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The Missionary Factor in Adnyamathanha History

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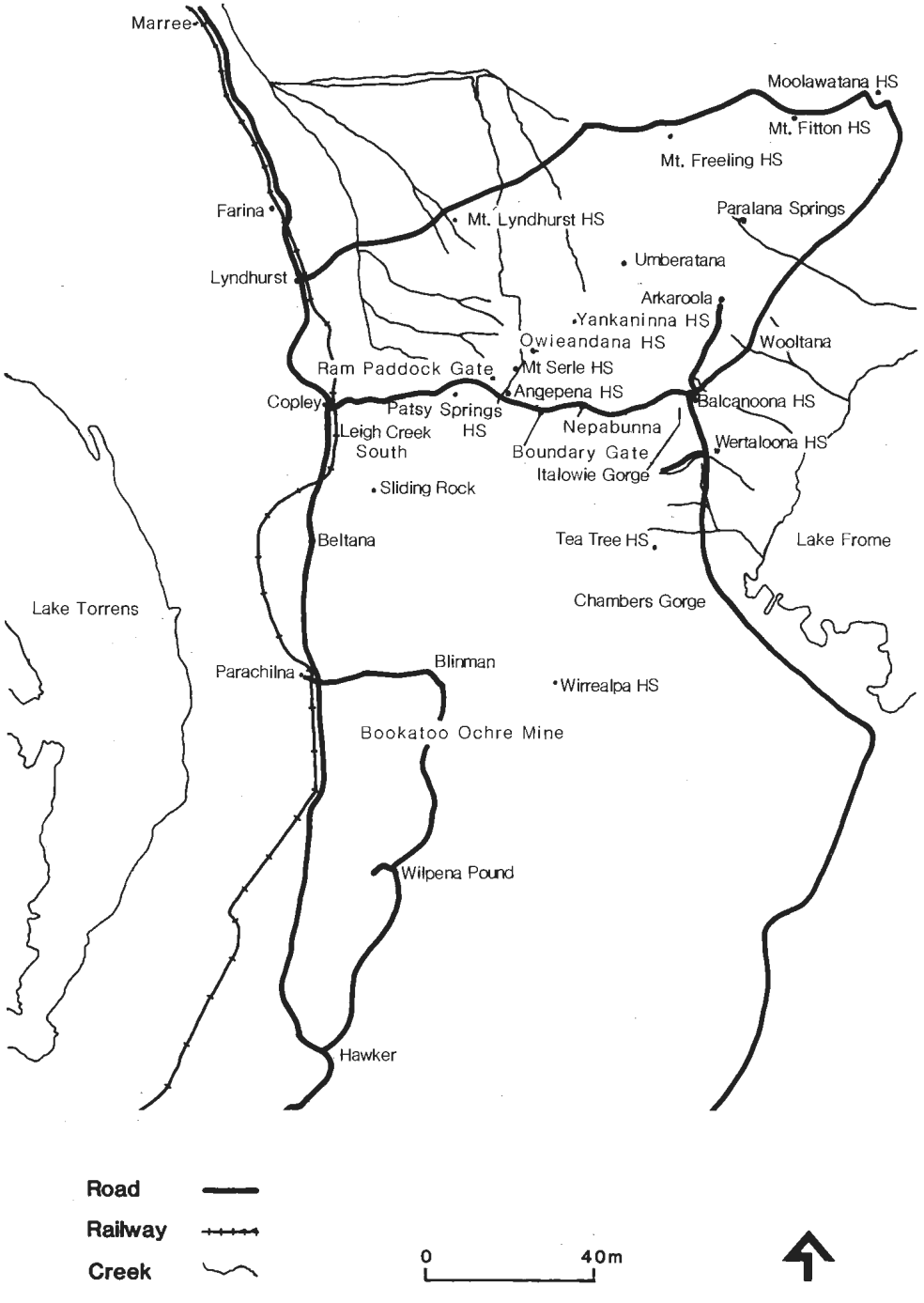
Many of the Aboriginal people in South Australia, who still have an identity associated with a particular region and a group of people with whom they have kin and cultural links going back over generations, owe this continuing identity to missionary intervention some time in their past. In most cases the missionaries were not the Aborigines' first contact with Europeans, but they were among the earliest Europeans with whom they had sustained contact. There are, of course, exceptions to these generalisations. The Adnyamathanha of the northern Flinders Ranges (see map on page 278) are one of these exceptions. They were in continual contact with Europeans for about eighty years before missionaries from the United Aborigines Mission joined the community in 1929.

The mission had a dramatic influence on the Adnyamathanha, but before considering its impact it is necessary to understand how the Adnyamathanha had survived nearly a century of European contact with their community intact and with no authoritarian or paternalistic intervention. In most of the settled areas of South Australia where there was no intervention people were dispersed, if they had not already been decimated through lack of food and water, violent contact with Europeans or disease. There are a number of factors which explain how the Adnyamathanha continued their religious and cultural life into the mid-twentieth century where others, in not dissimilar circumstances, did not, but it is difficult to come to firm conclusions.

A partial explanation is that in the early days of violent contact between Aborigines and Europeans, the Aborigines could protect themselves against the excesses of European violence by retreating to inaccessible mountains and gorges in the Ranges where it was impossible for horsemen to follow them. Aborigines who lived on the plains did not have this line of retreat. There is documentary evidence that the terrain did help the Aborigines — accounts of how they escaped capture by climbing up ravines and throwing stones down on their slow and clumsy pursuers (GRG 52 | 1 | 776 | 1857). But no one in Southern Australia can survive without access to permanent water, so these strategies would have protected them only over the



1. The northern Flinders Ranges, South Australia

short term. There is also evidence that early pastoralists kept Aborigines away from springs so they did not spoil the water for the stock.

Another explanation for their survival is that the Adnyamathanha of today are an amalgam of a number of separate but related cultural groups who lived in the north Flinders Ranges and on the plains to the east, north and west. These people included the Wailpi, Kuyani, Jadliaura, Piladapa and Adnyamathanha (although there is some dispute as to whether the Adnyamathanha, 'hills people', were a separate cultural group) (Tindale 1974). As their numbers became depleted, they increasingly shared cultural interchanges and intermarried.[1] This again is only a partial explanation — why did they stay in the hills rather than the surrounding plains? It may have been that the people in the Flinders Ranges missed some of the worst epidemics which killed so many Aborigines to the north-east of them. If there were any epidemics in the mid nineteenth century they have not been documented. There were measles and whooping cough epidemics from the 1890s on. Although these were devastating, they did not undermine the viability of the community, perhaps because by then there was some immunity to European-introduced diseases. Syphilis was evident among the people, but never reached the destructive proportions it did among some other communities.

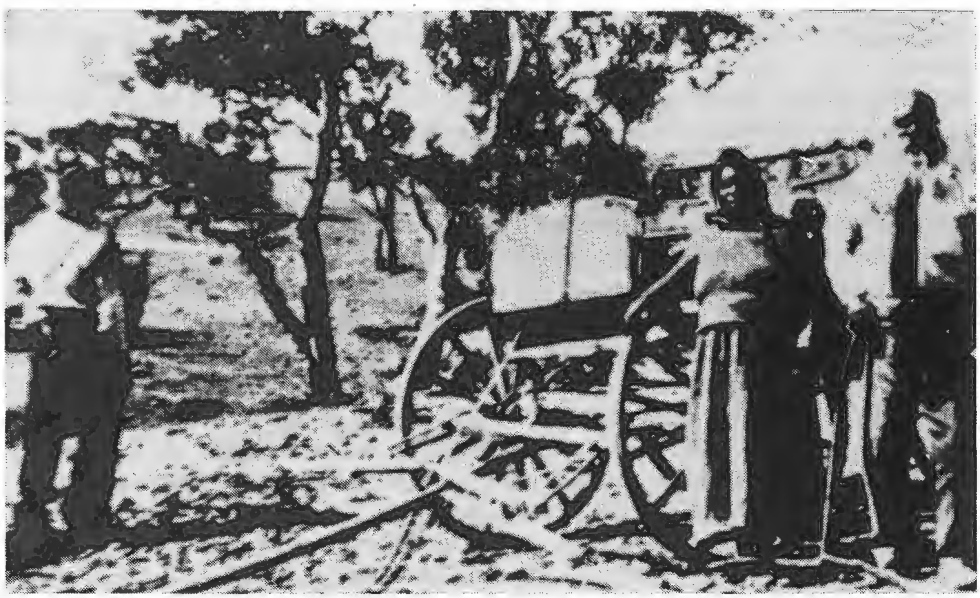
Another factor promoting the people's survival was full employment for ablebodied Aboriginal men in the local pastoral industry, except in times of extreme drought or economic depression. It is possible that Aboriginal stockmen were more useful than white stockmen in the rugged country. Employment in the pastoral industry was a point of entry into the western money economy which allowed Aboriginal culture and traditional life to continue. Until Leigh Creek coal mines were established by the Electricity Trust of South Australia to mine coal in the 1930s, there were no large towns in the northern Flinders Ranges, only villages such as Blinman and Beltana, so there was little motivation for the Adnyamathanha to establish fringe dwellings on the edge of towns. All the people lived on pastoral stations, moving from place to place depending on where work was available, rations were being distributed and ceremonies were taking place.

In the 1890s drought in the Flinders drastically reduced stock and game and some pastoral runs were abandoned. The Aborigines came close to starvation. Mt. Serle was one of the stations abandoned and the government took the opportunity to open part of it as a camel depot to service the far north. It also became a ration depot for Aborigines. Mt. Serle is central to Adnyamathanha traditional lands and has a number of important sites on it. It became the main camp for the Adnyamathanha from this time. The people still moved from station to station in search of work, to visit kin, or for ceremonial occasions, but Mt. Serle supported the largest population.

By this time the pastoral industry had destroyed much of the former economic base of Aboriginal life. Aborigines were prevented by pastoralists from using their traditional water supplies so they tended to congregate near homesteads where there were wells from which they could obtain water. Cattle, sheep and rabbits competed successfully with native game for food, so native game became scarce. The Aborigines also acquired a taste for European food and were happy to work for it, or, if too young, old or infirm, to receive European rations of flour, sugar and tea. The undermining of the economic base of any society has a dramatic effect on the structure and functioning of that society, but in the case of the Adnyamathanha one economic base was almost immediately replaced by another, so the society was

never in economic limbo. This may also explain why the Adnyamathanha retained their religion, their relationship with the land and their kinship system. Although they required handouts from time to time, they never developed a handout mentality and the sense of hopelessness and lack of self-respect that often accompanies it.

In 1923 the government camel depot was closed. This was a turning point in the fortunes of the Adnyamathanha. The Greenwood family took up the pastoral lease for Mt. Serle and decided to replace cattle with sheep. They also agreed to continue giving out rations. But an argument with the Aborigines Department put an end to ration distribution and the Aborigines moved their main camp from Mt. Serle to Ram Paddock Gate. They appear to have moved voluntarily without pressure from the Greenwoods although it is hard to believe some pressure was not applied. The Adnyamathanha were now in a worse state than they had been since the 1860s, before their adaptation to the pastoral industry. The Depression of the late 1920s made employment almost impossible to find and they were competing with unemployed whites for the few remaining avenues of employment such as vermin control. This low paid work had often maintained them in the past when pastoral work was scarce. They were once again close to starvation, having neither employment nor rations. It was at this point in 1929 that the United Aborigines Mission sent a missionary to live with the people at Ram Paddock Gate.



2. Frome Charlie, and Annie and Sydney Ryan at Ram Paddock Gate in the late 1920s

Jim Page, the first missionary, arranged for distribution of rations. Fred Eaton and Harrie Green later joined him. While the advent of the missionaries saved the Adnyamathanha from starvation, it caused other difficulties for them. The surrounding pastoralists became concerned that a permanent mission would be established on or near their lands. While they were happy to have Aboriginal workmen and their families camped on their land, they did not want a permanent community making inroads on their property. They began agitating to get the people moved. The lessees on whose property the Adnyamathanha were camped were particularly concerned and threatened police action and destruction of all the Aborigines' stock (mainly donkeys and goats) if they did not move. The missionaries applied to the state for some land, but the government was slow to move. The missionaries then negotiated directly with the lessee of Balcanoona station, who agreed to make over some land to them under certain conditions.[2] That land was known as Nepabunna, 'flat rock'. It had a creek flowing through it, but no large supply of permanent water. The Adnyamathanha for the first time in their existence had a permanent settlement, though on land that had no traditional value to them. It was rocky ground, land on which they would not normally choose to camp.

Before investigating the changes that occurred in Adnyamathanha lifestyle at Nepabunna I will describe the life of people at Ram Paddock Gate. By the 1920s when the Adnyamathanha settled at Ram Paddock Gate they had been in contact with Europeans for seventy to eighty years. They had become familiar with the wage and ration systems. As early as the turn of the century they had stood their ground when the overseer at the camel depot had tried to make them work for their rations. They spoke English, although Adnyamathanha was their first language. At Ram Paddock Gate they sank a well and built European style huts of stone and mud with wooden uprights (Heritage Unit, p. 6). They used many European materials in their day-to-day living and no longer hunted with spears and boomerangs, although they supplemented rations with native foods. They hunted game when they could find it, using rifles, nets and dogs and gathered local fruits, seeds and roots. A number of families kept goats for milk and donkeys and horses, which they used in their business of carting wool from stations to the railhead at Copley.

Despite these adaptations to new economic conditions, their social system was still intact from pre-European times and ceremonial life was central to their community. An archeological study of the settlement carried out in 1981 located the ceremonial grounds in relation to the dwellings (Heritage Unit, p. 5). Four *mulkara*, or first stage initiation grounds (a ceremony attended by women and children) were closer to the settlement, and two *yandawuta*, or second stage initiation grounds, were further out. This indicates that during the period at Ram Paddock Gate, *mulkara* ceremonies were carried out on at least four separate occasions (each on a new ground) and *yandawuta* ceremonies on two occasions.

Adnyamathanha social relations were largely governed by a moiety system, *araru* and *matheri*, determined by the maternal lineage (in pre-European times a totemic system also operated, but this was disrupted when the Adnyamathanha lost their lands). Moiety determined how people interacted in ceremonial life and social intercourse. Marriage was exogamous, that is a *matheri* married an *araru*, and this was strictly enforced. They also married within the community, contracting no formal alliances with outsiders, European or Aboriginal. Children resulting from casual liaisons with outsiders were always accepted as Adnyamathanha and brought up by their mother's Adnyamathanha husband.

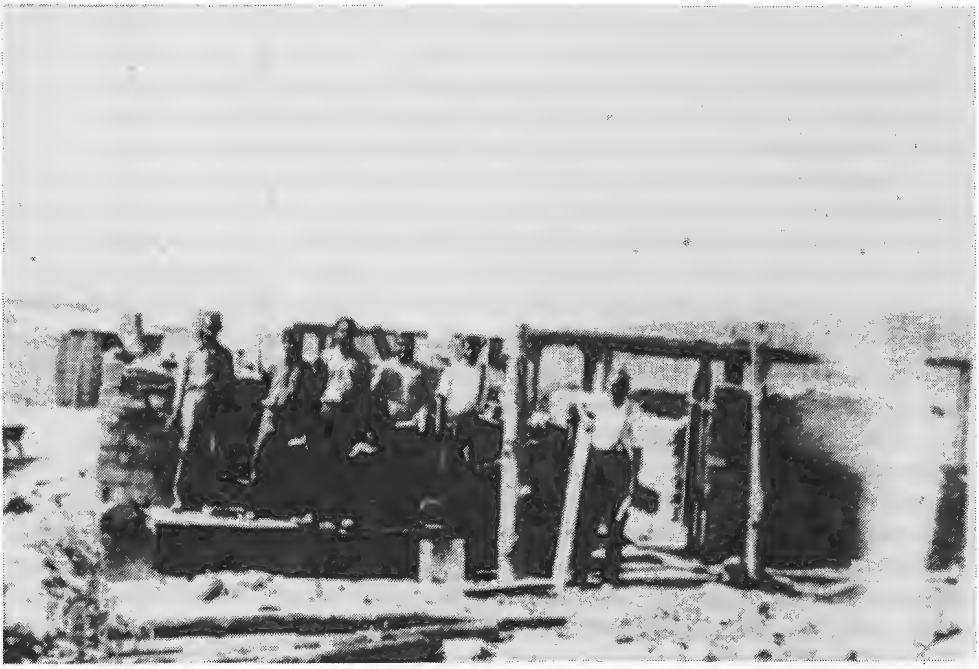
While the people were camped at Ram Paddock Gate, they established two burial grounds, *araru* on one side and on the other *matheri* (Heritage Unit, p. 19). When the people were more mobile there had been no need for specified areas to be set aside for burials as they burnt their camp and moved on after a death. At Ram Paddock Gate they vacated the hut where someone died, but did not change camp so a burial ground became necessary. The graves show a mixture of Adnyamathanha and European influences, for instance, they are oriented south west with brush or stones at the head of each grave (traditional practice), but are also fenced and have borders (not a traditional practice) (Heritage Unit, p. 19).

The mythology associated with Adnyamathanha ceremonial and religious life was communicated to the young people, but to what extent it may have altered or adapted to changing circumstances is not known. Other beliefs also persisted. It was believed, for example, that a whooping cough epidemic at Ram Paddock Gate in which about seven children died was due to a grave being disturbed and bones being removed at Blinman by men who had no rights to disturb the grave. Thus the community to which the United Aborigines missionaries came was an Aboriginal community with a functioning traditional religious and social life, surviving within the European economy and influenced by Europeans in most aspects of day to day living. No-one in the community had had any western education. One man had taught himself to read and write with some assistance from a pastoralist, but the rest were not literate.

When the first missionaries came in 1929, they built a church in the settlement and a house for themselves, but otherwise made no impact on the physical structure of the settlement. They started teaching school. Within twelve months the settlement moved to Nepabunna. The missionaries who had come to an established settlement were now responsible for starting one from scratch, one in which they were in full control. No doubt this gave them added influence over the Adnyamathanha. This control was reinforced by the condition on which the land at Nepabunna was made over to the mission, stating that if the UAM withdrew, the land would revert to the lessee. This was to give the missionaries great power over the people because if they did not co-operate, the missionaries could threaten to leave and the people believed they would lose their land.

The missionaries' prime concern was to convert the heathen to Christianity, but there were many other hurdles they had to overcome in the course of their duty at Nepabunna. They had to build shelters and find permanent water. Eaton helped the people build houses, make furniture and sink wells. The missionaries were now responsible for the total well-being of the Adnyamathanha at Nepabunna. They had to distribute rations, run the school (though they were not trained teachers), take responsibility for the health of the community, receive and distribute child endowment and other payments made by the government to their charges, and apply for these payments. No payments were made direct to the recipients, all were made to and controlled by the missionaries. Once buildings were constructed they were responsible for their maintenance. They kept birth, death and marriage records, and, as their influence began to change customary usages, they married and buried people, ran church services and worked at converting 'their' people to Christianity.This was a huge burden to take on for little more reward than an occasional conversion.

3. Ted and Winnie Coulthard and daughter Evelyn at Nepabunna in the 1930s



4. Mission house being built, Nepabunna, about 1936

The missionaries stayed at Nepabunna until 1973 when the government bought the Nepabunna lands freehold on behalf of the Adnyamathanha people. In the course of the missionaries' tenure many things had changed. By 1973 the ceremonial life had stopped, traditional marriage and burial customs were no longer practiced, births were in hospital not in the bush, and no members of the community were perceived as having special powers, such as healing, controlling drought and flood, or sorcery. The first language of the children growing up at Nepabunna was English not Adnyamathanha. Many of the people, particularly the women, were Christians. There was virtually no station work in the Flinders Ranges; the main sources of employment were government enterprises such as the railways, highways and Leigh Creek coalfields seventy kilometres west of Nepabunna. Many people had moved away from the North Flinders in search of employment or secondary schooling for their children. Nepabunna had a government primary school; older children were bussed the 140 kilometres to and from Leigh Creek South each day for secondary school. There were also changes in housing, water supply and transport.

The list of changes could go on, but one would expect major changes in any community over forty years in the mid twentieth century. The changes I am concerned with here are those which might be attributed to the missionary presence, especially the relinquishing of traditional religious life and culture, social relationships and language. As already indicated, many of these changes were in train when the missionaries joined the community. The Adnyamathanha had a strong sense of survival and were very good at adapting to changing circumstances. The missionaries and their Christian evangelism were just another circumstance to which they had to adapt.

The missionaries who came to Nepabunna were not sophisticated, highly trained and educated people. They seem to have come from working class backgrounds, some from skilled trades, others with no particular training or skills. What they did have was the determination and toughness required for life in remote areas, without any of the comforts of city living, working long hours and long years, with little monetary remuneration or recognition for their achievements.

The innovations they introduced into the lives of the Adnyamathanha were the preaching of Christianity, basic European schooling and authoritarian control. Missionaries who went to areas where they had to set up camp and then wait for their prospective converts to come in from the bush did not have this immediate control over their community. They had to wait until the people decided to settle permanently with them. But at Nepabunna the missionaries controlled a settlement of people who felt indebted to them for the land on which they lived, and whose tenure on the land depended on the missionaries' continued presence.

The Adnyamathanha seem to have accepted all three changes. They were relieved to have someone who was able to negotiate on their behalf, and Eaton turned out to be a strong advocate for Aboriginal rights. He tried to ensure they were reasonably paid on the neighbouring stations, he applied for endowment for women who might be eligible and was outraged when one woman could get it because she was "half caste" while her mother could not because she was more than half Aboriginal (GRG 52 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 46, 29 / 4 / 53). He also saw as unfair a system which allowed Aborigines to earn wages and pay tax, but then denied them the pension (GRG 52 / 1 / 2 / 3 / 46). Eaton also seems to have been a reasonable disciplinarian. He resolved conflicts without apportioning blame and punishing the wrong doer.

Although the UAM introduced primary education at Nepabunna, they had no trained teachers and unlike Lutheran and Anglican missions, running the school does not seem to have been a high priority. For reasons that are not entirely clear, running the store was put ahead of schooling, so school was only run when the store was closed and other duties of the missionary did not get in the way. School was only for an hour a day and often not at all. Most of the early students did not get past junior primary level.

Many of the Adnyamathanha also accepted Christianity. There does not seem to have been any strong antagonism to Christian teachings, but many of the people, especially the men, did not believe that this excluded their own traditional religion. This is where they came into some conflict with the missionary. This conflict was partly documented by C.P. Mountford in his fieldnotes on his visits to Nepabunna in 1937, 1939 and 1944 (Mountford-Sheard Collection). He went to Nepabunna to gather data on Adnyamathanha traditional culture and he made special trips to observe the initiation ceremonies in 1937 and 1939. His interest in the Adnyamathanha was therefore in direct conflict with the Eatons. Mountford favoured the continuation of the ceremonies and his very interest in them was interpreted by Eaton as encouraging them. There was a mutual dislike between Eaton and Mountford, and strong moral disapproval on both sides. Mountford's observations must therefore be read as rather subjective jottings. He described the church as constructed of pine logs and kerosene tins with bag windows and children's desks for seats. He found the service rather unorthodox:

> Before the service commenced the missionary, minus coat, and armed with a guitar strummed away at favourite evangelistic hymns and sang them in a low voice. The women slowly drifted in and sat in the front seats, accompanied by the children, while the men occupied the back seats. The seating accommodation consisted of old school desks on which everybody leaned.
>
> When the service commenced nobody stood to sing. Everybody sat down while the missionary called for suggestions for choruses. These were readily forthcoming and were sung (with little vigour) by the congregation. There were many choruses, interminable they seemed, a Bible reading and a short address...
>
> At the completion of the service communion was given to all present. This is the service which is supposed to separate the believers from the non-believers. If a man takes part in a *wilyeru* ceremony, he is not supposed to be allowed to attend this service. (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 20, pp. 87,89)

Adnyamathanha initiation was a two stage ceremony. After the first stage when the boy was circumcised he became *vadnapa* and after the second stage, which involved further mutilations to the body he was *wilyeru*, a fully initiated man. Eaton objected to both stages of the initiation ceremonies, but particularly the second stage. His professed reason for trying to stop them was his abhorrence of the mutilations, but Mountford believed his objections went further. He suggested that when the first missionary began preaching to the Adnyamathanha, an equivalent had to be found for the devil. As there was nothing evil like the devil in their mythology they decided

on the pivotal mythological character in the *wilyeru* ceremony, who was dreaded particularly by the women. The *wilyeru* ceremony then became associated with devil's work (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 20, p. 83). Whatever the reason, Eaton objected strongly to the *wilyeru* ceremony, and not only voiced his disapproval of it, but refused the sacrament to any men in his congregation who attended it, so forcing them to choose between the two religions.

Mountford found Nepabunna divided into two factions. A vocal minority was in favour of discontinuing the ceremonial life, putting the past behind them and adopting the ways of the whites, while a majority wanted the ceremonies to continue. This group was dominated by the old men who felt they were too old to change their ways, but they were also fearful of what would happen to the Adnyamathanha if they stopped. They feared that abandoning the old ceremonies would make them susceptible to the power of outside tribes, and also that their social system would collapse, the young men would not respond to their authority and the marriage rules would break down (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 20, p. 83). They were also worried that if the marriage rules broke down, they would become extinct. They cited the Diyari as an example of what happened when the missionaries at Killalpanina interfered in their marriage customs (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 20, p. 28).

Mountford claimed the leader of the ceremonies had previously revived the ceremonies (he gives no date) by going to Eyre Peninsula to relearn some of the chants, etc., which had been abandoned by the Adnyamathanha, to ensure that his people maintained their identity (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 19, p. 85). This action indicates the strength of the Adnyamathanha's sense of survival and need to continue their own group and cultural identity despite the acculturation process and adaptation to European lifestyle. This same generation of elders was now having to decide whether they should modify or abandon the cultural forms they had worked so hard to maintain. If they continued them they might split the community. If they stopped them they would lose their cultural identity.

In 1939 they decided on a compromise. They performed a *wilyeru* ceremony, but in modified form without the mutilations. Mountford claimed that this satisfied both factions in the community and the missionary (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 20, p. 73). By 1944 the missionary wanted the total abandonment of the ceremonies. Mountford wrote that Eaton had threatened to leave the Adnyamathanha, in which event they would lose their reserve, if they did not adopt Christianity and end their ceremonial life (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 51, p. 25). Mountford believed Eaton was therefore responsible for ending the ceremonies. In fact, another and final ceremony was held in 1947-8.

Mountford's views of the social changes that were occurring at Nepabunna were rather blinkered. He seems to have been oblivious to the pressures, other than the missionaries, which affected the Adnyamathanha. Most of the men and some of the women were employed in the European economy and they could not always take time off to attend to ceremonial business. The initiation ceremonies in the 1930s and 1940s were held in late December during the Christmas holidays to fit in with their working lives. The use of alcohol was increasingly prevalent among the Adnyamathanha and the elders did not want their sacred life tainted by drunken participants. A third factor was their access to the land. Although the Adnyamathanha still worked all over the Flinders Ranges and many lived for extended periods, and

some permanently, on the stations where they worked, their access to the land was becoming increasingly restricted. They were known to be Europeanised and were not expected to move about the country as they had fifty years earlier. Their dependence on European food also affected the way they related to the land which no longer directly sustained them. Finally, there were the differences Mountford had noticed about the ways in which their religious, social and cultural life should proceed.

The missionaries' attempts to convert the Adnyamathanha to Christianity were more successful with some people than others. Women were more susceptible to the Christian message than men, perhaps because they had less to lose by converting to Christianity. For instance, although they took part in the first stage initiation ceremony (unlike women in many Aboriginal communities), it was a male ceremony and gave power to men, so its termination affected the status of men in the community rather than women. The missionaries were also more successful with some families than others. Some of these families made their own independent decisions not to participate in the ceremonial life. This created problems in marriage arrangements as boys who had not been initiated were not considered men and, therefore, traditionally could not marry. In one instance when a father of a girl objected to her marrying an uninitiated man the young couple appealed to the Protector of Aborigines, who was willing to override parental authority and allow the marriage to go ahead. This uncertainty and controversy over the ceremonies, and the increasingly Europeanised life style made it much more difficult for the boys to go through the arduous ceremonies with the same commitment their forefathers had. The possibility that these boys would not be able to stand up to the rigours of initiation was another factor in the decision to end them.

The missionaries were not in a position to stop the Adnyamathanha ceremonial life, but they did have great power and influence over the people, and there is no doubt they used that influence to put an end to cultural forms which they believed were 'devil's work' and evil. The Eatons did influence the timing of the end of the ceremonies. However, had secular authorities rather than missionaries been in charge at Nepabunna the ultimate outcome might not have been very different. The Protector of Aborigines was not as vehement or morally judgemental as the UAM missionaries, but he also believed the ceremonies would and should end. He believed this was inevitable and would happen with only minimal intervention from outside, although he was prepared to protect boys from the elders of a community if he believed the boys were being initiated against their will and he was also prepared to intervene in marriage arrangements as already mentioned (GRG 52 | 1 | 16 | 1948). It seems unlikely that with these internal and external pressures on the Adnyamathanha that the ceremonial life, which had already been modified, would have ultimately survived.

Once the decision to end the ceremonies had been taken, other changes were bound to follow. Until the mid 1950s all marriages among the Adnyamathanha were 'firestick' marriages performed in the traditional manner; from the mid 1950s on, all marriages were performed according to European forms. The missionaries had quite happily recognised Adnyamathanha marriages, but the government did not and would not pay endowment to those they insisted on classifying as 'unmarried' mothers.

When the Adnyamathanha moved to Nepabunna they established two cemeteries, an *araru*, and a *matheri*, as they had at Ram Paddock Gate. By the mid 1950s, a third cemetery was used where all people were buried regardless of moiety. Traditional ceremonies associated with death and burial gradually changed and disappeared, such as abandoning a house where a death occurred, building a wind break at the head of the grave, lighting fires between the grave and the camp or settlement. These ceremonies had been performed to prevent the spirit of the dead person from returning to haunt the living in the first three days after burial.

5. Wedding at Nepabunna in the mid 1950s (Ron and Allie Coulthard with missionary Bill Hathaway at the back)

The moiety system prevailed in determining categories of appropriate marriage partners, and even today there are no wrong moiety marriages at Nepabunna. But the strong identity the Adnyamathanha maintained in the twentieth century, through insistence that people only marry within the community began to break down in the 1950s when they started marrying people outside their own community. Mountford claimed that Eaton had deliberately tried to undermine the Adnyamathanha marriage system by encouraging non-conforming marriages, but if he did, he was only partly successful. In the one documented case of a girl marrying an uninitiated man in the 1940s (cited above), the couple had to move away from Nepabunna to get married, even though they were conforming to the moiety system. On the other hand there were a number of men at Nepabunna without wives because the system of arranged marriages was breaking down (Mountford-Sheard Collection, v. 19, p. 99). But the marriage rules really disintegrated (apart from the exogamous moiety rule) after the ceremonies ended and the Eatons had left Nepabunna.

By the time the Hathaways took over Nepabunna mission in 1954, the Adnyamathanha were Europeanised in most aspects of their lives. What remained of traditional life was still strong, and continued to ensure that the Adnyamathanha were a distinctive community with a strong identity. They maintained their language, in spite of disapproval by the missionaries, but the children now learnt English as their first language and were no longer fluent in Adnyamathanha. The mythology was still a vibrant part of community life and the sites associated with the mythologies were important to the people. On the other hand, people's association with the land was further undermined by the virtual end to employment on pastoral stations in the 1970s. This meant that Adnyamathanha children could not have the same access to the land, and therefore the knowledge of the land that their parents had had.

The effect of the mission on the Adnyamathanha is complex. The missionaries were concerned to save the Adnyamathanha and to Christianise them, and on both counts they were largely successful. But their success had conflicting and contradictory outcomes. They probably saved the Adnyamathanha from starvation and certainly protected them from being dispersed by the local pastoralists by negotiating a place for a permanent settlement. Without the UAM's intervention it is unlikely the Aboriginal people of the north Flinders Ranges would have been able to maintain their strong group identity. They would have moved to the fringes of nearby towns or south to Port Augusta. It is possible the government would have intervened and removed their children if they had not been able to maintain them. The children were all of mixed descent by the 1930s and therefore could legally be removed from their mothers. The missionaries' intervention thus actually saved Adnyamathanha culture, language and identity. Yet the missionaries were intent on modifying this culture and identity which would not have survived without them.

This contradiction makes it very difficult to assess the impact of missionaries and Christianity on Aboriginal society, not only in the Flinders Ranges, but wherever missions were established in South Australia. In retrospect the perceived moral superiority of missionaries and the conviction that they were right and knew the truth is distasteful if not highly objectionable in the present era of cultural relativism. Yet this conviction carried them through the most trying and difficult circumstances, living in very basic conditions on the poverty line with no recognition and often little material or moral support from their mission societies. Aboriginal survival owes much to them, and yet, with the possible exception of Ernabella in northern South Australia, the missionaries were the avowed enemies of the cultures they were instrumental in saving.

In the case of Nepabunna the missionaries' advent came late enough in the acculturation process for their destructive influence to be minimized, while the people were able to take advantage of the focal point offered by permanent settlement to keep the community intact. The missionaries were not the Adnyamathanha's first point of contact with Europeans. These people had had eighty years of contact to familiarise themselves with this foreign culture and economy. They were therefore in a better position than some other mission Aborigines to decide whether to become Christians or not. Rejecting Christianity did not mean an individual was rejecting all aspects of European life. The retention of their own religious life on the other hand was not an individual decision, but a communal decision. The balance of community attitudes changed in the 1940s and the decision was taken to abandon the ceremonial life, which was becoming less and less the focal

point of Adnyamathanha life. A number of individuals felt keenly that this communal decision meant their personal options were restricted. They could choose not to be Christians, but they could not choose to engage in their own religious rites.

The missionaries, therefore, were influential in altering cultural forms they considered evil, but this did not win them more converts. In fact it is possible that if they had been supportive of Aboriginal culture and religion they would have been more successful evangelists. The Adnyamathanha, unlike the missionaries, did not see Christianity and traditional religion as mutually exclusive. It is also important to recognise that the Adnyamathanha were making active choices in many of the changes which occurred during the mission period. They used the mission and the missionaries as tools in their strategy for survival as they had earlier used their rugged terrain, their ceremonial life and the opportunities presented by the pastoral industry.

The history of Christianity among the Adnyamathanha does not end with the forced departure of the missionaries in 1973. Christianity has become a political force among the Adnyamathanha and in the general Aboriginal community in a way the UAM missionaries could not have anticipated. Evangelical Christians have in the 1980s become involved in redefining traditional Aboriginal culture and tribal areas. This is in an era when being Aboriginal can mean having power over land and land-based resources and having some political clout. In the era of the missionaries Aborigines had no power or status in European society and therefore were dependent on the missionaries who were, themselves, dedicated to win as many souls as possible to the Christian God.

Notes

1 This is despite the fact that, as anthropologists have pointed out, some practised subincision, while others practised circumcision. It may be an indication that too much emphasis has been put on these differences as a cultural divide. (See Tindale 1974, map.)

2 These conditions included: putting up a sheep and donkey proof fence, ensuring the camp was not near other station boundaries, dogs to be kept in check, land to revert to the lessee if the UAM abandoned the mission. S.A.P.R.O. GRG 52/1/1930

Acknowledgment

Photographs are from the Aboriginal Photographic Collection, Aboriginal Heritage Branch, Department of Environment and Planning.

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