

REVIEW

Diane Austin-Broos,* *Arrente Present, Arrente Past: Invasion, Violence, and Imagination in Indigenous Central Australia*, Chicago and London, 2009, xiv + 316 pp.

The Arrente Aborigines of Central Australia (also rendered Arunta and Aranda in earlier phonetic systems) have an important place not only in Australian anthropology but in European thought of the early twentieth century. The writings of the German missionary Carl Strehlow, and of the Melbourne University-based zoologist turned anthropologist Baldwin Spencer (with his local associate F. J. Gillen), were important sources for the French sociologist Emile Durkheim's 1912 *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, as well as for the turn of the century armchair anthropologists James Frazer and Andrew Lang. A generation later, the Hungarian psychoanalyst Geza Roheim worked in Central Australia, subjecting 'Aranda' beliefs to a quite different kind of interpretation. Following World War II, T. G. H. Strehlow, the son of Carl, who had spent his early years on the Hermansburg mission, but now holding a position in English at the University of Adelaide, used his close knowledge of the language to produce, among various writings, the volume *Songs of Central Australia*. With the expansion of anthropology in Australian and overseas universities since the mid-1960s, writing and research on Aboriginal culture and society have proliferated, and the Arrente became just one among many 'tribes'. The book under review gives them a new salience in the literature, less on account of their traditional culture than of their distinctive, and in many ways difficult, existence on the periphery of settled Australia. Moreover, it is grounded in a close acquaintance of Arrente lives and at the same time informed by an insightful control of social thought.

The author of this book, until recently Professor of Anthropology at

the University of Sydney, is not a product of the somewhat introverted world of Aboriginal Studies. She is an Australian, but was trained in anthropology at the University of Chicago. For her doctorate she carried out field work in Jamaica, which resulted in two books. In 1989, as a new departure, she began field work with the Arrente but, although she has immersed herself in the now voluminous literature on Aboriginal Australia and does not refer directly to her Jamaican work, there is at a more abstract level a corresponding sense of the disjunctions that occur when modernity, particularly economic modernity, impinges upon ways of life that move to a different beat. It is also apparent that she is very good field worker. Her work with the Arrente, consisting of a series of visits up to the time the book was completed, has taken as its vantage point a particular outstation, with events often seen through the eyes of a senior woman whose observations she cites throughout the book. (The woman died shortly before the book went to press.)

In her introduction Austin-Broos cites the historian Inga Clendinnen to the effect that while historians were resistant to culture, anthropologists were resistant to temporal change. In fact, many anthropologists (including this reviewer) have been engaging with change for some years, but this trend in the discipline has been less in evidence in the anthropology of Aboriginal Australia, which often reads like an attempt to prove cultural continuity. This is at least partly because much of the work of recent years has been written in order to prepare claims to Native Title. One of the insights of *Arrente Present, Arrente Past* is that what looks like cultural continuity is in fact subtly, or not so subtly, changed, not least in the case of Arrente Native Title. Combining the historical and the ethnographic methods, the book sets out to describe the 'social suffering' which has been the consequence of the 'cumulative structural violence of invasion, mission rule, and poorly conceived policies for a transition to modernity' (p.10).

Part One is entitled *Remembering the Mission*. The mission which became Hermansburg began as early as 1877. It gave rise to a community of practising Lutherans, as well as some Arrente pastors, eroding traditional beliefs though without quite extinguishing them. It also brought into existence what Austin-Broos calls a domestic

economy, which in country taken over by the cattle industry provided 'a way station' 'on the way to modernity'. Like other Christian missions in the Northern Territory, the Lutherans had eventually to give way to the new order in Aboriginal affairs, in 1989. Hermansburg became Ntaria. In terms of beliefs, what remained after the withdrawal was what this book calls a 'vernacular Christianity', but one overtaken by the politics of land rights, with its revalidation of traditional myths and inherited connections with 'country'. This has had the effect of decentralizing the Arrente into 'outstations' which, in the absence of opportunities for employment, exist in tension with economic dependence on government transfer payments. Modernity gives rise to the 'paradox of land rights and citizenship in the midst of economic marginalisation' (p.22). The forms of 'self determination', supposed to organize the distribution of government funds, have likewise had the effect of bringing kinship loyalties and norms of community equity into contradiction.

Part Two, entitled *Life as a Standing Fight*, describes the effect of these conditions on the ways in which Arrente now deal with one another in the course of everyday life. The system of relatedness which has always structured social relations, and which still defines a sense of being, is now subject to stress. Since people now live with money and acquire goods such as automobiles, the traditional but occasional 'demand sharing' has become a constant pressure, with the younger generation preying on the old. Among the young, the practice of relatedness becomes 'sheer wilfulness'. These are people who 'remain kin-based in a market society with its concomitant government bureaucracies, creating a juxtaposition of different social orders' which are often in contradiction to one another. The frustrations felt give rise to violent outbursts and, Austin-Broos argues, to the abuse of alcohol and to petrol sniffing, which further disrupt relatedness.

Part Three, *Outstations and Being Remote*, describes Arrente involvement with the various government agencies and programs which have oversight of their affairs. As Austin-Broos ironically describes it, 'The Arrente found themselves embroiled in a state-sponsored return to tradition that was also their medium of modernity' (p.167). In particular, rather than returning to some

hunter-gatherer mode of existence, or even the kind of domestic economy that the mission had tried to create, involvement with the mainstream economy took the form of welfare dependence.

The very establishment of the outstation gave rise to competition with Ntaria-based people, which may have had traditional origins but which was equally a product of the present. A land claim for a small area of Crown land provided one site for factional conflict; access to CDEP (work for the dole), which was allocated to groups rather than individuals, was another. Competition between the various outside agencies, particularly in relation to the allocation of government funds, also gave rise to factional conflict.

Any book about Northern Territory Aborigines written after 2007 must be read in the shadow of the 'Intervention', in which the Federal Government abruptly assumed control of Northern Territory settlements, bringing in the military to impose law and order, banning alcohol, and taking control of the welfare money on which the majority of Aborigines depended. In the run up to this event, there had been media reports of widespread alcoholism and violence in Aboriginal communities, and of late distressing reports of the sexual abuse of children, which seemed to be confirmed by an official enquiry and which the Government in the first instance made the justification for its intervention. There had, however, been for some months before a neo-liberal critique, arguing that existing policies of supporting remote communities and self determination had failed, and that the solution to the 'Aboriginal problem' had to be their 'mainstreaming' into the wider community. (How that was to be effected has never been made clear.) The Intervention and its associated policies have divided both Aboriginal spokespersons and those non-indigenous people concerned with Aboriginal affairs, with one side arguing that the policies perpetuating remote communities and self-determination were misconceived, and the other arguing their continued viability, if only they were adequately funded and serviced, and implemented in good faith.

The Arrente did not escape the Intervention, and Austin-Broos devotes her penultimate chapter to an analysis of the events and the debate arising. It is analysis, rather than just position taking and,

while her critique of those who support the intervention is more severe, she has reservations about its opponents' arguments. She does not deny that there is violence, against women and among men, child neglect, and malnutrition; she has described such suffering in earlier chapters. Explaining these matters, however, requires more than a glib scapegoating of 1970s policy makers, or a blanket demonising of Aboriginal culture. It requires an understanding of what has happened to Aboriginal communities, not just in the early years of colonisation but also in 'the ill-wrought transition from missionization to modernity'. 'An adequate response requires addressing the enduring cultural issues that require more than individual moral renovation – chief among them the conflicting forms of value that keep Aboriginal Australians remote and thereby marginalized from market society' (p.242). In this situation, the meanings and values of market society disorganize other regimes of value without quite delivering modernity' (p.246). On this matter she states her differences from some colleagues, whose disinclination to recognise these problems 'seems to rest on notions of protecting culture' at all costs.

Reviewing the debate around the Intervention, Austin-Broos suggests that the 'cultural difference' which was central to the discourse of Aboriginal Affairs 1970–1996 vintage, has been recast as pathology in the sense that individual pathologies have been projected onto Aboriginal people in general, so that cultural difference is only understood in negative terms. While anthropologists have mostly contested this generalization, Austin-Broos suggests that they may have been unintentionally to blame, in the sense that they have tended to gloss over the difficulties of everyday life in favour of such topics as spirituality and art. In particular, a culturally sensitive latter-day anthropology has either 'purged' sexuality from the ethnographic record, or reinterpreted it terms of spirituality. Such 'sanitizing' of Aboriginal sexuality leaves the public unprepared when the press reports rape or sexual violence in Aboriginal communities, giving rise to suspicions that the 'truth' has been concealed in the interest of 'political correctness' – a perception that in turn calls into question the value of other indigenous claims based on cultural difference.

Austin-Broos's objection to the discourses supporting the

Intervention is that they strip away both the cultural and structural specificity of the Arrente, 'leaving only moral pathology and state control as the response' (p.257). It is to this specificity that she duly turns, in which the Arrente undergo an involuntary transformation 'from hunter-gatherer to sedentary life, and then the equally searing transition from mission to marginalized modernity'. These radical changes, which are described in detail in the book, amount to 'structural violence' – a term she introduces from a Haitian study – which situates the Arrente on the settler society's periphery, leaving them remote from the larger society, and yet dependent on it.

The next step is to describe how the Arrente experience and understand these changes, undergoing an ontological shift with both emotional and social ramifications. There is a confrontation between the Western market as social imaginary and a kin-emplaced life that 'renders the subject first and foremost as a relative'. As Austin-Broos writes, the Arrente made 'a passage between worlds that were not merely ideational but also substantially embodied socialities, different scales of imagination, and levels of technology' (p.267).

The book concludes by returning to Clendinnen's disinction between anthropology and history (see above). Austin-Broos quotes anthropologist Talal Asad: 'among anthropologists, "history" is a notion that few would now dare to despise. On the contrary, all of us solemnly acknowledge it. But what kind of history?' (p.269). This book goes some way towards answering Asad's question, at least in terms of the project in hand.

Austin-Broos's picture of Arrente life is in many ways a bleak one, and it offers no easy answers. There are times when a reader familiar with Aboriginal people might wish for those moments of laughter that miraculously occur, even in the midst of suffering. But her description of particular events and statements, particularly of her woman friend, leave one in little doubt as to its truthfulness. The bleakness, however, is explained not in terms of Aboriginal deficiencies, or even of impugning the intentions of latter day Euro-Australian planners in Aboriginal affairs, but of the painful contradiction of the objective situation. It leaves, however, one unanswered question: it seems that, while outsiders – missionaries, bureaucrats, medicos, lawyers and the

rest – play a significant part in the way life plays out for the Arrentes, their relations with them are not described. Are we to understand that they remain quite outside Arrente sociality?

The insights to be found in *Arrente Present, Arrente Past* are deepened as the author draws on social as well as anthropological theory, with names such as Charles Taylor and young Karl Marx occurring alongside authorities in the field of Aboriginal studies. This makes the reading at times dense and demanding. Nevertheless different sets of readers – academic anthropologists concerned with remote Australia, anthropologists and non anthropologists concerned with the practicalities of Aboriginal affairs, bureaucratic policy makers, as well as scholars concerned with indigeneity as a global phenomenon – will derive different insights and understandings. For this reviewer the book's achievement is to shine a light on the way remote Aborigines experience living in the contemporary world.

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