedicated physical space where women can connect, share and support one another, leading to significant improvements in their mental health. Participants describe the production facility as a safe, women-led space where they feel comfortable and protected, particularly during times of tension within their community.

Cultural norms often see women as primary caregivers for children and elders within their extended families, especially when relatives face difficulties. As a result, many women temporarily leave paid employment to take on the unpaid, often unrecognized, task of caregiving (Klein et al., 2023). Bush Medijina's governance system offers women the flexibility to return to work when they are ready. This flexibility enables women to continue with paid work while upholding cultural practices.

Preserving culture and land-management practices

In Aboriginal culture, land management (Cruzado Melendez and Kanowski, 2022) — referred to as looking after, or caring for, Country (Kerins, 2012; see also Rose, 1996) — encompasses activities such as harvesting plants and animals, fire management, and controlling feral animals. The word *Country* in this context refers to traditional lands where Aboriginal people connect to each other and with beings other than humans. These practices are widely recognized in Australia for their role in conserving ecosystems, managing invasive flora and fauna species, and promoting the regeneration of native plants that attract animals to be hunted for consumption (Steffensen, 2020).

Bush Medijina harvesting practices are deeply embedded in a complex system of kinship and are guided by Aboriginal cultural protocols. Aboriginal women hand-harvest plants after consultation with the Traditional Owners of the land on which the plants grow. The

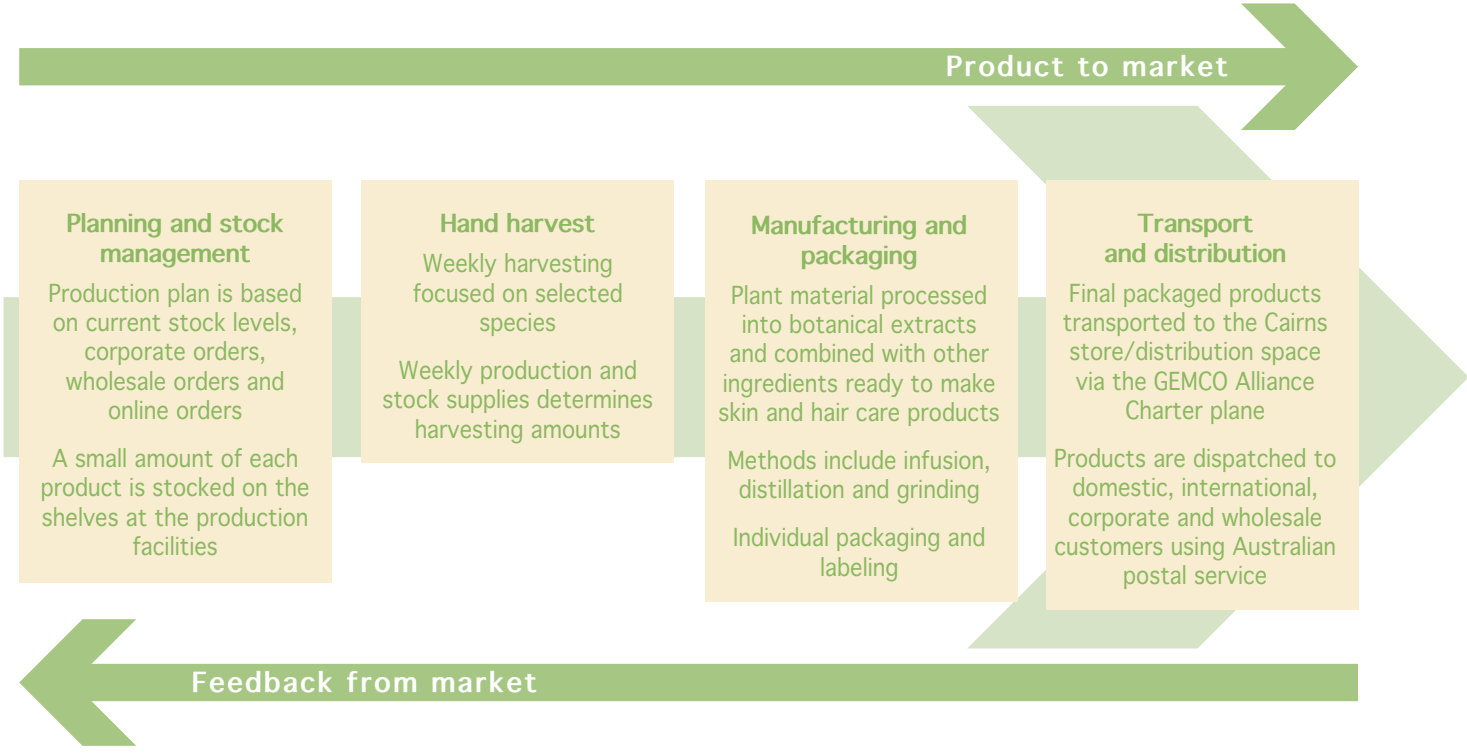

Figure 2. Simple representation of the Bush Medijina value chain
Source: Based on Giselle Cruzado Melendez

The author at the production facilities in Angurugu. Photo: Giselle Cruzado Melendez

consultations ensure a deliberative process to assess their Country's suitability for management (e.g., Pyke et al., 2018). These practices also include reading the indications of plant health and assessing the time needed for vegetation to recover from wildfires. Participants reported that they harvest species only when they observe an abundance of regeneration; since most of the harvest is leaves from shrubs and trees, regrowth is usually rapid.

Some of the medicinal plants used by Bush Medijina are part of women-only tasks. This role and its associated knowledge are preserved and transferred to the younger generations of women, who accompany their elders and relatives in visits to their traditional lands. These visits also allow for a spiritual connection between these women and their ancestors, who they feel are present in those lands. As one participant observed: "When we see the *sugarbag* (honey from native bees) on the treetop, I said, 'sorry, I am gonna cut you; it is my food, inside,' and I cut the tree, so we have to talk with the heart, speak to the plants or animals."

Some studies identify issues with the sustainability of the harvesting of non-timber products (e.g., de Mello et al., 2020). Here, locally led governance and management are likely to result in a low ecological impact from this harvesting due to its small-scale nature and the Aboriginal people's sense of connection with both human and non-human entities. This is illustrated by the case of gathering turtle eggs by the Yolngu people in nearby Arnhem Land. Since turtle eggs are part of a kinship system in which men, women and children and Country are one, the eggs are gathered with respect, in limited numbers, and in ways that reinforce the collectors' responsibility and care for others in the community (see Suchet-Pearson et al., 2013).

Strategies to overcome key challenges

Like many other Indigenous SEs, Bush Medijina faces multiple challenges (Logue et al., 2018); a major strategic issue is the finite life of the mine and its associated royalty stream. Anindilyakwa women are implementing several strategies to continue Bush Medijina operations when mining ceases.

Geographical isolation poses a significant challenge for community enterprises that seek access to external markets. The remoteness of Groote Eylandt makes it particularly difficult to transport products, equipment and raw ingredients to and from the island. However, the support of mining operations and local shipping services proved crucial in overcoming these barriers. Aboriginal corporations, including ASAC, effectively leveraged the concept of corporate social responsibility to engage these stakeholders, securing their support in facilitating essential transport and delivery operations.

Recognizing the impending closure of mining operations, Bush Medijina partnered with the mining company in 2024 to open a physical store in Cairns, a high-traffic tourist destination on the mainland. The Cairns store sells Bush Medijina products, as well as items from other Indigenous producers. It serves as a central hub for assembling final products from the island and dispatching them to domestic and international markets.

The partnerships between Aboriginal women from Anindilyakwa and non-Aboriginal women, and the strategic use of the internet since the social enterprise's inception, have been instrumental in the development and continuation of Bush Medijina. Partnerships with non-Aboriginal women have been built based on mutual objectives, such as creating meaningful employment opportunities for women from diverse cultural backgrounds who share similar responsibilities.

In this way, Bush Medijina can be characterized as a hybrid institution, as suggested by Altman (2005). It operates between two worlds — emerging from and representing enduring interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal cultures, and bridging cultural, commercial and geographic contexts.

Conclusions

Understanding the hybrid economy in which Bush Medijina operates illustrates the opportunities it provides to diversify the economies and livelihoods of the Anindilyakwa people while maintaining their cultural traditions. Bush Medijina participates in the hybrid economy by integrating state support with mining royalties, market-driven product development, and customary land management practices.

Bush Medijina is an example of a women-led organization that provides tailored support for Indigenous women in remote communities, addressing needs not adequately met by government organizations or the private sector. This includes creating dedicated spaces that empower women and enhance their well-being. However, to achieve their goals, SEs need financial security, which can come

Anindilyakwa women connecting with Country during a harvesting trip. Photo: Giselle Cruzado Melendez

from the private sector or government institutions or both. The current competitive funding model for Bush Medijina affects its stability. This illustrates that political and financial support for Aboriginal SEs and economic development must be adapted to local contexts, and that support for Bush Medijina should evolve.

Anindilyakwa land management practices are believed to have low impacts on the environment by respecting traditional gender roles in harvesting, and by harvesting only when plants are abundant and only when *Country* is healthy. There is scope for co-research involving western knowledge on the ecological impacts of harvesting and ensuring its sustainability (e.g., Ens et al., 2012).

Although Bush Medijina operates under a strong cultural system of governance, where the maintenance of culture and the well-being of women are paramount, fostering appropriate collaboration and partnerships with non-Aboriginal allies has been instrumental in developing a value chain. These efforts foster the transfer of skills in both directions, creating new understandings around the integration of Indigenous knowledge and Western practices. This principle — and its context-specific implementation — is likely to typify successful Aboriginal SEs.

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