Australian Aboriginal Studies: The Anthropologists' Accounts

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Of all the groups in Australia designated in terms of race or culture none has had their authenticity questioned as much as Aborigines. Popular conceptions as well as academic writings make an implicit or explicit division of Aborigines into two kinds. They may be termed traditional and non-traditional, part-Aborigines and full-bloods or those in the north and those in the south (cf. Langton, 1981). One category is commonly seen as more legitimately Aboriginal. The popular view that the 'non-traditional' or 'half-castes' are not 'true' Aborigines is widely recognised, but anthropologists' complicity in such judgements is less obvious. There could be two reasons for such divisions. They could indicate that Aboriginal groups occupy such different structural positions in the wider society that they are not easily analysed within the same theoretical framework or by using identical research strategies. Alternatively, the Aborigines themselves could be perceived as so different racially or culturally as to preclude any analysis that encompasses both categories. This latter view has probably been the most pervasive both in anthropology and elsewhere, to the extent that the 'southern' or 'non-traditional' groups are sometimes denied inclusion in the category of Aborigines.

Neither argument can be easily sustained. The division would imply sharp contrasts between the history and culture of northern and southern Aborigines as well as shared unique features in each area. But there are numerous differences both in the nature of the Aboriginal groups themselves and in their relationships with the wider community. There are common themes in the history of the Northern Territory and southern Australia, and there are striking cultural and historical contrasts between communities in each area. The *de facto* separation of the literature on Aborigines into two major categories is a function of anthropological interest in both senses of the word.

I argue here that this dichotomy is misleading and has resulted from a narrow definition of the task of social anthropology. Only *some* features of *some* social groups are investigated. Although a number of contemporary anthropologists have recognised that the dichotomy is false it is still

embedded in much writing, in terms such as 'part-Aboriginal' and 'of Aboriginal descent', and in the propensity of most anthropologists in Australia to work in the north of the continent. Ideas about anthropology which underlie this division have largely remained unexamined.

Three assertions will be the subject of this paper. Each is controversial in a different way and each is related to the history of anthropological thought and practice in Australia.

First, anthropologists in the 20th century have been influential in determining how Aboriginal society was understood by Australian intellectuals, politicians, journalists and now by the land courts (cf. Shiels, 1963). Second, the anthropologists' definition of Aborigines was always dependent on notions of their cultural integrity and homogeneity. No concepts or theories were developed within Australian anthropology which could adequately deal with either relations between the indigenous population and the invaders or with changes in either. Yet both of these were significant issues confronting field researchers wherever they worked. Finally, when anthropologists did conduct research with non-traditional groups the very vocabulary of 'caste' and 'blood' with which such groups were described, relied on *biological* ideas of race, and the search for the traditional also relies in the final analysis on the reification of race.

The concept of race as a way of dividing the human species into discrete groups was fundamental to the practice of anthropology during the 19th century. Aborigines were seen as a race, and the defining characteristics were to be discovered by measuring their bodies and bones. It was only in the mid 20th century that biologists resoundingly rejected racial categories by showing that variation within such groups is greater than variation between them. Where the average variation between groups is significant, only biologically superficial characteristics such as skin colour or hair type are involved. Throughout human history continuous migration has precluded the development of sub-species (Gould 1981:323).

But the biologists' rejection of racial categorisation of the human species did not eliminate the concept of race from popular or academic discourse. Instead of adopting the biologically more accurate term 'population' or 'gene pool', the term 'race' was retained. Social scientists asserted that it had a new meaning because it referred to a social rather than a biological category. However the defining features of the social category have not been the subject of analysis. Rather, it is my contention that social anthropologists uncritically equated 'traditional Aborigines' with the previous 'Aboriginal race', an equation which rendered the study of 'non-traditional', 'southern' or 'mixed race' groups anthropologically invalid.

Anthropology in Australia developed an institutional base with the

establishment of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science in 1888. In its first twenty years the anthropology section of this Association had, either as presidents or participants, the major anthropological researchers of the day - Howett, Fison, Roth, Gillen, Spencer, John Mathews and R.H. Mathews (Elkin, 1970:9). According to Elkin it was the 1914 meeting with anthropologists from the British Association for the Advancement of Science that forced offical and public recognition of anthropology in Australia. But there is no doubt that anthropology was flourishing before this; and the dominant intellectual currents of British thought directed anthropological research interests in this country. For instance, Fison and Howitt's *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1880) provided an example of the 'lowest level' of Morgan's kinship types. Baldwin Spencer gained Frazer's patronage on finding the most 'primitive' form of religion in Central Australia. Further, 'By the 1880's Darwin and Huxley had received awards and tributes from Australian Royal Societies, had their works included on Australian University syllabuses and had won complete hegemony over anthropological thinking' (Glover, 1982:18).

Although the physical character of Aborigines was studied by anatomists and craniologists, and the social character by a diverse range of people from surveyors and magistrates to medical officers and zoologists, both groups of researchers worked within the framework of evolutionary theory in which the major facts on the matter of race had already been decided. Some races were more developed than others. Even before theories of polygenesis and degenerationism gave way to unilinear evolutionary theory, there was virtually universal acceptance of the relative positions of the European and Australian types of humankind. The former was at the highest stage of development and the latter at the lowest. It only remained to show in what way and to what degree Aborigines were behind the development of other races. As Mulvaney says, 'In the polemics of nineteenth century evolutionary controversy, when men declared themselves for apes or angels, the Australians were ranged firmly on the side of the apes' (Mulvaney, 1969:12).

The work of physical anthropologists and those researching stages of social development proceeded in parallel. Around the turn of the century anatomists and craniologists spent a lot of time measuring skulls both inside (cranial capacity) and outside (cephalic index) as they were convinced that limited brain size was related to the supposed inferiority of Aborigines. Even after the relationship between brain size and intellectual ability had been dealt a severe blow in the 1880s, with the demonstration that some highly respected German Professors had smallish brains and some criminals large ones (Gould, 1981:93-4), the measuring continued for over sixty years in Australia (cf. Abbie 1957). The specific aims of this research did change, but the specifying of racial characteristics remained one major underlying theme of physical anthropology.

From the 1880s anthropologists aimed to show that the Australians could occupy one of the gradations between ape and man. Howitt was convinced that 'Australian evidence had proved the truth of evolutionary theory' (Glover, 1982:17). Baldwin Spencer speculated that, having been 'shut off from the competition of the higher forms, the Australian Aborigine is a relic of a type of mankind once widely scattered over the world' (Glover, ibid, 16). And Darwin used the Australian female as evidence in his argument that the difference between man and ape was one of degree, not of kind (Darwin, 1871:62).

There has been no thorough critique of the findings of early Australian anthropologists. Gould (1981) and Glover (1982) have shown that many who claimed to be objectively describing the characteristics of racial groups were already convinced that the black races were inferior. Gould's work shows conclusively that the measurement and ranking of human capacities, as a methodology, is subject to serious error and misunderstandings. It is not the measurements that are incorrect, but the meanings given to them, particularly the assumption that there could be some general measure on which human beings could be ranked in order of merit. What is significant for my purposes is that a century elapsed before the reasons for the error in this search were clearly set out. Gould's analysis of the general fascination with measurement, whether of intelligence quotients or skulls, is the first radical critique, not only of the measurements and their meanings, but of underlying suppositions about human variation which allows such research to flourish under the rubric of science. It is the twin fallacies of reification and ranking, first of races and more recently of IQs, that Gould identifies at the root of these endeavours.

For many years now there have been denials by anthropologists and biologists, of any necessary connection between biological race and physical, social or intellectual inferiority (e.g. Montagu, 1974). But, besides the work of George Stocking (1968), there has been little reassessment of the social anthropologist's heritage from evolutionary theory; many unexamined assumptions are still part of the framework of social anthropology. Glover (1982) begins his critique with a demonstration that not only physical anthropology but the early social anthropologists in Australia shared the view that their task consisted of tracing the tree of man and showing the features that were characteristic of particular primitive societies. While the social anthropologist's interest in the position of Australians in the heirarchy of man waned with the advent of structural functionalism, the definitive characteristic of this 'unique people' remained the primary object of anthropological investigation. Despite the break between social and physical anthropology that occurred in the 1920s, there were conceptual continuities which I wish to question.

Gould says that 'Science cannot escape its curious dialectic. Embedded in

surrounding culture, it can nonetheless be a powerful agent for questioning and overturning the assumptions that nurture it. Scientists can struggle to identify the cultural assumptions of their trade and to ask how answers might be formulated under different assertions' (1981:23). One 'cultural assumption' of social anthropology in Australia since the rise of structural functionalism concerns the submerged or implied definition of Aborigines as a race, the identification of that race with an unsullied tradition and the protection of this ever-narrowing category of Aboriginal studies from any systematic concern with the nature of the wider society or with changes in the object of investigation. In other words, although direct references to race were dropped, the concept of discrete *a priori* categories of human beings has remained central to the anthropological endeavour. This concept is, I would argue, isometric with the concept of race: that is, the concept of 'Aboriginal culture' has neatly filled the semantic space that 'Aboriginal race' previously occupied.

Questioning tradition is not a popular enterprise among the predominantly positivist 'Aboriginalists'. Recent attempts to re-examine the relationships between anthropology's past and anthropologists' practices have aroused defensive reactions (eg. A.A.S. Newsletters 1980-82). Thus I should make it clear that my discussion of the history and current practices of anthropology is not intended as a total rejection of the work of traditional anthropologists. Rather it is an attempt to develop a more informed and intelligent debate on those relationships. Some anthropologists believe that there is a sharp division between science and politics and that the former must be protected from the latter. I argue that anthropology in Australia is demonstrably related to the position of Aborigines in the wider society, not only in the more obvious ways, such as through the land rights movement, but the concepts and interpretations of Aboriginality have been developed through research conducted with the (white, European) discipline (e.g. Maddock, 1983; Hiatt, 1982; Gumbert, 1984). Decisions about funding the craniologist's search for evidence of the smaller Aboriginal skull in the 1880s are not different in principle from decisions taken in the 1980s about the funding of various other research projects. The kind of research that is encouraged in universities, the topics that are considered serious science and the work that is published are all part of a whole intellectual climate which has changed markedly in the last 100 years but, I would argue, is no less prone to error.

Some critics of anthropology have been accused of sentimentality or indulgence in partisan fervour (e.g. by Hiatt, 1983:54). They may more accurately be described as annoyed at the tendency to 'fiddle while Rome burns'. To have doubts about the fiddling entails no criticism of the violin. It is the priorities involved in allocating resources and energy to politically and intellectually dubious pursuits of ever more hopefully accurate infor-

mation about a 'traditional' society that no longer exists, that arouses ire. I would not of course argue that anthropologists determine the degree of Aboriginal disadvantage in Australia today; only that they have diverted their attention from the analysis of the events that have produced that disadvantage. It is understandable if anthropologists become irritated or bored when accused of simply being products of their time. I want to show how their intellectual products have become effective perpetrators of the errors of their times.

From the second decade of the 20th century, British structural functionalism increasingly challenged the evolutionary framework of Australian anthropologists. Proto-anthropologists such as Howitt (Fison and Howitt, 1880) and Spencer (1904), and collectors of information such as Curr (1886) and Woods (1879), had sought comparative material, especially on kinship and religion, within in the framework of a unilinear evolutionary theory. The major break with these endeavours came when Radcliffe-Brown arrived as the first Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University in 1926. The increasing concern was then to delineate the internal structuring of the typical Aboriginal social group, and its variations across Australia. Comparative historical questions lost their urgency, and concern with the nature of races and racial difference became peripheral. Radcliffe-Brown expressed this break in a footnote to 'The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes':

> Practically all the theoretical discussion of Australian social organisation has been directed towards providing hypothetical reconstructions of its history... The more modest but really more important task of trying to understand what the organisation really is and how it works has been neglected (193:426).

From this time on there was a flowering of social anthropology (as it took a different direction from physical anthropology) and the establishment of a tradition of long field-trips for participant observation in one community: the results of these investigations were usually published in the journal *Oceania*. Written accounts of social organisation and religious ritual were largely descriptive rather than analytical, and in the *Oceania* field reports there was little discussion of the significance of observations in terms of competing sociological theories. Interpretation consisted largely of specifying the social function of observed practices and beliefs (Warner, 1937). Attention was overwhelmingly focussed on social behaviour among Australian Aborigines and how it could most accurately be described.

As the twentieth century advanced, ideas disseminated from these specialised studies of social anthropology increasingly informed popular notions about Aborigines. Social anthropologists largely dominated the task of defining who Aborigines were and how their special characteristics

could be defined and explained. These characteristics were cultural, which meant that they pertained to social organisation (kinship and marriage), religious belief and practice. Origins and physical characteristics were dealt with in initial chapters in textbooks (Elkin, 1938 and later editions to 1964; R M & C M Berndt, 1964), but such treatment relied on earlier theories and evidence and was not an essential part of the description of Aboriginal social organisation.

The major changes in the direction of research necessitated some modification to already widely acclaimed work. Many of the earlier explanations for the patterns of kinship nomenclatures and religious ritual, in terms of stages in the unilinear development of human society, become an embarrassment. But rather than mounting a thorough going reassessment of the material gathered so far, researchers simply ignored the sections referring to stages of development and incorporated material gathered under an evolutionary paradigm into a new framework. For instance, in 1904 Spencer and Gillen published their study of *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* which included the description of group marriage as an early (i.e. evolutionary) form of marriage. When this 19th century interpretation of marriage was generally rejected, the term that Spencer and Fillen had initially translated as 'wife' was given instead the meaning 'legitimate sexual partner': in the 1927 edition of the book the section on group marriage was modified accordingly. Thus the behavioural observations of 'group marriage' became a description of 'wife-lending'. Clearly there are dangers when such short-cuts are taken.

The loss of interest in defining racial characteristics and in comparative questions meant that anthropologists tended to refrain from examining the consequences of miscegenation for the definition of Aborigines. The interest in a particular kind of culture encouraged that which was traditional and which defined Aborigines encouraged students of anthropology to repair to remoter parts of the continent where miscegenation was less apparent. They continued the work of the earlier compilers of information, providing descriptive accounts and interpretations of the complexities and subtleties of kinship, religion and other aspects of traditional Aboriginal society that commanded international interest. Thus, while in most parts of the continent the Aborigines had learned a great deal (though not of course scientifically) about the anthropologists' culture, the anthropologists' interest was only in those Aborigines who had escaped, through geographical fortune, the direct invasion of their territory. In the closely settled areas where often large Aboriginal minorities were to be found, there was little interest expressed by anthropologists. However, what little there was provides crucial evidence of the continued reliance on racial categories.

The few studies done in northern and western New South Wales uncritically used the terms half-castes, part-Aborigines or civilised Aborigines (eg. Elkin 1935, Reay 1945). The method of study was the usual anthropological one of participant observation of a community as if it were a bounded and stable entity, despite the fact that these groups were reserve or fringe dwellers. This analytic strategy derived from a particular theory of traditional culture as exotic and unchanging; cultures can therefore be 'broken down' or 'lost' owing to changed circumstances. Those who bear the culture are not seen as adapting to changes, as making strategic or rational judgements or as actively striving for certain ends. In other words culture from this perspective is a set of traditional practices and rules to be found either in the thinking of the people or in their habits. When the culture is no longer appropriate to changed conditions the people get confused. This identification of Aborigines with certain cultural practices leads to many problems. Aborigines allegedly behave in certain ways; are they still Aborigines if they behave in other ways? Or do they behave in other ways because they are no longer Aborigines? The terminology in these studies indicates raw confusion: reference to racial categories, half-castes and mixed bloods were made without any explanation of the relevance of 'caste' and 'blood' to what were supposedly studies of culture. There was thus an implied causal connection between the dilution of the blood and the loss of Aboriginal, that is traditional, cultural practices. Some indications of the origin of this elision of categories can be gained from an examination of early statements about the task of anthropology in Australia. The consequences are apparent in textbooks as I indicate below.

The anthropological endeavour was spelt out by Radcliffe-Brown in the first volume of *Oceania* in 1930. Anthropology was to be carried out 'by scientists who have been specially trained for the purpose' (Radcliffe-Brown, 1930:1). The science could be of practical value in the 'satisfactory control, in administration and education of what are called backward peoples, which require a thorough understanding of their culture' (1930:2). But, he added, 'These investigations are perhaps not of any immediate practical use, for the Australian aborigines, even if not doomed to extinction as a race, seem at any rate doomed to have their cultures destroyed' (1930:3). Firth, who was Professor of Anthropology and editor of *Oceania* for one year after Radcliffe-Brown left, indicated the kind of theory which underlay the usefulness of anthropology when he said that the principle of substitution, 'or replacing an item of culture which is ill-adapted to a new situation by one which is better fitted to stand the strain, is advocated by modern anthropology' (1931:4). Some attempts to show the use of anthropology to administrators of various kinds read like efforts to placate critics or justify funding, but Firth says there is also a

> mass of information to be collected from the remnants of surviving

> tribes in many portions of the continent who have been more influenced by white civilization ... Such work needs to be done soon, ere the still primitive tribes lose the fresh vigour of their social and religious system, and those already attached to the skirts of the white man loosen their enfeebled grasp and go to join their elders (1932:6).

Firth's poetic bent should not obscure the very simple theoretical approach which is empiricist, functionalist and contrasts the Aborigine's culture with the white's civilisation.

Firth recognises that 'it is inequitable and unsatisfactory to expect aborigines to live their normal lives when removed from their ancestral lands' (1932:10). This is the first reference to the issue that Elkin was to stress repeatedly in future years, and it is Elkin's information that Firth is referring to when he says the Aborigine 'cannot perform the rites which he thinks give him his food and certainly give him a sense of well-being in an alien land' (1931:10).

Elkin in 1938, R.M. & C.H. Berndt in 1964 and Maddock in 1972 published the major anthropological text books on Aborigines. While markedly different, each shows the confusion of culture with racial categories, and each also invokes the static and mentalist notion of culture that drew the same kind of boundaries that race had previously done. Elkin, above all other anthropologists, wanted to help the Aborigines but did not examine the institutions that were most directly oppressing them, particularly the Aborigines' Protection Board. I am not saying that Elkin ignored the A.P.B., but that his efforts on behalf of Aborigines did not involve any analysis of the A.P.B's social function and cultural context. European institutions were not the focus of the anthropologists' studies: Aborigines' characteristics were and on this topic the anthropologist was an expert, although Elkin was never sure whether their intellects were inferior to those of Europeans (1937). He berated those who, with narrow reasoning, denied the Aborigines the opportunity of special instruction, and pointed to the efficacy of such instruction given by the Americans in the Philippines. He accepted that Aborigines had shown little power to adapt themselves to our culture, but argued that 'the social and racial handicaps ... must be borne in mind' (1937:497). His major work, *The Australian Aborigines; How to Understand Them* (first published 1938), had an initial chapter on 'their human classification and place of origin' although the major part of the book is a detailed description of social organisation and religious life. In the final chapter a section entitled 'A cultural hiatus' describes Aborigines in the early settled districts who were mainly of mixed decent:

> Their knowledge of Aboriginal language, customs, beliefs and sacred places is, with few exceptions, fragmentary, though they often retain a

> feeling of belonging to certain tribal areas, and experience the warmth and refuge of kinship and extended family ties. Aboriginal culture for them ... is no longer a steady flowing stream of knowledge, law and faith, coming from the 'ever present past' and remaining with them 'from one generation to another'. ***And no other culture has taken its place...*** Full-bloods in the northern and west-central regions still have their own living culture to give them firm and well-known ground on which to stand and face the future (1974:379, 381 my emphasis).

Elkin envisages the part-Aborigines as either sitting at the feet of knowledgable old full-bloods, it that is possible, or,

> With their increasing opportunities of secondary and tertiary education, they may read and ponder on the records and expositions of Aboriginal culture made by anthropologists... In this way Aborigines, irrespective if caste, may become proud of their full-blood ancestors and gain an insight into the latter's philosophy of, and guide-lines to, life. Thus equipped, they will make their several ways more assuredly in the general Australian community, or in their own regional communities as long as these remain (1974:382).

Culture for Elkin then, is useful baggage which can be passed on in a number of ways; its loss leads to 'a kind of ''culture non-existence'' '(1974:381).

The next major general text was Catherine and Ronald Berndt's *The World of the First Australians* (first published 1964). Again, the first chapter covered origin and physical characteristics, and the bulk of the work described social organisation, material culture, the life cycle and religion. The final two chapters discuss 'what has been happening in the *non*-traditional sphere' (1977, ix, emphasis in the original).

The authors argue that 'the rapid disorganisation and relatively easy collapse' of the 'integrity and independence' of Aboriginal society was partly due to its 'heavy emphasis on non-change' and the fact that Aborigines on all counts 'were a conservative people' (1977:492). It is ironic that this depiction of Aboriginal society as unable to cope with change, because of a stress on permanence, which is echoed in many more popular works (eg. Stanner, 1969), is at least partly a consequence of anthropologists' methods of analysis. Their accounts of the characteristic institutions and ideologies of a society tend to emphasise stability over time. This stability, permanence or conservatism implies a comparison which is never spelt out.

It is possible to discern in the Berndts' text a similar idea about the nature of culture to that given by Elkin before, and Maddock after, them. After saying that 'Wherever Europeans settled in any numbers, the trend was the

same. The Aborigines around them began to die out' (1977:506), they explain that the

> ... survivors were beginning to adopt some European ways, at least superficially. And there was a growing number of half-castes, offspring of European or other alien fathers and Aboriginal mothers. This dual process has continued all through the southern part of the Continent: diminishing 'Aboriginality', in physical as well as in cultural traits; and on both these scores a growing resemblance to Europeans (sic) (1977:506).

As for the 'traditionally oriented', the Berndts say they are harder to find than a few years ago but this 'is not to say that traditional elements will cease to survive in some form or other, but that Aboriginal life, as a way of life, will have ceased to exist' (1977:514), and furthermore, 'Aboriginality, on an Australia wide basis means no more than a common identification in physical terms, the accident of Aboriginal descent' (1977:515). The confusion shown here about biology and culture is not reduced by the assertion that the 'last great socio-cultural reservoirs, so to speak, have been Arnhem Land and the Western Desert' (1977:521). It appears then that these authors have written about a people whose identity is, they believe, fading away. A careful reading of their final chapters reveals no coherent explanation for this change although it is implied that the process is a natural consequence of the presence of Europeans.

Maddock did not begin his text *The Australian Aborigines* (first published 1972) with origins and physical characteristics, but with a statement in the preface that he would confine himself to 'what was living in Aboriginal tradition' although 'reference has been made to what is dead where that seemed necessary for the explication of what survives' (1982, viii). It is not clear where he found 'what was dead' but we can presume it was from anthropological texts rather than the memories of informants, and it can be inferred that what was living were ideas sometimes expressed in practices. The object of writing the book was to 'state some of the general features of Aboriginal society' and the author clearly believes that Aboriginal society only exists in the north of Australia. It is identified with a particular tradition, even though Maddock accepts that the tradition may be changed to some degree. He sees various 'cults' as ways that Aborigines have tried to better their conditions of life,

> ... while keeping at least some of their traditional culture. Indigenous symbols and ways of thought continued to be vital even when mixed with new ingredients. By envisaging distinctiveness for themselves, whether alongside or in place of whites, the followers of these movements refused to accept that their society was dying. Yet their enterprise must be seen as deluded in each case: either it appealed to powers that are not of this world or it proposed a most unlikely ex-

> change. Although movements of this kind can keep up the spirit of their adherents, and thus help sustain the integrity of Aboriginal communities, their methods and assumptions are too fanciful for them to be able to tackle the real causes of the misery against which they are reacting. There is something self-defeating about a message that has to be deciphered by anthropologists (1982:9-10).

Maddock's account of Aborigines' response to the European challenge shows little appreciation of the dynamics of resistance. Nor does he explain his view of 'the real causes' of their misery, or how vital 'indigenous symbols' become part of a 'deluded' enterprise. He does say that 'open resistance could not last long; it was soon suppressed. Native interests were ranked so low in comparison with settler interests that they practically vanished from view and Aboriginal discontent was left to express itself in cryptic and ambiguous forms' (1982:10).

Though presenting what he defines as Aboriginal society in a very different light from Elkin and Berndt, Maddock nonetheless shares with those authors certain assumptions about the nature of 'traditional culture'. They each 'accord a critical priority to systems of human meanings [and]... leave unposed the question of how different forms of discourse come to be materially produced and maintained as authoritative systems' (Asad, 1979:619). That is, when Maddock says that indigenous ways of thought continued to be vital 'even when mixed with new ingredients' he is creating a recipe for confusion. Would it be possible to identify an 'indigenous way of thought' and specify the nature of the new ingredients and the reason for their being added? Why do these mixtures only raise 'the spirit of their adherents' and not anything more substantial? Are we perhaps in the realm, not of harmless metaphor, but of anthropological mythology and its mystifying symbol of the pure traditional culture?

The theory of culture used by these anthropologists included the view that after what was called 'culture contact' Aborigines began to 'lose' their culture. Given such theoretical orientations, Talal Asad has argued that 'the main trouble with much colonial anthropology ... and with much contemporary anthropology too ... has been not its ideological service in the cause of imperialism, but its ideological conception of social structure and of culture' (1979:624). He asserts that the difficulties anthropologists encountered in conceptualising social change stem from their preoccupation with essential human meanings. These 'authoritative meanings' tend to be for anthropologists the *a priori* totality which defines and reproduces the essential integrity of a given social order. That is, for anthropologists, culture is a particular ideology. The depiction of contemporary Aboriginal society has therefore been inadequate partly because it is difficult to recognise a systematic and consistent ideology among subordinate groups who lack the power to give authoritative expression to their ideas. An il-

lustration of the problem is Maddock's view that 'conditions in some Australian states are more compatible than ever before with the surviving features of traditional Aboriginal society' (1982 preface). I believe he is referring to the fact that reserve life allows more time for the performance of ritual than did station work. Thus rituals are 'surviving features' of what is, by implication, dead. In the Australian literature references to the culture being 'destroyed', 'undermined' or 'dislocated' are still common. Instead of any analysis of the processes of change we have such metaphoric phrases as 'upsetting the delicate balance between man and land', or 'the rapid collapse of traditional culture'.

Many of the studies done in the 1940s and 1950s in New South Wales and southern Queensland would be rejected as inadequate today. For instance, one researcher stated that work on reserves was useful because there were 'old people to whom the past was more real than the present with its disintegration of native social life' (Kelly, 1935:463), and the study concluded with the comment that 'research among the remnants on settlements is quite worthwhile' (1935:473). A more sophisticated author in the same tradition argued that 'when new beliefs and behaviour-patterns are adopted, and others inherent in the original culture remain, it is dangerous to attempt to define too sharply the separate spheres of influence of the older culture which has been rapidly declining and the new one which has been grafted on to it' (Reay 1949:89).

Here the two cultures apparently exist independently and people behave in terms of either one or the other. A common feature of such analysis is that Aborigines act in terms of their culture and that when it is 'lost' or 'eroded' they cannot 'adapt'. There is no attempt to understand how Aboriginal groups themselves responded and defined their aims in new contexts, nor how their choices were systematically expressed or limited, organised or suppressed. Elkin's work for instance on 'southern' Aboriginal groups was very much a response in terms of common-sense welfare notions accepted uncritically from his own cultural background. Maddock's only mention of Aborigines in the south is an assertion that 'in some regions there is scarcely any difference between Aborigines and other Australians' (1982:6) which, in my opinion, is simply superficial nonsense (cf. Beckett, 1958a; Cowlishaw, 1986). In general, the few studies conducted in the settled parts of Australia by anthropologists showed little appreciation of the historical, political and economic forces that had created the community being studied. Nor was there systematic attention paid to the way these Aboriginal communities were, in the contemporary situation, bounded by laws and practices that confined their activities to certain limited areas, both geographically and socially.

In the light of this dominant but restricted intellectual framework, the

reason for the limited number of studies of the southern Aborigines is apparent. Aborigines in New South Wales and other settled parts of Australia no longer displayed that most definitive characteristic, their traditional culture. These southern studies are also accorded low status. One researcher has even said that working in New South Wales was seen as a kind of apprenticeship carried out by those not yet ready for the real anthropological work. It is apparent that the inadequacy of the conceptual framework anthropologists used in these studies is due to the limitation of their concept of culture which was still closely associated with the older concept of race. But it is important to recognise that the study of 'traditional' culture suffered from the same conceptual limitations. There are a number of reasons for this.

Australian anthropologists remained more concerned with their place in the international anthropological fraternity than concerned with analysing events in Australian society, although dramatic changes in the Aborigines' social positions were taking place, both through the economic development of those areas which had been the remote haven of 'traditional' Aborigines, and also in legislation. Even if they did not have a direct effect on isolated groups, these changes would eventually alter and to a large extent determine their futures. But no attention was paid to this fact either as the subject of research or, perhaps most seriously, as requiring methodological attention. Given, for instance, that the hunter-gatherers were no longer hunting and gathering but were fencing and mustering, was the researcher still collecting information about hunters and gatherers? How did the field workers on government settlements or missions determine what represented the past and what represented some adjustment to changed concitions? No discussion of this issue was initiated. It seems that most field workers simply relied on the idea that people, or at least traditional Aborigines, did not change their ideas and habits quickly. Under certain circumstances, such an assumption may not lead to serious distortion, although in others there is evidence to the contrary (cf. Reynolds 1981; Morris 1983; Anderson 1983). Anthropologists' major concerns were usually with those things which had not changed, and the use of the ethnographic present in anthropological accounts is convention which allows the writer to pretend that it is possible to observe, and even participate in, an unchanging society. My objection is less to the use of such a convention than to the lack of critical assessment of its effect.

I have argued that the only integrity recognised in an Aboriginal society, until recently at least, was the integrity of tradition. Yet a whole body of literature in anthropology, valuable as it is in recording past traditions, did not see itself as *simply* recording past traditions. Rather, it saw itself defining what Aborigines were, and are. This literature is dominated by the false notion that there *are* traditional Aboriginal societies.

The recently coined term, 'traditionally oriented' papers over a crack in the whole conceptual edifice, for it allows for the retention of the anthropologist's notion of culture as a stable set of ideas and practices that are peculiar to Aborigines and which define Aborigines. In the last ten years there has been an increasing number of anthropological studies of change in Aboriginal society, but the notion of a past cultural integrity that is being breached or altered is often a fundamental part of the theoretical framework (cf. Berndt 1977). Another approach presents the contemporary community, though demonstrably embattled and precarious, as if it were a self-managing entity in the classic field work style (e.g. Kolig, 1980; Sansom 1980). I will suggest later that there are more useful strategies possible, such as seeing culture itself as a living response to stable or chaning conditions.

Theories that continue to define Aborigines in terms of one tradition and ignore the social contexts in which racial boundaries and definitions are culturally constructed and reproduced will remain inadequate. The problem is a conceptual one concerning the category Aboriginal, but it is not one confined to anthropological discourse. Confused terminology and embarrassment often occur as people try to avoid imputing greater or less legitimacy to some Aborigines than others (cf. Reay, 1964; Tugby, 1975). My aim here is to escape this confusion which we inherited from a particular kind of theory of culture and its unacknowledged links with popular racial categories. If the study of race was the science that many of our academic forebears produced, which explained and thereby justified the differences between the colonisers and the colonised, could it not be argued that social anthropology, by defining Aborigines as have a particular unique and unchanging culture, has done the same thing?

We need to keep in mind the lessons from the earlier literature on the nature of racial differences: the concept of race which referred to discrete human groups was based on a biological error, and yet was used to assert inferiority. I am now suggesting that any connections between the specific characteristics of traditional Aboriginal culture and the political predicament of Aboriginal groups today are also invalid. Yet, it is the work of anthropologists that has invited such an explanation, even when they have not made the connection implicitly or explicitly themselves (cf. Berndt 1982: preface). In addressing this legacy, Morris has argued that 'The view that traditional practices and attitudes provided an insurmountable barrier to Aboriginal employment is simply misleading' and that 'creative adaptation is a form of culture change for a people who ***had to depend*** on their creativity and innovation to survive' (1983:511. Morris' emphasis).

It also ill behoves anthropologists to create a temporal division of culture. Aborigines may have never been quite as we have described them and,

more seriously, we would have to explain when Aboriginal culture ceases to exist. Maddock has implied that he can tell, but many Aborigines are denied inclusion in his category. In contrast to these problems, it is refreshing to see a new dynamic approach emerging: two articles appeared recently in the same issue of Mankind (1983), both by young anthropologists critical of past accounts of Aborigines. Anderson attacks the new historians for their lack of recognition of culture and Morris attacks the old anthropologists for recognising nothing else. Both incorporate particular historical events in their explanations of the changing nature of the Aboriginal communities they are analysing.

The history of the literature on Aborigines is the history of anthropological hegemony and in the recent contributions from educationalists, historians, psychologists and political scientists, there is a tendency to rely on anthropologists' work for authoritative statements concerning Aboriginal traditions. It seems important therefore to define the limits of the anthropologist's area of expertise and admit that the discipline has no special authority in the area of what is called 'social change' or in the analysis of the kind of society into which Aborigines have been incorporated. The bulk of social anthropology in Australia on Aboriginal society until recently may be more accurately described as social archaeology.

In conclusion, I suggest a more useful approach for anthropological enterprise. In recent years the work about Aborigines has produced three themes. First, that Aborigines are victims of racism. Second, that Aborigines are victims of capitalism, exploited and dependent. Third, the theme of Aboriginal resistance to invasion and European hegemony. It is the third theme that seems to me to leave room for a more useful conception of culture and for analysing changes in Aboriginal society. Until a decade ago there was almost no recognition of the active part that Aborigines might have played in the retention or resurgence, or even rejection, of cultural forms as strategies in a political struggle. Quite the opposite. As indicated, Aborigines were usually depicted either as having lost their culture, or as clinging rather pathetically to its remains. But there is quite a different interpretation of such clinging, or indeed of rejection of particular traditions. The work of Gilroy in the United Kingdom develops a view of culture as essentially political. He says

> The struggles of 'black' people appear in an intensely cultural form because the social formation in which their distinct political traditions are now manifest has constructed the arena of politics on ground overshadowed by centuries of metropolitan capitalist development, thereby denying them recognition as legitimate politics.

He goes on to point out that the terms such as coon and wog (or boong), are cultural constructions in an ideological struggle, and that

> [c]ultures of resistance develop to contest them and the power they inform, as one aspect of the struggle against capitalist domination which blacks experience as racial oppression. This is a class struggle *in* and *through* race (Gilroy 1981:210, emphasis in original).

He therefore argues that culture is a terrain of class conflict. Whether one accepts the class nature of the conflict or not, my major point is that this is a quite different way of viewing culture from the old tradition-retained-or-lost one. If culture is a creation, an expression of a human group's responses to their social existence, then the changing conditions of that existence does not mean a loss of culture. One could as well lose one's biology. Rather it means a cultural response to a different situation. That is, the Aboriginal response to change is cultural by definition. While Aborigines have not chosen the weapons or the arena on which the struggle is played out, nonetheless they have, consciously or unconsciously, continually responded to and resisted the hegemony of white society.

In New South Wales country towns there *is* an Aboriginal culture. There is an ongoing recreation of a distinct cultural heritage which has its own vocabulary, its family form, pattern of interpersonal interaction and even its own economy (Cowlishaw, in press). One source of this culture has been the specific everyday experience of the black population which has given rise to commonsense (in the Gramscian sense) ideas which conflict with the whites' commonsense concerning normality, propriety and the sanctity of private property. One of its manifestations is the highly developed humour which reinterprets events which threaten to engulf Aborigines' lives. Another part of it is the direct attacks on property. It is also manifested in the black power vocabulary which has been adopted by some of the young people, and in defiant public emphasis on values that are known to upset the dominant whites (cf. Young, N.D.; Beckett, 1958b). Willis and Corrigan (1983) have discussed such 'oppositional culture' in Britain, and the work of Genovese (1975) discusses equivalent cultural creations of the oppressed.

It is my contention that it is not the task of social scientists to define who is and who is not an Aborigine, or to pronounce on how far a community conforms to some typical or traditional form of Aboriginal society. The interest in such questions, and more recently in Aboriginality, stems from the dynamics of a racially divided society where a particular category of people has been subject to formal and informal sanctions since the arrival of Europeans. Neither biological nor cultural criteria can be used to distinguish, once and for all, a category of people called Aborigines, any more than set characteristics can identify Greeks, Americans or Chinese. Such groupings of people are made according to historically changed criteria and they gain social and political importance for historically specific reasons. Thus Aboriginality has become an important issue for

Aborigines today because of the political, economic and ideological position they are in.

Thus I argue that the Aborigines in the north, south, east and west of Australia are themselves defining what Aborigines are. Aboriginal culture is being changed, developed and extended in embattled situations. There has not been simply an attempt to cling to a past tradition but, wittingly or not, the creation of new ones. Part of the Aborigines' struggle today is over who is to define the very category 'Aboriginal'.

Notes

1. A notable exception is the work of Jeremy Beckett at Wilcannia (1958a).

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