

J. C. Altman, *Hunter-Gatherers Today: An Aboriginal Economy in North Australia*. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1987. Pp. xv, 251. A\$29.95.

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Jon Altman's study of the contemporary economy of the Momega people, a small group of Aboriginal outstation dwellers in the vicinity of Maningrida in Arnhem Land, is unique in a number of ways. By combining the analytical approaches of an economist with the participant observation and interviewing techniques of an anthropologist, he presents a picture of Momega life today that is illuminating in both social and economic terms. Moreover, his analysis is not restricted to the local micro-economy, but is set firmly within the broader political and administrative framework that impinges directly upon it. By placing the details of his case study in the wider context, Altman offers interesting conclusions both on a noncapitalist hunter-gatherer economy and on how its current practitioners have adapted and adopted elements stemming from the capitalistic cash economy.

A basic aim of the study is to examine the resilience of the Momega economy, and to suggest why its survival is so strong. Altman combines two theoretical models of economic transformation, the opportunity and response model and the articulation model, both of which he feels to be of some relevance to the Momega situation but neither of which alone can explain the processes that have occurred. Themes arising from

these two approaches are related to the structure of the book, with the first part presenting evidence for opportunity and response and the second part considering articulation. After a brief introduction Altman opens his discussion of the economy with an analysis of Momega diets, of basic importance because that analysis reveals the relative importance of subsistence and market foods in the sustenance of the group. The almost universal adoption of purchased carbohydrates, clearly reflecting the low return for labor when such commodities are obtained from subsistence sources, is an obvious example of the operation of opportunity and response in this context. Social accounts and expenditure patterns are then presented and the section ends with a study of time allocation, which again highlights the opportunity and response theme. Thereafter the analysis is concerned more closely with the articulation theme and its relevance in a number of spheres--the Momega production system; sharing subsistence produce; distribution in the cash domain; consumption; and ceremonial activities, both in terms of their interaction with market exchange and their economic impact on the community. Each of these components exhibits some example of articulation, such as the substitution of market goods for traditional artifacts in ceremonial exchange and the distribution of cash along lines similar to those established for the sharing of subsistence resources.

Two important aspects of the book should be stressed. First, the careful use of theoretical approaches and existing evidence relevant to each topic under discussion undoubtedly enhances the value of the study. Through this Altman successfully integrates his work with a wide range of earlier investigations and highlights a number of assumptions contradicted by his findings. Such contradictions in part stem from the different approaches taken. Altman's period of fieldwork at Momega--twelve months from October 1979 to October 1980--was considerably longer than those undertaken by many other commentators on hunter-gatherer economic issues. Second, his detailed presentation of data on variety of economic activities--work expenditure, foods consumed, time allocation, and cash expenditure, to name only a few--provides an unusually rigorous analysis of such aspects. This undoubtedly enables more detailed level of assessment than normal. While, as Altman acknowledges, the accuracy of the data must at times be questioned, these tables certainly inject an impression of precision normally lacking in such studies. Hopefully those who now interpret the findings will note Altman's caveats and will not overemphasize an exactitude that is not always justified.

Although Altman is generally careful to qualify his statements on the

basis of his information, there are some points worth stressing further, Momega is a small community of between forty-five and fifty people and only ten to twelve households. Consequently some of the data suffer in disaggregation. In particular, information classified on a gender-age basis, as in figures 13 and 14 (p. 110), must be interpreted carefully because the numbers involved are so small. Similarly, while the discussion of Chayanov's rule relating work effort to dependency ratios (pp. 113-115) is interesting, the fact that the data apply to only twelve households must create doubt about the general findings. Although Altman is clearly well aware of this and makes appropriate reference at times, he does on occasion make broad statements that, if taken out of context, might make his study appear to be more representative than it actually is.

Another issue that receives less attention than warranted is women's activities, in terms of subsistence, ceremonial involvement, and other spheres of community life. While Altman's long period of residence in very small community would have allowed him to gain a clearer understanding of these matters than many other male researchers, it is still unclear to what extent women's interests and activities are downplayed. For example, the products of gathering, predominantly a woman's activity, are more likely to be consumed before returning to camp than is game obtained from hunting; similarly fishing, a very important woman's activity in other parts of Arnhem Land, may well produce far more food than eventually appears at the family hearth. Thus the subsistence contribution of women may well be greater than estimated. Similarly it is possible that ceremonial interests, about which women may well have been reluctant to talk, are greater than it appeared.

Qualifications such as these do not seriously detract from the worth of this study. It is a valuable piece of work, which will doubtless be referred to by other practitioners in this field for some time to come. It is hoped that a similarly detailed analysis might one day be completed for an Australian desert community, about which our understanding of economic matters is still sadly lacking.