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# Goods and Gods

## A Follow-Up Study of "Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians"

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In 1952 Lauriston Sharp published "Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians" in *Human Organization* (v. 2, no. 2, 1952). The paper has become a classic of its kind. It has been reprinted many times and is highly respected as a model analysis of the dynamic relationship between technology and aspects of sociocultural systems. It also says something about missionaries.

Because of its wide availability I will not present (yet another) précis of the paper. But I will remind readers of the conclusion that Sharp drew from his analysis, and the prediction that followed from the conclusion. Sharp, it will be recalled, was demonstrating how even indirect and unintended acculturative pressures could precipitate cultural collapse. To epitomise these pressures and represent the insidious effects of all western material culture on the bush dwelling people, he chose the steel hatchet which was being distributed by missionaries in large numbers. He concluded that the indigenous myth-making process would be unable to come to terms with, and account for, not just the hatchet, but the myriad new traits being accepted into the bush natives' way of life. He predicted that they would abandon their totemic ideology entirely. "The steel axe, shifting hopelessly between one clan and the other," he said, "is not simply replacing the stone axe physically, but is hacking at the supports of the entire cultural system" (1952:88). The future would become confused, uncertain and fraught with anxiety causing perhaps symbolic aggression (such as increased levels of sorcery), or withdrawal and apathy (which Sharp had witnessed among Aboriginal groups to the south). Sharp saw the missionaries as providing the realistic solution to this dilemma. "In such a situation", he concluded, "the missionary with understanding of the processes going on about him would find his opportunity to introduce religion and to help create the constitution of a new cultural universe" (1952:90).

Like many undergraduates, I found "Steel Axes... " exciting. The analysis was clear-cut; the writing was vivid and compelling. I was led to ask, no doubt like many

others before me: What happened to the Yir Yoront? It seemed to me that Sharp's analysis presented an ideal scenario for follow-up research. Accordingly, as a doctoral candidate with the University of Queensland, I persuaded my supervisor to allow me to find the "Yir Yoront" and, using Sharp's materials as an ethnographic baseline, chart the adoption of their new way of life and the reconstitution of their world view[1].

Sharp spent 29 months in the field between 1933 and 1935 working with Aboriginal groups still in possession of their own lands in the country between the Mitchell and Edward Rivers on the western side of Cape York Peninsula. This country had been set aside as a reserve for Aborigines by the Queensland State Government. He called the groups he worked with Yir Yoront, Yir Mel, Taior and Ngentjin. In his 1952 paper Sharp refers only to the Yir Yoront. However earlier papers (especially Sharp 1934:408, 1940, 1957) indicate that this was merely a descriptive convenience. His predictions for the Yir Yoront could be held to be equally true for the other groups he studied.

My enquiries, prior to going into the field, revealed that Sharp's Taior and Ngentjin (more properly referred to as Kuuk Thaayorre and Kuuk Yak) and some Yir Yoront people had gravitated to the Edward River mission that was set up by the Anglicans in 1938, three years after Sharp had left the field. This settlement also attracted a number of other bush dwelling peoples hailing from the country between the Holroyd and Edward Rivers. The remainder of the Yir Yoront were to be found at Kowanyama some 65 km to the south. Kowanyama, established in 1915 by the Church of England, had a long history, and a large population with a good deal of linguistic heterogeneity. By contrast Edward River, whose population in 1968 numbered approximately 280, was a far more attractive research proposition. The records of missionary endeavour presented a picture of just the kind of cultural reconstitution Sharp predicted.

Edward River received its first ordained minister 11 years after its founding. Shortly after his arrival in 1949, the chaplain baptised 50 older children and adults and commenced formal religious instruction. In September of the following year, nine young adults were confirmed in the Christian faith. The ensuing years showed a record of evangelical success. The chaplains busied themselves with baptisms and held daily church services. One of them translated the Creed, the Lord's prayer and the Ten Commandments into Kuuk Thaayorre and, at the request of the people, wrote a hymn in that language (Bayton 1965:181). 1955 saw the celebration of the first Christian marriage ceremony. In 1962 the superintendent of the time could record that there had been 417 celebrations of the Holy Eucharist, 4,824 communions (a figure which implies a rate of 30 communions a year for each confirmed Christian), 55 baptisms, 56 confirmations, 6 marriages and 8 burial services. If these figures were any guide, then the major Christian sacraments seemed securely institutionalised. In 1967, the Anglican Church ceded its administrative control over the Edward River community to the Queensland State Government. By the time of the takeover, some 270 people had been baptised. About 45 per cent of the recognised marital unions (25 out of 53) had been celebrated in a Church wedding. There appeared to be an enthusiastic congregation attending church services, and plans were afoot to build a new Church. The Edward River people gave every appearance of having become a devout Christian community.

But appearances can be deceptive. When I commenced fieldwork at Edward River in 1968 not long after the government takeover, attendance at church services had fallen away dramatically. I quickly discovered that, contrary to Sharp's predictions, the totemic ideology had not disappeared. Youngsters and adults alike could recite their major totemic affiliations without hesitation. Totemic sites could be mapped (e.g. Taylor 1976), and even linked to similar maps Sharp himself had made during his fieldwork. Whenever I accompanied Aboriginal people out into the bush, their behaviour palpably demonstrated that they were moving in a landscape imbued with supernatural entities, powers and associations. Further, the Christian sacraments had not replaced Aboriginal ritual. It was true that the traditional calendar of ceremonial activity revolving around initiation and species increase was no longer observed. There was, however, a calendar of non-Christian ceremonies operating within the settlement which focussed on death and mourning. It required little analysis to show that this ritual was generated by the same totemic world view that Sharp had described. In many respects, Edward River people behaved as if they had just stepped from the pages of Sharp's papers. Indeed, men still owned the axes and women had to borrow them!

Three broad questions arise from these observations. First, how did Edward River people manage to accommodate to Christian ideology? Second, why was Sharp so mistaken about the resilience of Aboriginal ideology? Third, what was the real impact of missionary endeavour on the Edward River people?

I will deal in turn with each question in the following sections.

## Reconfiguring Beliefs

> Before they had that fight at *Kirkyoongknakarr*, the Old People had gone way up there to the east to learn to be like white people. God was there. He was teaching the people book learning. One of the old people said, "No, it's too hard. We can't manage these letters and these pencils. Its too hard for us. We have to go back to our own home."
>
> "Alright," said God. "You give me back all those pencils and letters. You keep your spears but give me back those guns you have been using."
>
> So the people gave God back the guns, the books and the pencils.
>
> God said, "Alright, now you keep those spears. I give them to you. You must kill bush animals for your food, wallabies and possums, and you must eat bush tucker like yams, lilies and bulguru (*Eliocharis* sp). When you want to hunt anything, or kill something, then you must make your own spears and use them."
>
> "Alright", said the Old People.
>
> God gave the Old People some farewell gifts of tobacco, sugar and bread and they went back to their homes where there were no white people. That was when they began to make spears and to use them to fight each other.

The content of the above myth shows it to be clearly spun out of the realities of mission life at Edward River. I recorded it in 1969 where it was appended to the

beginning of a long saga owned by the Spear/Duck clan that deals with the institution of spear fighting. The manufacturing of a new myth was one way in which the Edward River people sought to reconcile present states-of-affairs and mythic verities.

As Sharp had pointed out, there were many novel phenomena to challenge the mythic verities. First, there was the problem simply of accounting for the presence of non-black humans, of new kinds of animals (e.g. horses, cattle, feral pigs and cats etc.), as well as the introduced material culture. Then there was the challenge posed by the ideologies of the Missionaries who were actively proffering alternative theories about the nature of supernatural beings and the place of humankind within the cosmos.

Manufacturing a new myth like the one above, and linking it in sequence to a corpus of other myths to legitimate it, was one way of expanding the Edward River cosmology. But there were other ways. For instance, the content of existing myths could be changed. Sometimes just a small alteration could account for some very large facts. The Wallaby/Lightning clan possess a "Big Humpy" totem (or "story" as the phrase is on the western side of Cape York Peninsula). The term "Big Humpy" really labels an important mythological event that occurred in the Wallaby/Lightning estate. Like many of the Edward River myths, it has to do with the adventures of two brothers who are simply known as The Two Men. The "story" goes like this:

> The Two Men were preparing to hold an initiation ceremony at *Murka*, but the people would not cooperate with them. They went instead to hold the ceremony in Wallaby/Lightning country. The Two Men were very angry to have been so openly ignored and they determined on revenge. They set out to go to the other initiation ceremony, but on the way they stopped at *Pupurrkathman* where they made a firestick. Each man produced some glowing ash from the firestick and encased it in a ball of dry grass and attempted to hold it in his hand. The older brother's ball of grass burst into flames and burnt him. His younger brother's ash smouldered without flame in his hand. With the glowing coal secreted in the younger brother's hand, the two went on from *Pupurrkathman* (whose name signifies this event) to the initiation ground. Feigning cooperation, The Two Men sang, danced and clapped with the others.
>
> After the dances concluded, everyone went inside an enormous humpy that had been built of grass to shelter the participants. When everybody else was asleep, The Two Brothers stole outside. The younger brother fanned his glowing coal into a flame and set the humpy ablaze. The roaring of the fire aroused the sleepers and they all scrambled to get away from the flames. Those who escaped serious burning went from there to make their homes in other places. *Those who jumped out of the fire first were white people. They were not burnt at all. Those who were a little bit burnt were half-castes and Chinese. Others were charred fairly badly, and these became the ancestors of other Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.* Some were badly burned and jumped into the water of a nearby pool to ease the pain. There

> they sank down and their ashes became the conception spirits of the present Wallaby/Lightning clan members.

We may treat this myth in one of two ways. It may be, as the first myth seems, something totally new. Or else the italicised section is an interpolation. I think it is the latter because if we remove it, the remnant of the myth which is restricted to the pre-contact Aboriginal world still seems perfectly meaningful. Consider then what the interpolation accomplishes: nothing less than the origin of all races in four sentences.

If the races of humankind could be so easily accounted for, how then to deal with the Christian concept of God? I imagine that the fundamental problem for Edward River people was to make sense of what it was the missionaries were saying about this deity. In attempting to do this, they assumed that behind the lessons and biblical stories that were part of their Christian religious instruction, there was a belief system not greatly different from their own. The features of the Christian mythology were obscured, of course, by communication problems. However, from the Edward River point of view, deciphering the structure was no different from coming to terms with the mythologies of neighbouring groups of Aborigines. Christian mythology could be rendered understandable if part of it at least could be seen as composed of versions of myths that had parallels in the Edward River mythology.

A characteristic of the mythologies of the western side of Cape York Peninsula is that certain of them tend to repeat themselves at intervals. Thus the myth of the brolga and the emu (see Sharp 1937:144 and McConnel 1957:91 for details) occurs in the Aurukun area, at Edward River, and also in the Mitchell River Trust Area. Each version was firmly embedded in its own geography but in essence they were the same. The repetition creates no puzzles for Aborigines. The shared myths are known, and they provide major frames of reference for forming alliances between groups and individuals when other commonalities of interest were tenuous.

The myth of the water rat also existed in several versions. Its central character, *Poonchr*, as he is called in the Kuuk Thaayorre version, lived in a sky-world and came to earth occasionally in the form of a man by means of a magical rope. I will not describe the myth in detail. It is long and involved. What is important is that the Edward River people made a clear identification between God, who dwelt in heaven, and the creative figure *Poonchr* who dwelt in the sky-world. In talking about the indigenous culture hero, men often referred to him as "*Poonchr*-God". It was not simply a matter of making mental equations. "*Poonchr*-God" intervened actively in people's lives. It was said that one old man, now dead, had actually had an encounter with him. From his description, "*Poonchr*-God" was large, black and the possessor of massive genitals.

When people talked about "God", analysis revealed that it was often the syncretic character, "*Poonchr*-God", they had in mind. Consider the following set of opinions I recorded from one informant about the arguments over the liaisons of the young single people that occasionally disturbed the tenor of the settlement:

> Why should people want to fight over girlfriends and boyfriends? Parents should not be jealous of what their children do. It only leads to rows and puri puri.

> When they are born, parents do not own their children's genitals. Their fathers do not cut their daughters with a knife to make them women. Men can't make the sex of a child the way they make their spears. They can't do that. Genitals come from God. He made a story and genitals belonged to the children. They don't belong to men the way spears do. Therefore, no-one should worry about the way single girls carry on. God gave them genitals. Girls should use them in any way they want to.

On the surface, the reference to God making genitals might be seen as a slightly garbled account of the creation of Adam and Eve. In fact, it pertains directly to an episode in the *Poonchr* myth where *Poonchr* finding that the women in the sky-world had no genitals obligingly created them by making an incision in an appropriate part of their anatomy.

It follows that if the Christian beliefs of missionaries and others could be equated with Aboriginal cosmology, then there was no need to attempt to account for all artefacts, ideas and animals that lay outside the purview of local belief systems. No one clan (or tribal group for that matter as I shall argue below) possessed a universal compendium of all that there was in the world. Provided someone had the "story" was all that mattered. For instance, when I taxed an informant about the existence of a "story" place for the ubiquitous feral pig, I was told that there was no such place on the Edward River reserve. But it was confidently asserted that "There must be one somewhere" and that it probably belonged to a white man. Edward River people clearly thought Europeans possessed a fund of "stories" that explained their things, animals and ideas which in turn provided a charter for their actions. Thus when some item of European manufacture caused trouble in the settlement (e.g. alcohol) people in berating others would say, "We don't have the story for that thing (i.e.alcohol). We don't know how to use it yet." How strong this belief in the stories of Europeans is may be demonstrated by the following example.

I had invited one of the closest of my Edward River informants to visit me in Brisbane in 1971. It was his first trip in a jet plane and his first experience of a large city. When I met him at the airport, he was plainly impressed, and not a little confused by the enormity of the place and numbers of Europeans. As we drove towards the city, he looked about him at the tall residential buildings and asked, "Brother, did man make these things? I think they must be from story," he prompted.

I said that the buildings were indeed man-made, and further along our route I showed him a building under construction. By the time we reached a central business district of Brisbane known as Fortitude Valley, the size of the buildings had increased considerably and Eddie was once again having doubts about the origins of the buildings. I assured him they were indeed man-made and not the product of some whitefellow "story".

To get to my home, we had to cross the Brisbane River. I chose to go via Brisbane's (then) largest bridge. It was a massive suspended steel arch. My informant had never seen anything so big. "What do they call this one, brother?" he asked. Without quite realising the implications of my reply, I said, "It's the Story Bridge." (It was named after a prominent Queensland citizen, J.D. Story.)

"Ah," said my informant totally misconstruing my use of the label "story". He looked up at the fretwork of interlacing girders flashing by and found a comparison from his own Edward River environment where marvelous things may spring from the earth. He said, "It must have grown up like a mangrove, I reckon." Then he sat back with great satisfaction and contemplated the rest of Brisbane's marvels without puzzlement. His cognitive orientation was restored and his faith in the power of "stories" reasserted. The European environment was clearly interpretable through the categories of the Edward River cosmology.

## Modifying Ritual

The pre-settlement cosmology found specific expression in rituals. Through ritual observances, Edward River people sought to communicate with, and to some degree control, the supernatural powers and beings that inhabited their mythic landscape. Ritual observances can be divided into three kinds — routine rituals and increase ceremonies, both of which were performed at the level of individuals and families, and the large scale ceremonies, mostly centring on initiation, that involved the cooperation of many clans. The purpose of routine rituals was to introduce newcomers to particular tracts of land by identifying them with the owners. Such introductory rites offered a protective mantle against the harmful effects of potent and dangerous places and warded off the unwelcome attentions of ghosts, demons and unpredictable mythic beings. Increase rites were aimed at conserving the material conditions of the hunter-gatherer mode of production. Large scale ceremonies required a high degree of organisation and preparation. They culminated in dramatic celebrations of the actions of the mythic beings of the creative epoch through song and sacred dance. At one level they were rites of passage that marked important transition points in the careers of individuals (e.g. from boy into man, progression in ritual status). At the social level ceremonial ritual provided a supernatural charter for clans as the primary landholding groups by linking them through conception filiation to the ceremonial responsibilities that had been instituted by the personalities of the mythic past.

These days (1988) three broad types of ritual activity occur at Edward River. First there are rituals that take place in the bush and are identical with those performed prior to the establishment of the settlement. Rites of introduction are still meticulously observed by Aboriginal travellers. People are still said to be manipulating places of power and malevolence in order to produce rain and storms, epidemics and annoying plagues of insects. However, the routine ritual connected with food species increase is no longer performed. The settlement store provides the bulk of foodstuffs. The bush is now seen as a place of abundance where many kinds of game and fish are simply waiting to fall to the firearms, spears, and fishing tackle of anyone who cares to go out and hunt them. The bush is no longer viewed as a habitat whose food supplies need to be assured through ritual control. Notably absent are the large scale ceremonies revolving around initiation. The last of these was performed at the settlement in 1946.

The second kind of ritual activity is comprised of the ceremonies of the Christian church: the round of daily services, holy communion, baptism, confirmation, marriage and burial. For the moment I will postpone discussion of these. The third sort of ritual activity revolves around death and mourning. Its most spectacular

public manifestation is the "house opening", a ceremony performed to prepare the house of a deceased person for re-occupation. Despite its apparently "traditional" character, house openings have relatively tenuous links with pre-settlement ritual. They are, however, part of a sequence of activities that evolved under the impact of the exigencies of settlement life. Based upon the durable postulates of the Edward River cosmology concerning social relationships, death and the after-life, this sequence of mortuary rituals fuses elements of Torres Strait Islander custom and Christian ritual to create a new kind of ceremonial complex. How this came about is worth describing in detail. Pre-settlement funerary ritual and mourning observances for the western side of Cape York Peninsula have been dealt with by a number of researchers (e.g. see Roth 1937; Sharp 1934b; McConnel 1937). I shall describe Edward River practices only briefly here.

When a person's death was notified, the members of his/her kindred adopted the mourning behaviour appropriate to their relationship to the deceased (e.g. the wearing of mourning regalia, observance of food taboos, going into seclusion), and undertook duties associated with the disposal of the corpse. The dead body was slung between forked poles and a camp composed of all those who knew the dead person gathered around at the site to grieve. When the body had reached a suitable state of decay, it was taken down from the poles, gutted (the viscera being buried), and the body fluids expressed from the remains until the cadaver was reduced to a thing of bone, hair, tendon and desiccated flesh. It was then wrapped up in a bark parcel so that it could be carried about by female kin pending its final disposal. If magical death was suspected as the cause for demise, a divination ceremony was held over the place where the viscera was buried. At about the same time, people who had committed some dereliction against, or who had some unresolved dispute with, the deceased offered themselves for punishment by the dead person's close kin in order to clear the grievance and avoid being suspected of complicity in procuring the death. If the sorcerer's identity was established, then several young warriors might be secretly sworn to carry out a revenge expedition at a later time.

When the mourning camp broke up, access to the tract of land containing the death camp, and to other places particularly associated with the dead person, was prohibited to facilitate the severing of the ties between the dead person's spirit and the surviving family. After an interval of time the physical remains were finally interred or cremated in a public ceremony. The deceased's personal effects were usually left to decay at the final resting place although certain items might be given to particular kin. A feast was provided by the mourning close kin for those who attended the last obsequies. The mortuary prohibitions on kin and places at this time were also lifted. Sometimes the final rites were used as an opportunity for identifying and killing the presumed sorcerer. As a result, they occasionally concluded in wild fights and fatalities.

Clearly there were features of this process that were objectionable to the missionaries, and incompatible with the sedentary lifestyle adopted by the Aborigines. The missionaries forbade corpse exposure. They insisted on immediate burial with Christian rites. They also actively suppressed the violence associated with grievance clearing and sorcery accusations although they left intact other customs such as widow seclusion, the assumption of food taboos and the closing of tracts of land. While areas out in the bush could be closed, it was of course not possible to close the tract associated with the site of death without evacuating the mission village. The

first solution to this problem was to abandon the house in which a person died. Since the houses of the early mission were constructed out of bush materials (palm thatch and rough timber) which required frequent renovation, abandonment caused no great hardship. However, when the State Government began to provide modern, prefabricated housing, permanent abandonment could no longer be entertained. As a consequence the Edward River people developed "house openings".

The evolution of this ceremonial solution to the re-occupation of a dwelling took as its starting point a pre-settlement custom revolving around wet season huts (or humpies), the only substantial shelters likely to last from one year to the next. If a person died in one of these, the abandoned shelter became the focus of the ceremony to open the tract. At a given time, a group of close kin and friends would gather about it to wail, to stamp on the ground, and to shake the structure in a final display of grief before declaring the place open. The humpy itself was left abandoned. The post-settlement ceremony, whose purpose was to open the house, was a greatly elaborated version embellished by the performance of "Island" and "Old Paten" dances. In pre-settlement times, the only occasion when people danced in funerary rites occurred during cremations. The dances of the post-settlement house opening ceremonies were not modelled on cremation dances. The inclusion of "Island" dancing drew its inspiration from the customs of Torres Strait Islanders. They were often held up as the precedent for doing new things at Edward River. It was said that Torres Strait Islanders opened their houses with singing and dancing. This was the main reason for incorporating "Island" dancing in the ceremony. In these dances, the melodies, instruments, dancing regalia, and stylised dance movements are based upon Torres Strait Islander models. The songs and the mass choreographing of the dancers' movements are locally devised. Another reason offered for the inclusion of these dances is that it gives the younger men who have not learnt "Old Paten" dances a part to play in the proceedings.

The origin of the term "Old Paten" is obscure. It refers to the performance in dance and song of episodes from the mythic creative period, called *woochorrm* by Thaayorre speakers. Some of the dances are post-settlement creations, but most of them are reproductions of portions of pre-settlement dance dramas that used to be performed in large scale ceremonial ritual, especially the initiation ceremonies. In the case of house openings, the content of the dances generally draws on that segment of the *woochorrm* that belonged to the deceased. The addition of "Old Paten" dance segments came about through a traditional innovatory process, dreaming. The first dances that were performed were ones that had been created by the spirits of the dead themselves. They were passed on to their living kin in dreams with the request that they be performed in their memory at house openings. When it was realised that performing "Old Paten" was pleasing to the ghosts of dead kin, it was a small but significant step to include sections from the repertoire of initiation dances and other pre-settlement ceremonial dramatisations.

House openings are large-scale public activities requiring the cooperation of many people. They are not easy to organise, but there are always strong pressures from settlement staff and other community members to hold them as soon as possible to clear the way for re-occupation. They are usually held on weekends and staff are particularly invited to attend the proceedings. When everyone is assembled, and the performer's preparations complete, the "Island" dancers commence singing and emerge from the bush, or from behind a screen, and advance in a dancing line

towards the house. As they draw near, people fall in behind them and follow them in procession around it. Next the dancers go inside the house. At a given signal, the neighbours and close relations of the deceased rush inside to cry for the dead person. This grief display is marked by heavy stamping and a great deal of banging of the walls of the dwelling. It is called the "house bumping". Then follows a lull in the proceedings while a feast is held.

After the feast there follows the highlight of the ceremony, the "Old Paten" dancing. Each "Old Paten" segment consists of a discrete mythic event described in song. The dancers, their bodies decorated with bush paints, mime, with a masterly sense of theatre, the actions of mythic characters involved. The dances are watched with rapt attention by the Aboriginal audience. Even most of the children know by heart the events being re-enacted. The "Old Paten" dances give vivid expression to the Edward River world of myth. The dramatic presentation of primal events in song and dance makes the Edward River cosmology tangible and therefore believable. When the last dance has been performed, the gathering breaks up in a high state of euphoria. Because the performers have been close to the sources of supernatural power, they will sleep late next day. The house is now ready for re-occupation, usually by a family not closely related to the dead person.

The "house opening" ceremony that I have just sketched is a part, albeit a spectacular part, of a sequence of funerary rituals that begin, as the pre-settlement sequence did, with public grieving and the assumption of customary taboos and statuses among the close kin. The body is now prepared for immediate burial, usually in a coffin. A church service and burial according to Christian rites is an established and expected part of the sequence. Divination may still be carried out although nowadays the divination vigil is kept over the new grave. Sorcery accusations are no longer made openly, but suspicions may be voiced privately, and may even sometimes emerge publicly in the heat of other disputes. The "house opening" releases a major set of mortuary restrictions. It is followed at a later date by the "look rubbish" ceremony.

The "look rubbish" ceremony has its origins in a part of the pre-settlement ritual that accompanied the final disposal of a body. Prior to burial or cremation, the kindred viewed the dead person's possessions and wept over them. Some items of value might be given away to distant kin, but mostly they were left to rot. In the "look rubbish" ceremony, there was no weeping over the dead person's possessions. Instead they were distributed among close relations. The major intent of the ceremony was to validate ritually the inheritance of a dead person's effects by members of the kindred. This was a new need that had arisen in the wake of the growing affluence of Edward River society and the accumulation of consumer durables.

In brief, the Edward River cosmology has survived the challenge to its relevance and continues to function powerfully in the everyday life of the community. It has responded to changed needs and altered contexts by economically renovating beliefs and generating new rituals. While these renovations incorporate introduced elements, it has also maintained clear links with the past so that Edward River people can truly say, as they often do, "We follow on from old custom".

How was it then that Sharp came to predict a cultural collapse for the Yir Yoront?

## A Critique of Sharp's Analysis

The primary object of Sharp's researches was to come to a clearer understanding of the nature of totemism in at least one relatively homogeneous Aboriginal society. At the time of Sharp's fieldwork there was already a voluminous literature extant on totemism. It was an area of such confusion that Haddon (1934:136 quoted in Sharp 1937:vii) had been forced to conclude that, "Nearly every writer on the subject expresses different views from those of other writers but scarcely one of them has any original facts to offer". One might add that the position seems little clearer nowadays, for as Berndt and Berndt (1977:231) observe, "Totemism is a confusing term because it has been used in so many different ways". Sharp's purpose was to offer new facts and attempt to explain one particular Aboriginal totemic system. He was not concerned to integrate his findings and interpretations with the wider domain of theories of totemism.

As Sharp described it for the Yir Yoront, totemism was an association between classes of things, activities and states (the totemic phenomena) and particular groups of people (clans or lineages). The associations were established by a set of myths. While Sharp provided abundant evidence of such associations among the Yir Yoront, the most important piece of evidence he submitted was a list in his doctoral thesis of the totems belonging to the Freshwater/Rain clan (Sharp 1937:330-3). For this group Sharp enumerated in excess of 220 totems. Included in it were 74 kinds of natural species comprising insects, birds, fish and other aquatic creatures, plants, crustaceans, amphibians, reptiles and marsupials. Twenty-seven of the items referred to general environmental phenomena such as clouds, dawn, stars and thunder. Another 30 items referred to artefacts and material things associated with human activities such as camping places, axes, ashes, shelters and pointing bones. All of these things were common enough in other lists of totems (e.g. see Spencer and Gillen 1904:768-73).

What was unusual about the list was the inclusion of things such as parts, states and conditions of the human body (for instance, anus, blood vessels, sores, intellect and so forth), as well as human emotions and activities (e.g. marriage, copulation, shame etc.). There were 91 items of this type. Even more remarkable was the fact that this large number of totems belonged to a single clan which in 1933 numbered about 40 people. The Freshwater/Rain tracts occupied less than 6% of the total area owned by the 26 clans Sharp studied. Less than 8% (17) of the totems associated with the Freshwater/Rain clan were shared with other clans. There is no doubt that Sharp meant his readers to take the example of the Freshwater/Rain clan as an apt illustration of the distribution of totems across the remaining clans. Suppose we make this inference. It follows that if the other 25 clans had equally large sets of multiple totems covering the same wide range of things, events and states, and if there was the same degree of sharing of totemic items (i.e. less than 8%) between clans, then for all practical purposes the totems of the Yir Yoront present themselves as a kind of universal compendium of natural and cultural phenomena. Such a compendium would contain by my calculation some 5000 items.

Why were there so many totems? Sharp argued that the Aboriginal cosmology was ordered about a tripartite division of the perceived world of experience. These classes consisted of tracts of land, social groupings and totemic objects. Tracts and totems had naturally distinctive characteristics and enduring identities. Social groups on the other hand were relatively changeable. Sharp argued that a strong

objective reality could be imparted to otherwise ephemeral social groupings if they could be related to the unchanging landscape and the well-defined totems. This was the real purpose of the totemic system of the Yir Yoront.

Thus social groups, totems and tracts were welded into a set of mutually dependent conceptual relationships. Small changes in the sets could be accounted for without upsetting the basic stability of the system. However, because the interweaving of the elements appeared to be on such a cosmic scale, any major change in any of the sets, Sharp argued, would have repercussion for the others. The result could only be social and cultural disintegration. Because of the tightness of the conceptual structuring, there was simply no room in the Aboriginal cosmology for Europeans and their enormous inventory of things. Contact with Europeans and European material culture must therefore cause the the collapse of the entire cultural system itself. It was a courageous prediction. Few anthropologists have had such faith in their models that they have actually set the conditions for testing them against future events.

As it happens, Sharp was wrong about the way in which things would eventually occur. I believe I have presented enough evidence to indicate a vital and continuing cultural tradition which has coped exceedingly well with major changes in settings, activities, and artefacts, as well as coming to terms with foreign ideologies and rituals. I doubt if Sharp is the least bit dismayed to learn that the totemic belief system he patiently described with such accuracy has turned out to have such resilience.

I must acknowledge that the evidence for a universal compendium of totemic items seemed very strong in Sharp's data for the Freshwater/Rain clan. Yet 35 years later, try as I might, I could not produce clan lists of totems that came anywhere near the numbers that Sharp recorded for that single clan. Have whole sets of totems disappeared from people's minds in the space of 35 years? Was the Freshwater/Rain clan an extraordinary or atypical example? I cannot answer either question because I have not attempted to collect totemic lists for present day Freshwater/Rain clan members.

I prefer another interpretation for the meaning of totemism. It is one that is profoundly influenced by the way in which the Edward River people themselves view those things anthropologists call "totems", Aborigines call "dreamings" or "stories" and the Kuuk Thaayorre call *woochorrm*. Such terms, I argue refer to a set of symbols that represent mythological events at particular places. In other words, the totems are primarily tags for identifying segments of a mythological record. The association between social groups, totemic objects and tracts does not come about, as Sharp suggested, because of the inherent features of the totems and tracts themselves (i.e. their perdurability). Rather it is the ownership of a set of totems by particular clans denoted by the ownership of a ritual estate which in turn justified, or provided a charter for, a clans' primary entitlements to tracts of land within the Edward River domain. This interpretation sits easily with Sharp's general description for the totemic system of the Yir Yoront. It does not require the system to break down when confronted with the presence of Europeans and their material culture.

The anxieties, ambivalences and bizarre behaviour that Sharp noted in his classic paper were not so much indicators of culturally fatal cognitive disorientation, but rather, I submit, a short-run perturbation about the means for regularising the supply of European artefacts.

The Edward River solution to the problem was achieved by inviting the Anglicans to establish a mission.

## Conclusion

It is tempting to see Edward River Christianity as a veneer thinly laid over Aboriginal traditions. It would be wrong, however, to think that Christian rites have no place in the fabric of everyday life. Certainly some sacraments such as marriage do not appear to be popular. In the last ten years there have been no church marriages at all despite the formation of a number of stable *de facto* unions. The principal reason underlying the reluctance to marrying in church seems to be the expense involved in cementing unions that have already achieved community endorsement through the operation of the marriage system which is little changed in its operation from the one Sharp described for the Yir Yoront (Sharp 1934a).

On the other hand Edward River parents almost without exception take their infants for baptism. The ritual of baptism is as important to them as the pre-settlement rites of introduction, which, interestingly enough, often included splashing newcomers to a place with water from a well or lagoon. Adult Aboriginal newcomers to Edward River seeking to settle permanently there offer themselves for baptism to demonstrate that they are now part of the community. I have already described how Christian burial rites are perceived as an integral part of Edward River funerary behaviour.

There is only a handful of Aboriginal people who can now be described as regular church attenders. One of them, a most tradition oriented old man, continues to worship daily because he feels that frequent application to the sacramental wine will enhance his life span. At a more serious level, another, younger man who is a lay preacher, is much concerned about Edward River's current social problems. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the origins of these problems but they include widespread alcohol abuse, conflict and fighting (that not infrequently ends in homicide), rape, theft, and the neglect of children and old people. Tradition clearly has no remedy for these unwelcome and disturbing manifestations. The lay preacher looks to the Church as the one organisation capable of providing training for leadership and moral inspiration. Whether the church can meet his expectations and play a significant role in addressing these issues remains to be seen. Unlike Sharp, I do not have the courage to make a prediction.

## Note

1 The fieldwork upon which this paper is based took place in three periods: as a postgraduate scholar with the University of Queensland from 1968 to 1971; as medical anthropologist with the Queensland Institute of Medical Research 1971-1975; during fieldwork in 1988 financed by James Cook University of North Queensland. I acknowledge with gratitude the funds provided by the above institutions.

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