

"A BITTER HERITAGE: THE IMPACT OF EUROPEAN SOCIETY ON ABORIGINAL CIVILIZATION"

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The arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 and the subsequent start of what can only be accurately termed the invasion of Australia began what C. D. Rowley has termed the destruction of Aboriginal society. Since then the impact of white society on the Aborigines and vice versa has found its way into the literature and the written history of Australia, though not, perhaps, to the extent they should have. The awareness of what actually happened on the frontier is a comparatively recent phenomenon that has only just started to filter into the writings of Australian historians. A concern that Aboriginal life might be on its last legs and that the next decade might see its final demise has, however, been a recurrent theme in the writings of Australian anthropologists as A. P. Elkin, one of the pioneers of the subject, has pointed out.¹

This is not to say that there is *now* the immediate prospect of doom as far as the Aborigines are concerned. Though the family life, for example, of many Aborigines now bears a more obvious resemblance to European patterns and the traditional way of life continues as a functioning system in only a few isolated areas and most of this remnant of the pre-contact population would have had some contact with whites, it now seems that the predictions of doom are unlikely to be fulfilled in the near future. In some areas there has, in fact, been a resurgence of the traditional ways and a growth of resistance to assimilatory pressures which bode well for the future of what was until recently thought to be a dying race, and a dying lifestyle.

There is no longer any doubt that the Aborigines will survive as a racial group. However, there is reason to believe that Aboriginal culture may not continue as a distinct identity, and, if this is to be the case, it will be the result of the process that the sociologists call acculturation. For the benefit of those unacquainted with the form, perhaps the easiest definition is "the process whereby, in the course of culture contact, people from one ethnic group acquire cultural traits originating in the impinging society". Usually acculturation implies invasion, though not necessarily physical assault—for instance it could be suggested that the 'Americanization' of Australian society is a form of acculturation. Acculturation is one aspect of the broader process of assimilation the other faces being integration (or the process of becoming part of the social structure of the assimilating society) and amalgamation (the biological blending of the two groups).² However, all too often acculturation becomes linked, with the other elements of assimilation, to a belief that the two cultures involved are 'two vessels unequally filled' and that the mere act of connecting them enables their contents to find a common level—a level which, of course, swamps the 'lower' culture—and that such a process is both inevitable and

desirable when two ethnic groups of unequal technological advancement come into contact.³

The process cannot, however, be forced upon a reluctant population. To be successful it requires the co-operation of the culturally dominant group as well as the at least tacit permission of those who are to absorb the invading cultural influences. This does not imply a conscious granting of permission, but rather illustrates the obvious fact that a process of this kind cannot proceed if there is strong resistance to the acceptance of any elements of an alien cultural tradition. Cultural breakthrough depends on the strength of civilizing or missionary zeal, the economic attractions of the territory involved and the acceptance of the new by the 'natives'.⁴

In some parts of Australia, the isolation and economic unattractiveness of the area allowed the tribal Aborigines a degree of choice regarding the extent of cultural change, though they obviously could not choose the direction of change. In such areas, invasion for a variety of economic and climatic reasons, was far less destructive than in what became the more closely settled parts of the continent. In addition, the shortage of rural workers in some of these more remote areas gave the tribal Aborigines employment opportunities for part of the year, while the 'slack season' allowed an amount of free time, enabling the elders to conduct some, at least, of the sacred rites on 'walkabout'. Thus it was possible for tribal life to continue only slightly disturbed until the very recent past.

Not that in areas of minimal contact there was absolutely no disturbance of the traditional lifestyle. Apart from the obvious depopulation caused by disease, punitive expeditions, poison, alcohol and opium, all of which followed the initial contact, radical changes occurred in local organization, economic activity and material culture. One of the first things to go was the long established ethnocentrism of some of the Aboriginal groups, the white man being outside the realms of traditional cosmology. The recalled reactions of the Aborigines to the sight of the first Europeans, apparently even in the Ayers Rock area known to Aborigines as "Captain Cook" would, perhaps, be humorous if the impending future were less tragic.

But even in the remotest areas, members of groups who theoretically should have stayed where they were through lack of actual contact, drifted towards the settlements, stations and missions. They were attracted, at least in part, by curiosity, though some leading anthropologists have alleged that the Aborigines are not an inherently inquisitive race.⁵ A desire to see for themselves what was happening, was coupled with motives of material acquisitiveness and, in many instances, hunger, where the native game had been depleted since the initial contact. The power of the motive of acquisition can be illustrated by the fact that in isolated areas of Arnhem Land and the Central Desert, even among the Tivi of Bathurst and Melville Islands, European goods had become items of common use even, in some cases, of necessity, well before the arrival of permanent settlers.

No one escaped the effects of invasion. Even if they were not fortunate enough to encounter explorers or adventurous squatters, there were other messengers of the coming of civilization. The pioneers were preceded by the spread of foreign diseases, and probably by rumours "... of how these

white people could kill a man with thunder that sent out invisible spears to-tear a hole in his body and spill his blood in the sand.”⁶

The arrival of Europeans introduced a variety of cultural influences absolutely alien to the traditional way of Aboriginal life. The Aborigines were very ready to accept the tangible material benefits offered, and did so at first with no intention of making basic changes in their lifestyle. They did not discover that this was impossible until the disruptive influences were well and truly at work. Food rations, alcohol, the Protestant work ethic, the vengeful God of the Gospel—as espoused by the Moravians and others from the extreme right wing of Protestantism—all these combined to make the old ways increasingly untenable. The results of such influences are clearly visible today.

The practice of supplying foodstuffs to the Aborigines, introduced piecemeal and for various reasons by governments after the 1870's, and by station owners as payment for work done, first of all undermined the nomadic way of life. It accelerated the breakdown of tribal structures and actively encouraged Aborigines to become fringe dwellers. As W.E.H. Stanner pointed out:

“There is a sound calculus of cost and gain in preferring a belly regularly, if only partly, filled for an output of work which can be steadily scaled down. Hence the two most common characteristics of Aboriginal adaption to settlement by Europeans: a persistent and positive effort to make themselves dependent, and a squeeze play to obtain a constant or increasing supply of food for a dwindling physical effort.”⁷

The employment of young men, with the resulting dependence of the elders on their money had important long run repercussions on a social system where authority was since time immemorial vested in the hands of now economically dependent elders. These outposts of civilization did not confine their effects to the groups in the immediate vicinity. A widespread drift away from tribal lands towards such centres led to the development of large groups of Aborigines representing a variety of tribal and kinship groups. This development went outside the traditional social avenues since the new meeting places were often away from the old points of social contact along the mythic travel routes of the totemic ancestors. The rise of such new meeting places—towns, missions, farms, stations, government settlements, hunting and mineral exploration camps—all helped intensify inter- and intra-racial contact to unprecedented levels.

Such developments were not wholly negative. They broke down traditional barriers between groups, lessened age old inter-tribal hostilities, and led to the discovery of common traits without which the emergence of a sense of Aboriginal identity, paralleling the growth of negritude in African literature as a rediscovery and reassertion of traditional values, would be close to impossible. On the other hand, tension was often, caused by seemingly insurmountable differences regarding cult ritual and mythic traditions.

Moving away from the traditional tribal areas also acted to break previously strong links with the land—though this is not necessarily what the Aborigines intended when the move was made. In the initial stages of the process of acculturation traditional lands were still regarded as the tribal

home. Long estrangement from tribal areas led, however, to the situation where these links were so weakened as to become ineffective. In most cases some generalized linkage to an area, if not to specific sites, remained. The weakening of ties with the land in turn weakened the authority traditionally exercised by the elders, since such authority rested on specific geographical settings in which the events of the Dreaming were recalled. The spatial and temporal anchorage was conceptualized in terms of specific place names and of the actions of the originating ancestors.

Employment on pastoral properties did not, however, necessarily cause a weakening of the cultural traditions and increased mobility sometimes seems to have actually aided the spread of rituals and sacred objects. Travelling stockmen of the Central Australian Walbiri people, for example, have been used to transport ceremonial objects to distant or semi-distant groups of the same tribe.⁸ But increased mobility is a disruptive influence as well, a cause and an effect of processes involving alien contact, depopulation, detribalization, and the attraction of new, but alien, settlements.

The change from a nomadic to a sedentary way of life, and from the traditional diet to one based on rations of flour and tea created a variety of problems in the areas of health and hygiene. In some cases the change has not been complete, the rations being supplemented by hunting and gathering. The major problem was that what were perfectly acceptable hygiene practices in the bush became, in the new sedentary lifestyle, extremely unhealthy. The new diet, much poorer in protein content than the old, contributed to the prevalence of introduced diseases which was aided by low resistance and poor hygiene. Faced with the new foodstuffs, dental health, in particular, dramatically deteriorated. These facts were not, however, immediately obvious. All too often the rations supplied were seen as some form of banquet by both races, and it was concluded by apologists and supporters of the practice that "... whatever Europeans could supply in the way of foodstuffs, whatever its quantity or quality, it was vastly superior to, and a great improvement on, grubs."⁹ Such statements reflect ignorance of traditional Aboriginal life and an ethnocentric confidence in the superiority of all things European.

Another change was the survival of those who, in the traditional lifestyle, might not live through the harsh conditions of everyday life. This was the result of the arrival of European hospitals and the white man's medicine to treat what were often white man's diseases in the first place. The introduction of clothing, often in the form of articles discarded by settlers and missionaries, added to the decline of Aboriginal health, particularly aiding the spread of respiratory disease through the practice of constantly wearing such articles in all weather conditions. In some cases the wearing of clothes caused an apparent loss of skin pigments in the covered parts of the body, which, when exposed to the sun were now more likely to be sunburnt.¹⁰

Associated with the problem of the white man's food was that of the white man's drink, which presented itself wherever Aboriginals emerged from the bush. Alcohol, as Rowley points out is "... as much a symptom as a cause of the disintegration of Aboriginal society and Aboriginal health."¹¹

In most cases alcohol was not widely available until Aborigines actually moved into the areas of settlement. The presence of a drinking problem can thus be seen as indicative that some degree of acculturation has already begun to take place. It has been suggested that the Aboriginal drinking habits so many white Australians find abhorrent were based on the habits of the whites on the frontier, who would hardly have provided a good example.¹²

Alcohol helped lessen, temporarily, the loss of identity and non-acceptance in the new order of the European by providing a temporary escape from a seemingly pointless existence. It did not, however, drown the consequences of conquest. Detribalization brought psychiatric disorders through the loss of the old, personalized, face-to-face socio-economic organization. Though a minority of younger, progressive men, capable of leaving their less successful relatives behind seem to prefer the new life and fail to regret the passing of the old order, the lost and unoccupied appearance of so many natives of middle age, despite the efforts of missionaries and public servants to inculcate western habits, shows what can only be defined as personality disorder. Unhappily this lost generation has a formative influence on their children, who also tend to adopt these attitudes.¹³

The influence of the Christian missions, though, was perhaps the most obviously disturbing and disruptive of them all. Faced with a dramatically changing world, the Aborigines, for the first time found themselves confronted with the necessity of reflecting on the values of their own system of belief and philosophy of life. Whereas the stations tended, ironically, to slow down the action of acculturating forces and amounted to a conservative force supporting some aspects of traditional society,¹⁴ the missions, through their criticism of the old ways, aided a fast breakdown of traditional society. Assuming that the Aborigines were, indeed, a dying race, and that they had no culture worth saving—if, that is, they had any culture at all, the missionaries attempted to ensure that they at least died as Christians. Aboriginal culture hindered conversion. Therefore it had to go.

This cultural contempt and confident superiority on the part of the missionaries led to the sort of collapse of traditional authority Dick Roughsey refers to when he says that "today there is no discipline and our children run about and care for nothing; they are lazy and do not even know how to hunt properly."¹⁵ The decline of the old initiatory rites of passage, encouraged by the missionaries and aided by the desire of younger men to avoid the pain associated with initiation, has drastically cut the passing on of traditional knowledge, since few were now qualified to receive the wisdom of the Dreaming. Similarly, failure to carry out increase rituals believed to be responsible for ensuring adequate supplies of food and water has been seen as the cause of drought and famine in Central Australia, at least by those still sufficiently versed in the old ways to know the significance of the ceremonies.¹⁶

This process has led to the present situations where religious leadership in the fullest sense has been dramatically affected by culture contact and the imposition of outside controls. The traditional sanctions and threats that upheld the system have been withdrawn and the sphere of religious authority has shrunk to a narrow zone of ritual performance, mythological

interpretation and graphic art. A religious leader in this changed sense is little better than a master of ceremonies. Missionaries and other philanthropists have deprived those involved of their Aboriginal heritage, without providing them the means of participating in the alien cultural life of the white man.

Missionary pressure also caused changes in the old marriage customs and led to increases in the age of women at marriage and in 'wrong marriages' once traditional sanctions (except, perhaps, sorcery) were no longer available to those who had once been in authority. Some of the changes that occurred must have been particularly disconcerting for the Europeans involved in attempting to 'better' the condition of the Aborigines. For instance, one of the virtues of the system of child betrothal and adolescent marriage was that every girl was accounted for by the time she reached puberty and since they mostly married before the time they were biologically capable of childbearing, there could not be any illegitimate births. The removal of the old customs thus created a previously unknown social phenomenon.¹⁷

Some writers have seen a decline in the practice of polygamy as indicative of the extent of acculturation, but there are reasons to doubt the accuracy of such an assumption.¹⁸ In pre-contact times, polygamy was not practised uniformly over the entire continent and it seems that the areas where it has declined most markedly are the areas where it was less common to begin with. Others have linked the practice of polygamy to Marx's conception of the relations of production, as an expression of the sexual division of labour. Changes in the productive forces of the Aboriginal economy caused, in this view, a series of changes in marriage relationships. Since one of the purposes of plural marriage was to ensure an adequate supply of food, the situation obviously had to change when Europeans began to provide rations.¹⁹ As far as the morality of the matter is concerned, it is interesting to note that among the traditionally polygamous Tiwi of Bathurst and Melville Islands there has been a tendency for men to surround themselves with women in the traditional manner, but to only have one of them as a 'legitimate' wife. Here the big work force ideal prevailed even though the mission provided most of the food. Here a concealed form of unofficial polygamy continues in spite of an apparently high level of acculturation and Christianization.²⁰

Mission influence also reduced the practice of infanticide, the traditional method of population control. Though there is now little evidence of direct infanticide, the predominance of males at all ages in semi-traditional groups suggests a hidden, perhaps unconscious, form of infanticide formed on differential care on a sexual basis²¹.

The arrival of the white man led to a variety of attempts to place him and his religion within the framework of traditional cosmology, attempting to find some key to the European system of morality which could be reconciled with Aboriginal customs. Aborigines attempted to assimilate whites into their kinship system by giving them women with the expectation of both financial return and correct behaviour along traditional lines on the part of the white man. The whites, however, all too often committed what amounted to incest, taking women who in Aboriginal eyes were taboo to

them. Aborigines also tried the labour relationship which appeared to work in some ways, but in the long run fell short of their expectations.^{2 2}

Aborigines also attempted to fit whites into the traditional realm of ritual life, in some cases by a form of cosmological compromise where the European was placed in the 'peripheral' sphere of the cosmos, a realm of spiritual mythological phenomena and of the geographically unknown world. This amounted to a 'retrospective modification and reinterpretation of the traditional past' so that European cultural elements fitted into the timeless superstructure.^{2 3}

This does not imply a blind acceptance of Christianity and a complete decline of traditional practices. Although some rituals were rearranged to include elements of Western influence, the average Aboriginal, at least in the early stages of contact, accepted only as much of the Christian ethos as fitted his own thought patterns and the concepts of the Dreaming. On missions, while many go to church and appear to live as Christians, seemingly out of contact with the ancestral past, traditional rites are often still secretly practised and in the early stages of contact the elders seem to retain much of their authority.

In some areas, new religious practices have resulted from the syncretic modification of traditional practices to incorporate Christian elements such as the doctrine of the resurrection.^{2 4} Some of these new cults are utopian in nature and bear a more than passing resemblance to New Guinea 'cargo cults'. Some have social revolutionary aims, envisaging an egalitarian society patterned along Western lines.

Such cults are one facet of an overall cultural and religious revival. Today in areas long thought detribalized it is apparent that some Aborigines have managed to keep their ancient languages and ceremonies alive. Revivalist cults tend to place great emphasis on all forms of ritual activity and ceremonial life, and particularly on those practices considered essential for continuity of life from past to present and into the future. Even among the most acculturated groups it is not uncommon to find that for an Aboriginal to be considered a man, with the right to participate in communal decision-making, some degree of initiation in the traditional manner is required. Some Aborigines are now dissociating themselves from outside influences which tend to weaken tradition and as their cultural isolation increases, it is reasonable to expect that the traditional and neo-traditional practices will assume increased importance.

This cultural revivalism also involves the mixing of cultural traits which would otherwise either have failed to take place at all, or which would have required a much longer period of time. One example of the less desirable aspect of such change is the decline of traditional Aboriginal singing and dancing in Cape York Peninsula as young men sent away to work on stations and luggers return with a preference for the livelier, simpler, Torres Strait styles.^{2 5}

The overall result of the process of contact has been the creation of a gap between those Aborigines living in areas where whites have become firmly established and those still living in a basically traditional manner. The drive for socio-economic viability, educational opportunities and a place in

Australian society has resulted in a widening of this gap. The upsurge of emphasis on Aboriginality and the attempts of city-dwellers to link themselves to their country cousins have, if anything, further widened the gap and contributed to the breakdown of the traditional lifestyle. In any case, what we today call a traditional lifestyle has become increasingly distant in time and space and content from that of pre-contact times. This increasing distance between the past and two distinct presents has created problems of adjustment for the future.

But regardless of the extent of individual acculturation, the past and the old ways still exert, where they survive, a strong influence both as an idea and an historic remembrance. Kinship remains important and the traditional social categories are, in some cases, still basic to all interaction. There is still a strong concern with sacred ritual even though the events of the last 186 years have acted to reduce its importance on a continental basis. In the areas where tribal identity still has continuing meaning, ritual now relates to static groups around European settlements and depends on the extent to which the particular group has been able to remain intact and on the views of the local whites. In many cases, adaption to changed conditions has been superficial, while Aborigines continue to be emotionally confused. Men like W. E. H. Stanner's friend Durmugam can never be assimilated because the only attractions they see in Europeanism are material. On any level above the material they find the new ways unsatisfying. The problem is that though in some cases they could survive more or less in the traditional manner, they no longer see the situation in those terms. Their conception of the necessities of life has changed, and the process of change has been a cumulative one.²⁶

Australia has never been, is not, and will never be a racially homogeneous society. The history of frontier contact is perhaps the least favourable area of our history. In North Queensland, in what Rowley claims is still 'colonial' Australia, the actions and events of the past confront us every day of the year. We must constantly remember, in the moments of racial arrogance all whites have, that our society is the result of acts of cultural, if not physical, genocide. To paraphrase Randolph Stow's opening remark in *Tourmaline*—"We have a better heritage—but that is not to deny it."

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