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Article

Channeling Country: An Interoperability Framework for Aboriginal Economic History and Economic Engagement Today

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Abstract: The economic history of the Australian Aboriginal people is often simply described as highlighting certain flaws, such as emphasizing colonial destruction and welfare dependency. This article, however, takes a different perspective, reinterpreting this history using the concepts of "channels" and "interoperability", and reflecting on contemporary policies. It no longer simply divides Aboriginal societies into "hunting and gathering" and "agriculture" categories; instead, it believes that they originally had a mature political and economic system, which operated through various "channels" (such as long-distance trade, artificial breeding, etc.), and these channels were both material and included arrangements across time and institutional levels. From this perspective, the impact of colonization is not just the loss of land, but more importantly, these "channels" were artificially cut off, modified, or even plundered. For example, through administrative restrictions and labor exploitation (such as "stolen wages"), the original economic operations became difficult to continue. However, even after experiencing such systematic destruction, the Aboriginal community has been trying to rebuild these economic connections, such as striving for land rights and participating in new environmental economies represented by grassland carbon markets. This article points out that to address the current statistical "gap", land and traditional laws should be regarded as key economic infrastructures, correcting historical wage exploitation to restore intergenerational capital, and strengthening "transformation institutions" to enable the Aboriginal governance system to truly achieve "interoperability" with the mainstream market.

Keywords: indigenous economy; economic channels; interoperability; colonial disruption; institutional interfaces

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1. Introduction

The economic history of Indigenous Australians is often presented as a simple and tragic story: originally, it was an isolated, self-sufficient "non-market" economy that was disrupted by colonial violence and subsequently replaced by marginalized labor and welfare dependency. In contemporary policy discussions, this complex history is further simplified into technical issues regarding employment, income, and educational "gaps." Although this narrative acknowledges the severe impact of colonization, it often obscures the long-term economic autonomy, institutional complexity, and adaptability of Indigenous people [1].

This narrative either portrays Indigenous people as historical victims or reduces them to statistical entities within the modern welfare system [2]. To break away from this binary perspective, this article proposes re-understanding the Indigenous economy using the terms "channels" and "interoperability," viewing the economy as a system composed

of various "channels" through which labor, knowledge, and resources can flow, thereby maintaining livelihoods, security, and power.

Before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous people had already established a relatively sophisticated network of channels, including long-distance trade, land management systems, and customary laws. These systems were used to reduce risks and distribute resources. Therefore, colonization was not merely the "impact of modern markets on primitive societies" but rather a conscious and structural severance and reorganization of these existing "channels." Through border violence, administrative control, and "stolen wages," the colonial government systematically disrupted the channels for wealth accumulation and intergenerational transmission. Nevertheless, Indigenous society has been adapting and striving to rebuild these connections, promoting "interoperability" between different systems, that is, enabling the Indigenous governance system to interface, be recognized, and operate with the mainstream market and the state. This can be seen from the Yirrkala bark petitions, the Mabo decision, and the development of contemporary cultural industries and land-based environmental economy.

Based on this development from pre-colonial networks to colonial destruction and to contemporary reconstruction, this article attempts to provide a new perspective for current economic policies [3, 4]. Not only should personal human capital be enhanced, but more importantly, land should be regarded as an economic infrastructure, the damaged "channels" should be restored, and the "interoperability" among systems should be strengthened to address the so-called "channel shortage" and "gap" problems.

2. Theoretical Framework and Historiographical Debates

2.1. A Novel Interpretive Framework: Channels and Interoperability

To accurately describe the economic situation of indigenous people, one cannot rely solely on the perspective of neoclassical economics, which focuses on market transactions, supply, and demand [5]. This article adopts a different explanatory approach, utilizing two interrelated concepts: "channels" and "interoperability."

Economic life is understood here as a network composed of various "channels." These "channels" refer to diverse "paths" or means—whether physical, relational, or institutional—that enable the relatively stable transformation of labor, knowledge, and resources into livelihoods, security guarantees, and social or political power [5, 6]. Examples of such "channels" include trade routes, technical infrastructure (such as fishing gear and aquaculture systems), customary law systems, and kinship networks that facilitate resource sharing and risk management. From this perspective, economic marginalization is not merely a "low level of development" but often the result of these "channels" being blocked, disrupted, or deliberately dismantled.

The corresponding concept to this perspective is "interoperability," which refers to the ability of different socio-economic and legal systems to connect, communicate, and facilitate the smooth conversion of values. This primarily concerns whether indigenous customary systems and the systems of Western market economies can interact without requiring one to fully integrate or replace the other. Historically, colonial strategies often sought to dismantle indigenous systems entirely [7]. In the contemporary era, a more viable approach is to establish "interoperability." This involves creating various "conversion mechanisms" or "interfaces" to ensure that the assets, cultural knowledge, and land ownership of indigenous peoples are fairly recognized and appropriately valued within the mainstream economy.

2.2. Historiographical Interventions: Beyond the "Hunter-Gatherer Vs. Agriculturalist" Debate

Applying the "channels" framework, new insights can be gained into the ongoing historical debates regarding indigenous societies, often referred to as "the historical dispute" in Australia. A typical example is the viewpoint presented in Dark Emu and the subsequent rebuttals by anthropologists and archaeologists.

This debate mainly revolves around a classification issue: Were the ancestors of the indigenous people agricultural farmers or hunter-gatherers? Although this discussion has promoted certain historical research, from the perspective of "channels," this debate based on the European classification system itself deviates from the key issue [8, 9]. The binary understanding of either "hunter-gatherers" or "farmers" relies on a linear social evolution model and cannot accurately reflect the actual economic lifestyle of the indigenous people.

From the perspective of "channels," the necessity of a single classification no longer matters. The more crucial issue is no longer how to categorize the indigenous societies into certain Western anthropological categories, but rather how they established and maintained the "channels" for resource security [1, 10]. Whether it was the collection of sweet potatoes, the storage of grains, or the construction of permanent aquaculture systems, archaeological and historical evidence shows that the indigenous people achieved resource management, environmental risk control, and the maintenance of long-distance trade through multiple material and institutional "channels."

Therefore, shifting the focus from classification labels (what they are) to operational mechanisms (how they operate these channels) enables a more comprehensive understanding of the economic characteristics of the indigenous population before colonization [11]. It is not merely a collection of survival-oriented activities, but rather a political and economic system with high adaptability and a clear governance structure. This shift in perspective diminishes the historical debates surrounding classification and provides a foundation for understanding the structures that were disrupted during the colonization process and the elements that need to be reconstructed in the future.

3. Pre-Colonial Networks: Channels in Deep Time

Before contact with Europeans, the economic system of the indigenous people should not be simply regarded as an undeveloped "pre-market" state, but rather understood as a highly adaptive political and economic system whose core is a complex "network" of "channels." Anthropological and historical evidence shows that there was institutional diversity across the continent involving cross-regional mobility, settlement, and governance [12, 13]. From the perspective of "channels," these pre-colonial structures can mainly be divided into three aspects: long-distance trade routes, infrastructure investment, and institutional governance arrangements.

3.1. Physical Trade Channels and Cross-Cultural Interoperability

Long before European colonization, the Aboriginal people of Australia had established and maintained extensive physical trade channels for long-distance exchange, enabling high-value goods to flow across vast regions. A notable example is the trade of Pituri, a local chewing tobacco with stimulant effects. Historical estimates suggest that the annual production and circulation of Pituri ranged between 2,500 and 3,000 kilograms. This was not limited to sporadic local transactions but represented a logistics network spanning the entire continent, requiring organized collection, processing, and distribution along established trade routes.

Additionally, these indigenous economic networks exhibited cross-cultural interoperability even before the arrival of Europeans [14, 15]. In northern Australia, indigenous communities maintained a continuous maritime trade relationship with Macassan fishermen from present-day Indonesia, who were engaged in sea cucumber harvesting. This interaction facilitated the exchange of labor, resources, and technology, demonstrating that the indigenous economy was capable of engaging in mutually beneficial cooperation with external trading systems and had established corresponding rules and arrangements to support such exchanges.

3.2. Infrastructure and Intertemporal Channels

One common misconception about the pre-colonial indigenous economy is that it was entirely in a state of "hand-to-mouth" with no capacity for surplus accumulation [16]. However, physical evidence demonstrates that these communities made continuous

investments in economic infrastructure and established mechanisms for cross-temporal storage and ecological management.

A typical example is the Budj Bim cultural landscape in present-day Victoria, which includes complex and permanent aquaculture systems designed for year-round fishing, storage, and harvesting of shortfin eels. Similarly, the Brewarrina stonefish fishing net (Baiame's Ngunnhu) in New South Wales represents a large-scale, long-term project requiring extensive labor coordination and cross-generational maintenance. These infrastructures essentially functioned as "savings channels," enabling communities to preserve value, adapt to environmental changes, and support large-scale seasonal gatherings with political and ritual significance [17].

3.3. Institutional Channels: Customary Law and Risk Management

An economy cannot operate solely based on physical infrastructure; it also requires stable institutional channels to manage resource allocation and risk control [18]. In pre-colonial indigenous societies, such institutional channels were primarily embodied in customary laws and complex kinship structures.

The indigenous economy does not rely on a monetary system or a centralized national welfare system. Instead, it allocates resources through mechanisms such as demand sharing and reciprocal obligations. These channels based on kinship relationships essentially constitute a sophisticated risk management system [12]. In an environment with highly unstable climate, activating these relational channels, such as mobilizing personnel flows between different regions or invoking reciprocal debts during resource shortages, is an important way to achieve economic security. Therefore, customary law is not merely a collection of cultural traditions; it is also a systematic infrastructure covering the entire continent, used to regulate property relations, usage rights, and economic obligations.

4. Colonial Disruption: The Seizure and Redesign of Channels

The economic marginalization of contemporary Australian Aboriginal people is often attributed to a lack of skills or an inability to adapt to the modern market economy. However, from the perspective of "channels," a different historical logic emerges: colonization was not a process where a more advanced economic system naturally replaced a less developed one. Instead, it involved the systematic deprivation and reorganization of the original economic "channels" by the colonial government. Through violent means, the colonial government disrupted the interconnectivity of the Aboriginal economy and replaced it with a controlled bottleneck structure [19].

4.1. The Violent Severing of Physical and Spatial Channels

The core feature of the early colonial period was border violence, which served as the primary method for severing the physical "channels" connecting indigenous people to their land and resources [20]. Large-scale land expropriation not only involved territorial occupation but also dismantled the economic infrastructure that sustained the livelihoods of indigenous communities.

Historical evidence, such as records from massacre incident projects, documented the plight of over 10,374 indigenous victims in border conflicts, highlighting the scale of this destruction. Such violence disrupted long-established trade routes, land management systems, and security passage arrangements [21]. By forcibly separating indigenous people from their land, the colonial economy effectively monopolized the spatial "channels" necessary for resource extraction.

4.2. Administrative Chokepoints and the Loss of Mobility

Following the border violence, the colonial government further disrupted the institutional channels of the indigenous people through protection and assimilation policies, forcibly relocating a significant number of indigenous people to reservations established by the church and the government.

From the perspective of institutional channels, these administrative systems themselves acted as bottlenecks. They directly classified the traditional mobility behaviors of the indigenous people as illegal, thereby severing the relationship networks and long-distance trade routes previously established. By confining the indigenous people to a restricted geographical space, the state diminished their ability to mobilize resources across regions and engage in risk-sharing. Consequently, an economic system that had been highly reliant on collaborative networks was replaced by a structure dominated by administrative control. Within this framework, the state assumed control over the distribution of resources and outputs essential for the survival of the indigenous population.

4.3. The Redesign of Labor Channels and "Stolen Wages"

The most long-term impact on the indigenous economy might be the redesign of labor channels, which hindered the normal accumulation of wealth within families and across generations [10]. A notable example is the Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897 in Queensland, which was subsequently adopted by other states.

Under such laws, the government functioned as an extractive intermediary for indigenous laborers to participate in the mainstream economy. However, this system was not designed to ensure fairness but rather to control and withhold income. Many indigenous individuals were integrated into the colonial economic system, primarily working in livestock farming and domestic service [22]. Their wages were often delayed, replaced with minimal food rations, or deposited into government-managed trust accounts, which were frequently misused and difficult for the workers to access.

This phenomenon is now referred to as "Stolen Wages," describing the systematic deprivation of wealth under conditions where the system permitted or even facilitated such practices. By disrupting the financial channels between labor and fair compensation, indigenous families were unable to save, invest, or transfer wealth across generations. The resulting intergenerational wealth gap represents an artificially created financial barrier. Additionally, this prolonged exploitation has eroded trust in formal financial systems within these communities, a legacy that continues to affect the economic participation of indigenous people today.

5. Adaptation, Resilience, and Indigenous-Led Rebuilding

Although the original economic channels of indigenous people were largely closed or restructured, they were not passive recipients of colonial policies. Historical evidence demonstrates continuous resilience and adaptability, alongside long-term efforts to rebuild economic connections. When the original channels were disrupted, indigenous communities consistently sought to re-establish interoperability, aiming to re-enter the broader economic system in ways recognized by rights, assets, and governance structures.

5.1. Re-Establishing Legal and Land Channels

The key step in rebuilding the economic capabilities of the indigenous people is to gradually restore the legal "channels" of the land [23]. For over two hundred years, the principle of "unowned land" during the colonial period obstructed these "channels," preventing the indigenous people from establishing any legal connection with the modern property system.

This structural obstacle was gradually overcome through the long-term advocacy of the indigenous people. Key milestones include the Yirrkala bark petitions in 1963 and the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976, which began to reopen the legal channels related to land. Subsequently, the 1992 High Court ruling in Mabo v Queensland (No 2) further transformed the overall legal structure, overturning the principle of "unowned land" and recognizing indigenous ownership within Australian common law. From the perspective of "channels," these legal changes were not merely symbolic achievements but crucial economic interventions. Through the legal recognition of

regaining land ownership, the indigenous people were able to restore the fundamental material and institutional "channels" essential for contemporary economic operations.

5.2. Transitional Interfaces: The Mixed Economy

As land rights gradually gained legal recognition, indigenous communities began to rebuild new channels for labor and livelihoods that did not necessarily require full integration into the mainstream wage labor system. During this process, a "mixed economy" model gradually emerged [24].

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) serves as an example. For an extended period, CDEP functioned as a connecting mechanism, integrating welfare, employment, and community development to form a mixed "channel." Through this mechanism, indigenous communities in remote areas could pool government-provided income support and use it to develop local enterprises and infrastructure, thereby participating in economic activities while maintaining their original social obligations [9]. Although CDEP underwent multiple policy adjustments and was eventually abolished, it clearly demonstrated that indigenous people have been striving to establish an economic structure that preserves community relations while supporting productive labor.

5.3. Contemporary Interoperability: Environmental and Cultural Economies

Today, the most successful cases of indigenous economic reconstruction occur in areas that have achieved true "interoperability." In these regions, traditional knowledge and assets are transformed into modern market value without erasing the culture.

The development of indigenous cultural economies, particularly in the field of visual arts, serves as a prominent example of connecting traditional cultural expressions with the global market through effective transformation mechanisms. Additionally, the outcomes of environmental services based on land have been remarkable. For instance, the indigenous forest rangers program now manages a significant portion of the Australian continent, playing a vital role in biodiversity conservation and border biosecurity.

Perhaps the most innovative contemporary "channels" involve indigenous participation in the carbon market [4]. By employing traditional tropical grassland fire management techniques, such as planned burning during the early spring dry season, indigenous land managers have significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions, thereby generating carbon credits with market value. This process exemplifies an important outcome of "interoperability": a traditional practice, conducted on legally owned returned indigenous land, has been transformed into a modern and internationally recognized financial asset. This also demonstrates that effective economic integration does not rely on forced assimilation but rather on governance structures, land ownership, and fair conversion mechanisms.

Based on the historical path discussed earlier, Table 1 organizes the key economic and policy milestones in chronological order. From the analysis in this article, this timeline clearly illustrates the evolution of the indigenous economy: from the highly developed "channels" network before colonization, to the violent destruction and institutional blockades during the colonial period, and finally to the contemporary institutional efforts aimed at gradually rebuilding "interoperability."

Table 1. Timeline of Key Economic Policy Milestones and Channel Logic

Period	Milestone	Channel logic (what it changed)	Anchor source
Pre-1788	Interregional trade routes and exchange systems	Dense mobility/trade channels governed by customary law; long-distance distribution of goods and knowledge.	Mulvaney (2010)
Pre-1788 to deep time	Engineered fisheries and aquaculture (e.g.,	Food security and storage channels; coordinated labor and governance around infrastructure.	UNESCO (2019); DCCEEW (2021)

	Budj Bim; Brewarrina fish traps)		
1788 onward	British invasion and frontier conflict	Violent channel seizure: land access, mobility, and resource infrastructure constrained or destroyed.	University of Newcastle massacre totals
Late 1800s–mid 1900s	Missions, reserves, stations; protection regimes	Administrative chokepoints controlling movement, labor, wages, family life; disruption of Indigenous governance.	AIATSIS explainer
1897	Queensland "Protection" law	Formal wage-control channels (protector bank accounts; reserve control).	Founding Docs; Senate stolen wages evidence
1937	Initial Commonwealth–State conference; assimilation consolidated	National policy coordination to absorb/relocate populations; intensified child removal and labor routing.	Conference proceedings; AHRC summary
1963	Yirrkala bark petitions	Indigenous protocol enters parliamentary channel; contest over mining and livelihood autonomy.	National Museum of Australia
1976	Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act	Reopens land tenure channels via statutory recognition of traditional ownership claims.	National Museum of Australia
1977–2013	CDEP (phased out later)	State-funded employment/community development channel; later reclassifications affect "employment" measurement.	ANAO audit; AIHW on CDEP classification
1992–1993	Mabo; Native Title Act framework	Translates customary title into Australian legal-economic channels; enables agreements and joint management.	National Museum of Australia
2006	Senate "stolen wages" report	Official recognition of wage control harms; attempts to repair blocked capital channels.	Senate report
2015	Indigenous Procurement Policy begins	Creates market-access channel via Commonwealth demand and targets.	Finance minister release; NIAA IPP page
2020	National Agreement on Closing the Gap	Formal partnership-based governance channel; shared accountability and targets.	Signed 27 July 2020
2024–2026	Digital inclusion and regulated carbon methods	Treats connectivity and carbon governance as economic infrastructure channels.	PC digital inclusion data; CER savanna methods

6. Contemporary Challenges and Policy Implications

6.1. Bridging the "Channel Shortage" in the Modern Economy

In contemporary Australian policy discussions, the economic challenges faced by Indigenous communities are often described as "gaps" in a statistical sense. The available data reveal significant disparities: the employment rate for Indigenous people is 55.7%,

while that for non-Indigenous people is 77.7%. Additionally, their average weekly income is considerably lower, at 540 US dollars compared to 805 US dollars. Traditional policies typically adopt a deficit-based approach to address these gaps, focusing on enhancing individual capabilities and adjusting welfare conditions.

However, from the perspective of "channels," this interpretation shifts the nature of the problem. These statistical differences do not primarily arise from insufficient individual capabilities or cultural mismatches but are instead the structural consequences of long-standing "channel" shortages. The more critical issue lies in the lack of effective "interoperability" between different systems. Therefore, policy efforts should prioritize designing fair transition mechanisms that recognize the governance power and assets of Indigenous people as legitimate economic values and integrate them into the system. Consistent with the 2020 National Agreement on Closing the Gap, this approach can lead to five key insights for current policies and practices.

6.2. Five Implications for Policy and Practice

Policymakers need to change a common perception: the ownership of indigenous people and traditional laws should not be regarded merely as cultural heritage or environmental protection issues. Land rights and the governance structures of indigenous people should be officially recognized, constructed, and invested in as important economic infrastructure. Their role is not merely symbolic but comparable to roads or telecommunication systems, constituting the "channels" that economic operations rely on. Strengthening the capabilities of indigenous local committees and land committees establishes legal and practical channels connecting indigenous communities with the broader market.

For "interoperability" to truly take effect, sufficiently strong intermediaries are needed to bridge the gap between indigenous systems and the mainstream market. Indigenous chambers of commerce and procurement frameworks, such as "Supply Nations," play key roles as transformation agencies. These entities provide necessary institutional interfaces by setting standards, verifying indigenous ownership, and establishing partnerships, enabling indigenous enterprises to expand their scale and safely enter the national supply chain [25].

The historical issue of "stolen wages" should not merely be treated as a symbolic reconciliation topic but rather as an important economic restoration measure. Long-term wage arrears have disrupted the "channels" through which wealth is passed down from one generation to the next and have weakened trust in the formal financial system. Therefore, actual financial compensation and the clarification of historical truths are necessary structural restoration measures. Restoring these labor and wealth channels is fundamental to rebuilding the economic confidence of indigenous people and family capital.

Land management practices, such as the Indigenous Reforestation Program and carbon reduction projects, should be incorporated into the core of national economic planning rather than being treated as cultural or welfare projects. Viewing "land management" as a productive service that provides biological security, environmental benefits, and economic value can create a more complete "channel" for transforming traditional knowledge into modern economic value [26].

In the 21st century, the most important physical and institutional "channels" are digital and financial channels [27]. In remote areas, the lack of digital infrastructure and barriers to accessing credit and financial services still severely restrict the economic participation of indigenous people. Policies should prioritize the promotion of inclusive digital infrastructure construction and the design of more inclusive financial systems, enabling indigenous communities to access the technologies and banking service interfaces necessary for participating in the remote economy, e-commerce, and global trade.

7. Conclusion

By adopting the analytical approach of "channels and interoperability," this study fundamentally reshapes the understanding of the economic history of Australia's indigenous people and the interaction of contemporary policies. The long-term economic marginalization of indigenous communities is not an inevitable consequence of entering the "modern" economy, nor is it attributable to a lack of capability. Instead, it stems from deliberate colonial policies that forcibly dismantled the original material, legal, and relational "channels" and replaced them with systems of administrative control and exploitative labor practices.

This historical trajectory, however, has been accompanied by persistent efforts toward reconstruction. From the bark petition in Ilcarra to the gradual legal recognition of indigenous ownership, and further to the development of cultural, environmental, and entrepreneurial economies, indigenous communities have actively worked to rebuild these "channels" and foster equitable connections and integration with the mainstream economy.

Ultimately, this article contends that addressing the contemporary economic "gap" requires abandoning assimilationist policy approaches. Policymakers should move beyond viewing land solely as cultural heritage and instead recognize it as vital economic infrastructure. By enhancing the role of intermediaries, addressing historical wage inequality, and increasing investment in the inclusiveness of digital and financial sectors, governments can facilitate the creation of an economic system where traditional governance methods of indigenous communities collaborate with modern markets in a genuinely equitable manner.

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