

A Pygmalion Complex Among Missionaries

The Catholic Case in the Kimberley

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Missionaries have fallen from grace and they know it. They suspect anthropologists of badmouthing them. But it isn't the anthropologists who've brought them into disrepute. This was done by the tellers of story and makers of myth. The likes of Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham and Graham Greene have floated images of missionaries that ultimately have proven more catholic and durable than the sympathetic portrayals to be found, for instance, in T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* or Randolph Stow's *To The Islands*.¹ In the contemporary mind the missionary is bumptious, prudish and something of a cultural vandal.

Anthropologists may have something to do with this but, in my experience, indirectly. The missionaries who have engaged my interest — the Roman Catholics who have sought to convert the Aboriginal people of the Kimberley of Western Australia — have suffered little scrutiny by anthropologists. This may be because, as I found to my own cost, missionaries are easily stung by criticism and outspoken anthropological researchers can find all access to the people they wish to study closed off. The missionaries have the power. I would concede, however, that the work of anthropologists has made Australians more conscious of the value of Aboriginal culture and thus indirectly undermined the status of those who tried to interfere with, if not destroy, that culture.

Conscious of their diminished stature, missionaries and their supporters have mounted defences. In publication, their apologia deploys two strategies. The first entails propounding a paradox which states that though missionaries sought to modify Aboriginal culture, because they isolated and protected Aboriginal communities, those communities were enabled to preserve that culture better than they otherwise would. The second strategy involves advertising the exceptional missionaries, the few who did show interest in the culture. The published accounts of the Catholics in the Kimberley particularly promote the distinguished anthropological priest, Ernest Worms.

The paradox, found in the general observations of Strehlow (Durack 1969:285) and Burridge (1973:20), was applied specifically to the Catholics in the Kimberley by Mary Durack in her semi-official history, *The Rock and The Sand*:

It seems clear to me that the work of the missionaries, sometimes inspired, sometimes blind, was the only evidence the Aborigines had of anything in the nature of consistent altruism within an otherwise ruthless and self-seeking economy...It was for many the only means of survival and their sole reason for regeneration. (p. xv)

It was expressed yet more overtly in a thesis of Fr. Deakin. After a careful and insightful analysis of the more dubious policies of the Benedictine missionaries in the northern Kimberley he concluded:

The paradox of their work was that they ended by giving the Aborigines the opportunity to resist the conforming ways and revitalise their old customs. (Deakin 1978:258)

The emphasis on the exceptional missionaries — Ernest Worms and an earlier missionary, Fr. Emo — is understandable but misleading. First, it ignores the fact that these missionaries often saw their knowledge of Aboriginal culture as a lever to help effect conversion. Second, it fails to acknowledge that these men's reverence for Aboriginal culture was not shared by the vast majority of Catholic missionaries who often regarded their confrère's interest as eccentric or even perverse. Consider Fr. Emo. After his death at Lombardina Mission in 1915 he was 'at his own request buried in the sandhills without a coffin...According to the custom of the blacks...'. His fellow missionaries could not allow this and we are told, 'When the Pallottines came the body was exhumed and re-interred at Lombardina with a monument'. (Reported in *Centenary of the Catholic Church in Western Australia, 1846-1946*). The exceptional missionaries may have tested the rule that missionaries were hostile to Aboriginal culture, but they did not prove it in the colloquial sense of that phrase.

And the use of the paradox to defend missionary endeavour is simply too clever. When missionary activity was specifically aimed at the eradication of Aboriginal culture it is a bit much to claim credit for having failed. Furthermore, there underlies this paradox an assumption that Aboriginality is essentially genetic. We see this hinted in Strehlow's judgement that but for the missionaries, '...there would probably be no full-blooded Aborigines at all left in the majority of these Australian areas where they are still surviving' (Durack 1969:285). The epithet 'full-blooded' is revealing. Missionaries certainly aimed at preserving the integrity of Aboriginal genes. They pressured black to marry black and protected and even reared the offspring. But their motive was to obtain the children before enculturation could take place and use them as the raw material for the new race of black Christians they hoped to create. Aboriginal genes might be preserved, but sanitised of the corruption of Aboriginal culture if the missionaries had their way. I will detail the mechanics of the process later.

In this article I aim to expose these two defences as inadequate, to define what were the attitudes and approaches the Catholics made to Aboriginal culture in the Kimberley and finally to outline something of the aftermath of mission activity.

The Approach

In Ovid's version of *Pygmalion* the protagonist rejects women on account of their wickedness. A celibate, he carves his own perfect image of a woman in ivory and falls in love with it. Venus gives the statue life and presents Pygmalion with a real woman to love. Now, did Venus, that contrary goddess, reward or punish him? Ovid does not comment but it is hard to believe that a man who can only love an idealised woman would find much joy in a real one.

The Catholic missionaries — Trappists, Pallottines, Lay Missionaries and St. John of God Nuns — who evangelised the Kimberley rejected the materialistic values of their own culture. Celibate, poor and obedient they thought they saw in Aborigines muddled reflections of themselves. So they went in pursuit of an 'uncontaminated savage' in whom they saw the potential civilised and Christianised ideal. Their aim was to remove the dross of savagery and they would then fashion the raw material into clear and shining reflections of themselves — civilised Catholics, but black. The result would be a creation surpassing not only Aboriginal society but corrupt white society as well. In pursuit of this vision Abbot Torres was driven in 1908 to the remote Kalumburu Mission (then Drysdale River) in search of a people, '... in their purely virgin state, free from all the vices of the whites...' ('An Irish Secular Priest', 1908:297).

But the real people the Benedictines encountered in the north (and even had to shoot in order to convert) were mere human beings whom a later abbot would dismiss as 'degraded savages' (Catalan 1935:15). Later, the disappointed missionaries would try to account for the disillusionment by blaming themselves or other whites. Fr. Sanz, long time administrator of Kalumburu, complained that the Aborigines had imitated the 'bad white example' (*Newcastle Morning Herald*, 18/5/1968). This became a perennial complaint of the missionaries. As one lay missionary put it to me, Aborigines are themselves 'beautiful and lovely people' but they have picked up bad 'white values'. Earlier missionaries who had come to found the first coastal missions in the Kimberley at the beginning of this century were similarly disappointed. But the sobering effects of reality did not disillusion them. They began to yearn for yet other Aborigines who could fulfil their dream. It had eluded them before, but no matter, they searched on for their 'true Aborigines'.² By the 1960s the rueful missionaries of Beagle Bay were thus looking to the remote desert area of Balgo as 'the most uncontaminated in the Kimberley'. And the nun who wrote this added, 'adequate and lasting results are expected in the near future' (Mechtilde, undated manuscript). Durack reported similarly that Bishop Raible was now looking to the 'simple desert nomads as his most promising material' (Durack 1969:272).

But to go back to the initial encounter. The missionaries, having found their raw material had to detach their future converts from their culture. For face to face with what they had regarded from afar as noble, they were almost always disgusted by Aboriginal lifestyle and morality. It had to go. A few wanted to preserve elements of it but the majority thought otherwise. Catholic missionaries were similar in attitude to those Tonkinson described (Tonkinson 1974). Bishop Gibney complained Aborigines were a 'savage and degraded race' (Reilly 1903:438). Fr. McGuire, superintendent of Balgo Mission in the 50s deemed the Aborigines to be 'people ignorant of their human dignity' and reflected that the missionaries were 'saddened to see a man living like the kangaroos' (*The Record*, Perth, 31/12/59). The Benedictines

in their official history of Kalumburu seem to question the basic humanity of Aborigines:

It would be naive and over-optimistic to expect the Aborigines to reach within one or two generations the level of civilisation which has taken *thinking* man centuries to achieve. (Emphasis mine. Perez 1977:149)

That the majority thought this way is, I think, not in dispute. What is controversial is the stance of the enlightened missionaries — Emo and Worms in the past, McKelson today. Worms is particularly venerated and much is made of the title 'Tbala' given to him by Kimberley Aborigines. Durack made him the hero of her history and enthused that 'he was accepted as a greater authority on the law than the elders themselves' (Durack 1969:240). Edmund Campion's recent *Australian Catholics* devoted its single page on the Kimberley missions entirely to Worms who, Campion says, 'felt no urge to devalue or destroy Aboriginal law' (Campion 1987:103). Learned Worms may have been but Campion misrepresents him. He had no time for the suggestion that Aborigines should be left with their beliefs. The 'eye of the missionary', he tells us, 'detects in the soul of the primitive much dissatisfaction and uncertainty'. He details a few Aboriginal concepts and then comments:

The spiritual attitude behind these conceptions is reflected in the chaotic mysteries and myths, and in the explosive savagery of the men, the slight build of the women, and the apathetic facial expression of the race. (Worms 1955:147)

And Worms acted on these convictions. He worked to help found Balgo Mission in the early 1950s in order to abort revivals of Aboriginal culture that originated in the Western Desert. Writing in 1955 he said:

Even today new secret cults are brought from the interior more than 1000 miles away from our Kimberley country. The missionaries have not yet reached the country where these cults originate, but a few years ago they established an advance station, a desert mission... to counter this wave of heathenism. (*loc. cit.*)

Today the exceptional missionary is exemplified by Fr. McKelson of La Grange Mission, a man learned in Aboriginal culture. I must admit that in his case I find objectivity something of a problem for I have considerable respect for McKelson and admire him for his opposition that prevented an attempt by the Catholic hierarchy to sell off the cattle station at La Grange, a station the Church had long promised would eventually be given to the Aboriginal community of the mission. McKelson does take a far more liberal stand on culture than did Worms. Yet he still regards it as the prerogative of the missionaries to arbitrate over what Aborigines should be allowed to preserve of their culture. He is reported in the *West Australian Catholic Weekly* (*The Record*, Perth, 5/12/63) as saying:

The old people are completely steeped in their law and tribal tradition, many of which are good but many of which are not... child marriage, polygamy.

He had subsequently enlarged on this theme in letters to the papers. Justifying mission intervention in Aboriginal marriage customs he wrote in 1969:

Indeed true to their mission of telling the people about God the heavenly father and His will 'nalu' they have told the people that there are certain things they will have to put on one side if they wish to become Christians. (McKelson 1969:5)

And in dispute with R. M. Berndt in 1971 he again justified the mission intervention, concluding with the statement: 'If our ancestors had not gone through this process, we should not be civilised today.' (*The West Australian*, Perth, 22/2/71).

I do not wish to labour the point. It is clear that the missionary attitude in approaching Aboriginal culture in the Kimberley has been hostile. Furthermore, much too much has been made of the anthropological priests as exceptions. What was regarded by the missionaries as harmless could be preserved. The rest would be expurgated in the process of moulding civilised Christians. I want now to detail the method the missionaries applied to this process.

The Method

When Catholics opened their missions in the Kimberley they took for their model of operation the Spanish Benedictine mission of New Norcia. It was regarded in the nineteenth century as the most successful in West Australia. It had been founded in the 1840s by Dom Salvado some 80 miles north of Perth. Salvado had first attempted to 'follow the natives in their nomadic life' in order to preach to them but soon concluded that to succeed 'one must teach these work-shy nomads to settle down to community life in one spot' (Salvado 1977:31). Once he had managed this, Salvado directed his efforts to the children — conversion of the adults was despaired of. So parents were induced, often despite their great reluctance, to give up their children to the mission (McMahon 1943:62). They signed a form giving up all 'rights, claim and authority' over their child to 'his lordship as manager of the New Norcia Institution' (Roth 1905, Q. 2057). Boys and girls were placed in separate dormitories and taught skills appropriate to farmers and housewives. The monks intended the black Christians so reared would marry each other and settle on a plot of land provided by the mission. Gradually a new generation — 'civilised' and 'Christianised' — would be formed by the missionaries into a 'village of native proprietors who would be farmers and skilled workmen no less than true Christians' (Salvado 1977:86).

The key to the system was control of the children. The role of the adults was to provide the monks with the raw material they could sculpt into the ideal black Christians. And the New Norcia system did indeed detach the children from their parents' culture — but it did not generate the settled rustic community the monks dreamed of fathering. New Norcia, having reached its peak in the 1860s spun into decline by the end of the century. The older Aborigines died or left and the young

graduates of the dormitory system moved on. New Norcia stands today like a collection of large derelict post offices occupied by a community of Benedictines who own a large tract of land. The tribes who once occupied it have long gone.

But back when Fr. Gibney initiated the missions to the Kimberley in the 1880s New Norcia was still in its glory. Moved by his witnessing of the exploitation of the Aborigines by white settlers, he decided the church should intervene. Though New Norcia with its large community of monks was his model he was at first only able to persuade one missionary, a Fr. McNab, to work in the Derby area (Durack 1969:17). McNab went looking for that missionary mirage 'a people untouched by the corrupting hand of civilisation through whom the Christian message might be revived in all its original dynamism' (Durack 1969:24). He wandered alone and unarmed trying to contact the Nyul Nyul near Broome but did not establish any hold over them. They probably regarded him with tolerance and pity for they later referred to him as 'poor old Fr. Mac-a-nab' and while they stole from his stores left him with sufficient to survive. He gave it up in 1887. He had established the fact that such a mission would not succeed unless the missionary had the power to co-erce or materially reward his converts. As he wrote himself, '...a savage will only listen to a missionary as he would to a musician unless he can confer on him some tangible benefit...' (Durack 1969:28).

Some three years later Gibney, now a bishop, had sufficient sway to found his classical mission at Beagle Bay first with Trappist, later Pallottine priests. Now Salvado's New Norcia policy could properly be implemented and his first step, getting the Aborigines to settle, became, and remained, the basic first principle of Kimberley missionaries. In the words of Ernest Worms: 'The natives have to be settled before they can be converted' (Worms 1938:62). Raible, second bishop of the Kimberley reiterated the principle adding: 'This was the method followed by the missionaries of Beagle Bay for the last 50 years' (Raible 1938:274).

At Beagle Bay and the other missions founded after it, the missionaries induced the Aborigines to abandon nomadic customs by the offer of food and tobacco. The effects of white settlement forced the Aborigines to resign themselves to dependency. It was otherwise in the more remote area of Kalumburu where Aborigines were able to spurn mission proffering for almost twenty years. But in the Broome-Derby area depleted supplies of traditional food quickly forced Aborigines to succumb. A pamphlet on Beagle Bay Mission noted in 1929:

When rations run short, the old natives are sent to the bush to find food. This is practically starvation as the kangaroos are dying out, and the natives are forbidden to fish in the creeks. (W.E.A. 1929:15)

The missionaries gradually came to recognise this indirect assistance white settlement gave them and though in other contexts they might deplore its effect on Aboriginal morality, they welcomed its destructive effect upon the traditional social system. In the desert area, for example, Worms looked forward to its disruptive effect on tribal boundaries:

I think that this difficulty will be more easily overcome where the growth of sheep and cattle stations and the extension of modern

means of travel have prepared the way for the abolition of this great missionary hindrance. (Worms 1938:62)

Food was one inducement to get Aborigines to settle at Beagle Bay and later missions, but tobacco was another very effective bait. Once addicted to the tobacco the whites gave them, the Aborigines became dependent on the missionaries as suppliers. Durack reports that 'no more tobacco no more Alleluia' became proverbial at Beagle Bay (Durack 1969:52). And it is evident in Perez's history of Kalumburu that chewing-tobacco to which the Aborigines were reported as 'becoming addicted' in 1929 was crucial in getting those people to accept the mission regime (Crawford 1978:44).

Once settled, the Aborigines were required to give their children to the missionaries. Disappointingly for the Beagle Bay missionaries, the birthrate of the Nyul Nyul was low so they were forced to range far and wide to fill their dormitories. Mission superintendent Fr. Walter recommended to the Roth Commission in 1904 that 'children, both half-caste and black should be removed from the centres of vice, such as Broome and other places and brought to this or any other institution which is working in the interests of blacks...' (Roth 1904, Q. 601). It was a recommendation that Chief Protector Gale was prepared to follow ruthlessly, especially in the cases of children of black mothers and white fathers. Justifying himself in a 1909 report he said:

I would not hesitate for one moment to separate any half-caste from its Aboriginal mother, no matter how frantic her momentary grief might be at the time. They soon forget their offspring. (Gale 1909:9)

For the first quarter of the century children from all over the Kimberley were sent to Beagle Bay, many never to see parents again.

For a time the Beagle Bay Aborigines were able to maintain their traditional rituals secretly. Their children would attend catechism and the adults would be present at the Catholic liturgy, but the old life went on in the bush. In 1892 Trappist Fr. Jean Marie stumbled accidentally upon a man-making ceremony in the bush and was astonished to find his erstwhile altar-boys drinking from the pierced arm veins of the elders (Durack 1969:53). Almost thirty years later when Porteus visited Beagle Bay Mission he found the old men still secretly maintaining their rituals and hiding their sacred objects from the missionaries. He reported the efforts of an inquisitorial Br. Stephen who attempted to catch the men at their sacred doings (Porteus 1929:32). Porteus believed the Christian faith was only skin deep and he seemed to be optimistic about the Aborigines maintaining their traditions. But the missionaries could wait and time was on their side. As Fr. McGuire said of Balgo, the missionaries could wait three generations to attain their goals (*The Record*, Perth, 5/11/1959). And at Beagle Bay the mission control of the children and doubtless the disruptive effect of non-Nyul Nyul people being brought into the area meant the gradual but sure erosion of tradition. After another thirty years Hiatt visited Beagle Bay in 1963 and found a dozen aged pensioners who faced 'death in the bitter realisation that the old ways were gone for ever' (Hiatt 1963:2). Now almost another thirty years have passed, and in 1987 Fr. Huegel reports from Beagle Bay that 'the old, tribal system no longer exists at Beagle Bay' (Huegel 1987:15).

Beagle Bay Mission, the eldest of the Catholic missions in the area seems to have almost completed the same cycle that could be discerned in New Norcia's history. At more recently founded missions — Kalumburu (1908), Lombardina (1910), Balgo (1937) and La Grange (1955) — language and ritual are still fairly strong. These missions all employed the fundamentals of the method I have described: establishment of control through dependency, intervention in transmission of culture from parents to children, church monopoly of education. But special factors have inhibited the rapid repetition of the cycle in these missions. At Kalumburu for example, the intransigence of the Aborigines meant that it took nineteen years before the missionaries were able to get possession of their first child (Drysdale River Mission Photo Album, Caption to Photo 370). Still in 1944 the monk diarist lamented that they had obtained the confidence of only two Aborigines and this despite forty years of operation (Perez 1977:111). Balgo is a very young mission — the Gogoda and Walmadjeri who walked in to settle have done so only since 1948. The situation is further complicated by the fact that by the 1980s government policy had changed and mission dormitories were closed. Catholic thinking has also changed since the Second Vatican Council. A new concept of mission has been developed, one that gives greater recognition to the integrity of the people the Church seeks to missionise. One Catholic writer imbued with this thought expresses the new ideal this way:

In mission, the Christians of one culture are offering a culture-free Gospel to the people of another culture, so that they might reincarnate it in their own culture. (Stockton 1986:25)

All this might lead one to think that the New Norcia method is a thing of the past and the cycle that extinguished traditional culture in New Norcia and then Beagle Bay may have been arrested.

Has the New Norcia method then been abandoned? No. It has only changed form. The Kimberley Church hierarchy remains steeped in the mentality that formulated the method. Long after the new philosophy of mission had become vogue, the present bishop of the Kimberley, John Jobst was endorsing the methods used at Beagle Bay:

If I had the time I would prove statistically that the Church's efforts with Aborigines are successful, particularly at Beagle Bay which is unparalleled in the whole of Australia for the success of its work. Sometime soon, Beagle Bay will be an example of how to treat the Aborigines. (*The Advocate*, Melbourne, 13/1/1977)

More importantly the Church with its hostels and boarding schools remains very much in control of Aboriginal education. As it realised the days of the traditional mission were passing the Church switched its investment to schools, in particular Nulungu College in Broome, the biggest school in the Kimberley, where Aboriginal children board away from their parents to receive an education given by the Christian Brothers. When an Aboriginal community at Turkey Creek considered establishing its own community school the Church moved quickly to persuade the people to accept instead a school staffed by nuns. Having persuaded the community to accept nuns as 'the best teachers' the parish priest Fr. Kriener warned against the

establishment of a 'community school' (where the church would have less control) and persuaded them to vote for a Catholic school because, he warned them, the bishop 'does not give sisters to a community school' (Kriener 1978). The church is adapting so as to maintain its influence in an era where Aboriginal self-determination is the accepted wisdom. It has scrapped the more obnoxious features of the old system and quietly reorganised so it still keeps control of the formal transmission of culture to Aboriginal children — the essence of the New Norcia system.

Success

I have considered the conceptions with which missionaries approached Aborigines and the methods they used. I want now to consider what the missionaries thought about what they had done. And here we do find a genuine paradox. For missionaries seem to measure their success not by the conversions they have wrought, but by the acceptance extended to them by Aborigines. Interviewing lay missionaries I was struck by the number of times I was told of some action by Aborigines that demonstrated their acceptance of the missionary. The missionaries would instance secret corroborees they had been invited to attend or mention they had been given a skin grouping or even an Aboriginal name. (One notices in missionary literature the store set by Aboriginal names given to Daisy Bates — who helped Bishop Gibney found Beagle Bay Mission — and to Ernest Worms). This indeed is a paradox — that missionaries measure their success not by the Aborigines they have converted but almost by how much Aborigines have converted them.

What are we to make of it? Part of the explanation is that for contemporary missionaries it is a defence against the charge that missionaries are hostile to Aboriginal culture. Such signs of affection prove to white society that missionaries do not force themselves on Aborigines. No — Aborigines make unambiguous signals that they want and value their missionaries. In earlier times when Aboriginal culture had little worth in the eyes of the whites such defence was unnecessary. Today it disarms criticism.

The use of such strategy is illustrated in a recent debate between Eugene Stockton and a mission nun who works in the Kimberley. Stockton published a fairly gentle critique of the style of Catholic mission activity in the Kimberley. Published in a missionary journal, *Nelen Yubu*, it was gentle in that it did not question the basic assumption of the need for missionaries. A reply from Sister Clare Ahern rebutted the Stockton article. What interests me here is not the substance of her article but the setting in which she placed herself as she spoke in her response. She wrote, she said, 'en route to the Aboriginal Woman's Culture and Law Meeting'. Occasionally she reminded readers of how she 'sat there with the Aboriginal women' and left one to surmise that her position was somehow endorsed by her presence at that conference. What could be more disarming to a 1980s liberal critic than a nun who spoke in solidarity with both women and traditional Aborigines?³

Nevertheless, while part of the explanation of missionaries' need for Aboriginal acceptance is their need to justify themselves to contemporary society, I contend that the paradox has deeper roots. For through the history of the Kimberley missions we find repeated signs of missionaries' need for Aboriginal acceptance — made even by missionaries who have repeatedly disparaged Aborigines. In early mission history I find these signs in the tradition of stories about Aboriginal 'boys' saving white

priests from some predicament. The first such story concerns Salvado, founder of New Norcia. This story begins with the monk hopelessly lost in the bush and dying of thirst. It continues:

He did then as he was to do on many another occasion; he chanted the 'Salve Regina'. His voice attracted a young native boy who was roaming carelessly over his native hills. The bearded white man and his strange clothes captured the boy's fancy. The boy gazed in wonder, but Dom Salvado's smiling face held him, and reassured him that he was looking upon a new friend. With signs the missionary made known his desperate need of water. The boy beckoned him to follow and within a short time led him to a splendid pool of clear water. (McMahon 1943:10)

Part of the interest of this story is in the way it is told so that the credit for rescue rebounds to the victim. Nevertheless, part of the story's burden is to show the Aborigine's response to and acceptance of the missionary.

The Salvado story is echoed in Durack's account of Fr. McNab who preached alone to the Nyul Nyul. 'Like an answer to a prayer' came an Aboriginal 'boy' called Knife who assisted the priest in the wilderness, cared for him and helped explain his message. Kalumburu missionaries recount two incidents of Aborigines saving priests from drowning. The most detailed is a long account by Fr. Droeste of Beagle Bay of his being saved from drowning, first at sea and then in a swollen creek by his Aboriginal assistant, Peter (Needham 1935:140).

It is in such accounts that the missionaries see the Aborigines at their most noble. Deferential, self-effacing, Aborigines are seen to rise above themselves when they risk their lives in protecting their missionaries. Pygmalion's statue responds to its creator.

In more recent times such accounts are not common but missionaries have other ways of demonstrating Aboriginal affection for them. When Bishop Jobst was in Rome in 1964 for the Second Vatican Council he was interviewed by Desmond O'Grady (*The Record*, Perth, 12/11/64). During the interview the bishop displayed to the journalist two 'tharunka boards'. The boards, he said, were presents to him from Aborigines and a sign that he was 'one of the mob'. He went on to disparage the gift pointing to the 'simple marking as evidence of the rudimentary stage of the people with whom he must communicate'. The disparagement is unsurprising. What I find interesting is that the bishop had taken the trouble to take these boards all the way to Rome to prove he was 'one of the mob'.

The incident is not unique. Fr. McGuire of Balgo was interviewed by the *West Australian* (14/1/63). Like his bishop the priest denigrated the Aborigines as 'primitive' but the report ended with the statement: 'Fr. McGuire has been accepted by the tribe'. As I mentioned above, such claims were commonly made by lay missionaries in interview.

Missionaries cling to these incidents and signs of Aboriginal affection because they mask the reality of how missionaries gain access to and power over Aboriginal society. In their mythology the missionaries imagine themselves rejecting the materialism and corruption of white society in order to serve the needs of Aborigines who welcome them and reverence them because they recognise their altruism and

self-sacrifice. This is delusion. The missionary short-circuits the cultural process that gives an Aborigine status and power in traditional society. The reality of the missionaries' status and power is their control over the economic goods Aborigines need (food, tobacco, alcohol, access to social security benefits), their ownership of land (chiefly in the form of government grants) and their ability to call on police support. The missionaries got this power because the institution to which they belonged, the Catholic Church, is a materially powerful one in white society. The missionaries were permitted to exercise power over Aborigines because they served, and still do, the interests of white society — dampening black resistance, saving government money, training black labour, aiding the entry of mining companies.⁴ The system they operated to achieve these ends — the New Norcia system — I have already described.

Missionaries also concentrate their gaze on Aboriginal acceptance of them because they do not want to focus on what are the consequences of mission endeavour. The missionary is a parasite that destroys its own host. If the missionary process is allowed to proceed to its logical conclusion (as it did at New Norcia and almost has at Beagle Bay) it virtually eliminates the traditional society and assimilates Aborigines into white society. The missionary, like the monks of New Norcia today, is left without a role. Now missionaries in the Kimberley lament the loss of the power of the old Aborigines to control their young and to pass on the culture. Yet it was the missionaries themselves who systematically broke the power of the old men. Ironically, while the first missionaries deplored the 'barbarism' of Aboriginal culture, missionaries today decry its passing because its passing sounds their death knell too.

But what if the missionary process is inhibited and a cultural revival is effected as it has been in areas in the Kimberley in recent years? Ceremonies have been restored, Aborigines have confronted a multinational mining company at Noonkanbah and demands for land rights have increased. Alas, the missionaries are even more outraged. These Pygmalions may mourn the passing of traditional Aborigines but they are completely nonplused if their statue comes to life and demands its independence. The 1980 Noonkanbah confrontation between traditional Aborigines and the drilling company AMAX illustrates the point. Catholic leaders throughout the Kimberley did their best to support the Court Government in crushing Aboriginal resistance. From La Grange Mission Fr. McKelson wrote to the papers supporting 'Sir Charles Court's attitude on this subject as being basically sympathetic, common sense and in the long run the more effective' (*West Australian*, 27/3/1980). Bishop Jobst went on television alleging the Aborigines at Noonkanbah were the dupes of white advisers and stated that the Aborigines were 'quite happy to share everything they have with the white man' (Channel 9, Perth, 16/8/1980). Fr. Sanz of Kalumburu telegraphed the Kimberley Land Council chairman telling him to forget the 'revived or supposed' sacred sites and to co-operate with 'constituted authority'. He signed himself the 'true friend of true Aborigines' (see n. 2). Clearly Jobst and Sanz wanted the Aborigines to go back to being what the missionaries had once imagined them to be. Pygmalion wanted this statue to lie back down.

Conclusion

I want to return to Strelhow's paradox in concluding this article. Strelhow suggested that traditional Aboriginal communities survived because of the missionaries. I think his paradox may need reversing. The Kimberley missionaries were, and are, very adaptable parasites that depended on the survival of their host for their continued existence. And ultimately, unless their control was broken, they would surely destroy the social system they attached themselves to and in the process eliminate their own roles as well.

There is something perverse in the role they have taken up. Pygmalion may have thought he loved his bride but the substance of his dream was domination. The missionaries saw Aborigines as their ivory. But, dissatisfied with Aborigines as they found them, they were just as dissatisfied at the end of the process when Aborigines were assimilated into white society. And if the Aborigines resisted (and the Noonkanbah resistance is symptomatic of a process affecting Aborigines living on missions as well) the missionaries were more distressed. Pygmalion's dilemma is finally insoluble. Once the statue comes to life he loses his total domination and his dream dissolves. Whatever the outcome — whether the Aborigines were assimilated by the system into white society or whether they insisted on self-management in a more traditional social system — the missionaries lose control. What the missionaries strove to create, those ideal communities of docile black Catholics presided over by loving white fathers and nuns, never materialised. Except perhaps in the cemeteries. They are the only places where the missionaries' fantasies can be seen fixed in stone. They are the museums of the missionaries' dreams.

In the New Norcia church behind the altar and flanked by the choir stalls Bishop Salvado reclines, entombed in marble. His sculptured head rises in relief from the monument on which are inscribed his labours for God and Aborigines. Outside the church the graveyard is dominated by the tomb of Lord Abbot Torres, founder of Kalumburu. Lord Abbot Catalan, the third abbot, rests behind in a third less elaborate tomb. Stretching left and right of these princes of the church are lines of stately white headstones that deck the graves of the Benedictines who, like their founder, spent their lives in praise of God and service to Aborigines at New Norcia and Kalumburu. In front of the men of God are another set of graves — unmarked or indicated only by a plain wooden cross. These are the Aboriginal graves.

Notes

- 1 I am thinking here of Coward's song 'Uncle Harry', Somerset Maugham's "Rain" and the missionaries in Greene's *A Burnt Out Case*.
- 2 The phrase 'true Aborigines' comes from a telegram discussed elsewhere in this paper in which Fr. Sanz of Kalumburu signs himself as the 'true friend of true Aborigines'. It is interesting that Strelhow's widow, Kathy, claims to be able to count on the support of 'real Aborigines' for her actions, including assisting mining companies to counter Aboriginal land claims (*Good Weekend*, Sydney Morning Herald Magazine, 29/8/87, p. 34).



Beagle Bay Mission Cemetery reproduces the New Norcia Hierarchy

- 3 One should note that such a strategy was not employed by those who she said 'paved the way' for her. Those earlier missionaries justified themselves to white society with arguments relevant to their time. They spoke of paving the way for white settlement of the north. Twelve months after he had established Kalumburu Mission, Abbot Torres was beckoning to white settlers with the news that:

The climate is good and healthy for European settlement. This may be interesting to persons anxious to make a home in the new country, but warned off by the climatic scare. (Torres 1909)

His successor, Abbot Catalan, speaking twenty-five years later boasted how missionaries had tamed the former 'cannibals':

If you seek for savages now up there, you will not find them but instead you will find Christians and people preparing to embrace Christianity and with it civilisation. (Catalan 1935)

Bishop Gibney justified missionaries to whites by arguing that missionaries would ensure the 'natives' would give 'no trouble' (Reilly 1903:498). And when Bishop O'Donnell visited the Beagle Bay Mission Gibney had set up, he wrote a pamphlet suggesting that missions like that would help save the 'White Australia Policy':

Perhaps with proper instruction and medical treatment the blacks might help solve the difficult problem before us at present — of adhering to our 'white Australia' policy in the Tropical North. (O'Donnell 1920:26)

Missionaries justify their role to white society by whatever reasoning is acceptable at the time. Early missionaries justified their role by proving they were destroying Aboriginal society — today's missionaries — the reverse.

- 4 I have discussed the assistance given by Catholic missionaries to white economic interests at some length in (Alroe 1981:Chapters 2f.).

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