

## EDITORIAL

THIS ISSUE OF *NELEN YUBU* is unusual in that it comprises only one article, a thesis prepared by Percy Leske in the context of Ridley College, Melbourne. Because it is not only within the area of major concern of *Nelen Yubu* but is also the fruit of long experience and reflection by a man in the field, we have thought our readers would appreciate a full presentation of it. We have left out only the Acknowledgements, which are more personal in nature, and the Synopsis. Too rarely do the men in the field, the 'practical men', submit themselves to the discipline of reflection and scholarly presentation to the rest of us of the fruit of their experience.

Percy Leske is the Anglican pastor at Numbulwar, Rose River, in south-eastern Arnhem Land in the NT. He was born in 1926 at Frelling in South Australia. He was a school teacher at Roper River 1951-52. In 1953 he studied at Moore Theological College and did some non-degree course work at Sydney University in the history of languages and anthropology. On his return to Roper River in 1953 he was appointed superintendent and remained in that role until 1968. From 1968 till 1979 he was Field Superintendent for the Church Missionary Society. In 1979 he went to Ridley College, Melbourne, and was ordained deacon in October of that year. In February 1980 he was ordained priest in Christ Church cathedral of the Diocese of the Northern Territory. In the Queen's birthday honours of 1981 he was awarded the MBE for Aboriginal services. His wife is Betty and his children Ruth, Helen, Graham and Kathryn.

It is to be noted that he is writing about Arnhem Land. Hence some general statements are really more restricted in application than might first appear to be the case, eg. regarding the use of subsections. However, when one allows for regional diversities of detail, so much of what he writes will be found to be thought-provoking commentary upon Christian missionary experience in Australia.

MARTIN WILSON

EDITOR

# AN INDIGENOUS CHURCH IN ABORIGINAL SOCIETY

PERCY E. LESKE

## I UNDERSTANDING THE ABORIGINAL

### HIS TRADITIONAL LIFE

#### *KINSHIP SYSTEM*

THE TOTAL IDENTITY OF AN ABORIGINAL is conceived by him as stemming from his relationship to people and to land. He derives great spiritual satisfaction by simply being with his relatives or being in his country and taking part in the daily pattern of life, with all the small details of reciprocal action and interdependence. In an Aboriginal community therefore, family and kinship ties are the most important aspects of life. They are community dwellers and it is important that they do things together and with each other. This forges bonds between them as well as expressing relationships and deepening them.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, everything that an Aboriginal does is used to express this relationship and so express identity. To go it alone, as it were, would make no sense, as relationship is at the core of their culture. Refusal to accept this carries overtones of denial of relationship and would, in a manner of speaking, leave a person 'stateless', an utter stranger.

The first thing that an Aboriginal in a community receives therefore, is relationship. If moving about, the primary thing in a new community is to establish one's relationship. This is not a difficult task for an Aboriginal as the very fabric of his society is the kinship structure, which is how the Aboriginal social system is referred to. Actually there are two main parts to kinship, sections and subsections. All Aboriginal people belong to one of the eight subsections in a tribal

community.<sup>2</sup> They are commonly termed 'skin groups'. By knowing a person's skin group one can tell his relationship to each other person of that community. An Aboriginal's skin group depends on the mother's group but is not the same as hers. Thus, from the moment of birth everyone belongs to one of these groups. Each skin group has a name which varies as to whether it is for a male or female person. Brother and sister belong to the same group but are referred to by male and female terms. Often people, when speaking to each other use the skin name in their conversation. The personal name, which is sacred, can only be used in some circumstances. Anyone knowing of it can wield great power over the person often for evil, as the name embodies the whole person. It is usually handed down to one's great-grand-child. Only certain persons are entrusted to do the naming. Therefore it is customary to call people by their skin group name, country name, nickname, assumed name or ceremonial name. Also it is not etiquette to ask a person his name. One must learn it from a third person who is in the right relationship to say that person's name. Among themselves, Aborigines use their relationship terms. In moving to a different area or on death of a person with a similar name to one's own, a person would adopt another name to be safe from any evil intent or malice aforethought from any quarter.

Thus, when an Aboriginal moves, the first thing to be established is his relationship to people in the new community. It is possible to find this out by corresponding 'skin' names or by finding a person known to both and the relationship of each other to that person, then determining all other relationships from that. Another way would be by related ceremonies. In Aboriginal society all plants, animals and inanimate objects are inter-related so can all be classified as though they are existing beings. The whole universe within which the Aborigine lives and moves is therefore regarded as a living organism to which he is related and to which he has obligations and responsibilities. Kinship therefore, is not just based on actual blood relationship ties but is far more wide ranging to cater for the needs of these nomadic food gatherers.

#### *KINSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES AND MARRIAGE CUSTOMS*

In Aboriginal society there is social order which has conventions that govern who hunts and gathers where, and who shares in the gains. Further it determines who marries whom, and to whom the children belong; who metes out punishment for an offence, and what the punishment is. There are definite duties for life and death that determine who plays what part in the rituals that follow a death, and so on. Thus, a function of the kinship system is the regulation of all

the rules and conventions of Aboriginal society. All Aboriginals, everywhere, irrespective of tribe or language are related. Even though persons may leave a parent group, these links of kinship do not break. People are still brothers, sisters, children, grandparents, fathers, mothers and so on, to those left behind. In this way the relationship extends right through all their descendents so that all Aboriginals are related. They cannot therefore think of kinship in any general way. Each individual stands in respect to every other individual, in a definite kin relationship.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned earlier, the system consists of a limited number of sections or skin groups. Everyone living within a tribe and in neighbouring tribes is classified into two distinct divisions or moieties. Moiety simply means 'half'. The skin groups are divided into two equal divisions. These govern all the marriage laws and are of prime importance to the Aboriginal way of life. A person of one moiety must marry a person of the opposite moiety and not into his own. This system of dual organisation, as it has been<sup>5</sup> called, provides a clear cut division for social and ceremonial purposes.

At times there are some alternative and irregular marriages for which allowances are made. Occasionally some argument or fighting may occur, gifts are exchanged and the kinship terms applied to the couple may have to be changed by some of the relatives. However, to marry someone in the kinship relationship of mother, father, uncle, aunt, son, daughter, nephew or niece, never mind how distantly related, is unpardonable. This is viewed as incest and punishable by spearing and death.<sup>6</sup>

A form of Levirate marriage is also practised. When a man's brother dies he inherits all his wives. Marrying more than one wife is also practised. A man may have several women of differing ages from very old to a child. This is deliberately undertaken so that there are younger people to care for the ageing. It has an economical function as well as a social role. The motive is not really sexual as this is often achieved by clandestine arrangements outside of marriage. Marriage often cements bonds between neighbouring tribes with gifts exchanged as well, especially between families.

From the foregoing, marriage is clearly established within the framework of kinship. In fact all behaviour patterns are based on kinship relationships between the persons involved. Standards of social behaviour can be observed in all stages of life; in childhood, marriage, initiation, the exchange of gifts, social contacts and in ritual, including burial.

Kinship prescribes that a man and his wife's mother must not associate, and other such avoidance practices including other cases of reserved attitudes towards certain persons. So, too, brother and sister do not face each other when conversing. A man is 'boss' and is

the disciplinarian over his sister's son, his 'boy' as he calls him, even as he will protect him and give him gifts. A man in the relation of mother's brother is the operator in circumcision and, belonging to the class of wife's father, protects his daughter's husband. An initiate is helped, encouraged and advised by his wife's brother.

The customs are endless. There are regulations about arrangements for food sharing, also the reciprocal gift making and the social duty of gifts. The order in which people group when camping, the ritual for mourning, these are all known. In fact all life's situations have a set pattern to be observed.

This gives a great solidarity to the group in that kin relationship is affirmed and deepened in terms of sharing and participating together. Failure to take part results in the weakening of the quality of the relationship. Thus an Aboriginal has a great need to be united with his relatives, that he may again and again experience and renew his relationship with them and express the interdependence of himself and his relatives.<sup>8</sup>

#### *LAND RELATIONSHIP AND PRE-EXISTENCE*

Another major factor in the life of the Aborigines besides community is land or country. The Aboriginal has a real bond with his country. It is the area where he does all things together with his relatives. His belief, his existence, all stem from it as he is intimately associated with it in every way. It sustains him, for he receives from it, rather than does anything to it. He has a real relationship with the land as it is the centre for his ceremonies and his mythological beliefs as well as source of economic opportunity. Many places are significant and will always be his life. The quality of the place ever remains the same, that is "the place where my grandfather died" or "my mother's country". Therefore it is regarded as the home of the spirits of its departed members and of those not yet born. Thus the ancestral heroes, when they made the country also provided the spirits of men. Here is a glimpse then of the heritage of life which gives continuity to the race. The Aboriginal believes in the corporate personality of the past, present and future. They are all one. He always is. Therefore the Aboriginal idea of heritage is not one of passing on life by physical means. It is based on pre-existence. Intercourse is not responsible for pro-creation and conception, Rather, the father's relationship is spiritual and social only, not biological. Man receives his body from and through his mother and her mother and so on. The father is therefore more closely related to his sister's children than his own, for he and his sister and her children inherited their flesh and blood from the same

line, while his own children inherit theirs through his wife's line. This explains the very close sociological bond which exists between a man and his mother's brother.

The 'supply' of spirits both human and natural has been present ever since the dreamtime. This view of pre-existence affects the Aboriginal view of nature. Definite sites in his country, such as water holes, stone piles, rocks, hills, caves and trees are believed to have spirits of various species living at them. If members of the right groups, generally totemic clans, at the right time, at these sacred sites, re-enact in sacred ritual the deeds and experiences of the dreamtime heroes, they believe that then the pre-existent spirits of that particular species will go forth into a species causing it to increase in due course.<sup>9</sup>

This, then, is the basis of the Aboriginal's attachment to his country — the country in which his spirit pre-existed since the dreamtime. The oft-used expression, "This is my country", means not so much that he owns it and has camping and hunting rights in it, but that it owns him. He belongs to it. To a certain extent he seems to feed on his presence in it, resulting from the religious beliefs associated with the land. It gave him all that he was, has and is. His life and its existence are one.

No matter how difficult and hard the country may appear to be, an Aboriginal is reluctant to leave his clan or tribal territory except temporarily. An Aboriginal would be most unwilling to be exiled from his spirit-centre or homeland.

#### SOCIAL ORGANISATION

The Aboriginal within his country has an organised social pattern. There are a series of groups. The largest is the tribe who are in possession of a well-defined area and are distinguished by a tribal name as well as by a common language. It is the custodian of the social laws, customs and mythological beliefs. Each tribe is divided into hordes or clan groups. These groups consist of people all related in the male line. They have exclusive hunting and camping rights of a well-defined area. Usually the control rests in one man, the headman who meets with other headmen of other groups in the tribe to make up the tribal council. The home of the local group is the country where their spirit centre exists and they have a common tie and relationship to all the myths and ceremonies. Of course they are all nomadic food gatherers and hunters. Mostly their relationships are traced<sup>10</sup> patrilineally and the women are included because of their fathers.

Each local clan is autonomous, or self-governing, having complete

rights in its own territory. Authority and leadership rest in the men of age. They must be men of experience who have received and tested the group's heritage of knowledge and skill, of belief and ritual. There is no central tribal authority dividing the several clans. Mostly when groups meet, the various clan elders discuss matters of common interest such as marriages, exchange of articles and especially ritual. These elders, usually men with grey hairs are not dictators. Rather they are custodians and interpreters of the customs and values which are enshrined in the myth instilled from childhood by parents and kinsfolk, and during the initiation of males by the 'masters' of the secret life. These men are men of prestige and indisputable authority who understand the secrets which were instituted in the long past time by the cultural heroes. They see that everything is duly performed and observed so that the future of the tribe is not jeopardized.

#### TOTEMISM AND DREAMING

For the Aboriginal, the clan not only consists of persons, but they regard everything known to them, in the heavens, on the earth and in the waters as part of their social order. All living creatures, all plants and other natural objects, as well as the sun, the moon, the stars, the rain, are also divided into clans, sections or groupings, so that the total environment is regarded by them as members of the clan, therefore as relatives.

A particular creature, plant or object is looked upon as a clan's special and 'active' relative and as the symbol of its common clan membership. This is known as the clan totem. If the totem is the bandicoot, then it is the totem of all the members of that group, human and natural. Thus men and nature are all members of one great tribe, forming a close spiritual bond between all aspects of nature. Man therefore, is not spiritually a being apart. Totemism then, is a view of life, reflecting the essential unity of all living things and all natural forces springing from the same source as all other forms of life in the universe. A person's totem is often described as his 'dreaming'. If the dreaming of a person is a 'goanna' then he stands in a particular relationship to that totem. It is to the species, not just a particular individual creature. The goanna therefore, is treated with respect and members of its clan refrain from hunting or eating. However they may kill and eat other edible species even though they are the dreamings of other people.<sup>11</sup>

No two persons of the same dreaming can marry as this would be regarded as incestuous. Even before birth, an Aboriginal's dreaming is part of himself and so is a link with his extended past and the great beings who created him and his social order. For its

part, the dreaming helps all others within its totem, those human beings who bear its name. Often it is said to appear unexpectedly to a person, either while he is awake or dreaming, to warn him of danger, by bringing him information in some way or to cure him when he is sick. The Aboriginal therefore attributes to all nature, activity with the same motives, actions and reactions as human beings.

*SECRET RITUAL LIFE*

In daily life the Aboriginal is so utterly dependent upon nature as it gives to him his very livelihood as well as providing the necessary spirit centres. As he did not cultivate the land in any way he had to ensure that nature kept on its usual course to provide for his basic needs. This he sought to do by performing the appropriate ritual. Before the time when rain would normally fall and the cycle of life was due to be renewed, especially knowledgeable men, who have been duly prepared by chanting and by bodily decoration, perform the secret, old time rituals at sacred places, and tend the sacred symbols. The belief that has been handed on from time immemorial by the 'dreaming' is that the cycle must be re-enacted exactly as revealed in the past. The past is not something which has gone, but continues with the aid of ritual, to be ever present. So by symbol, chant and action the creative deeds of the dreamtime heroes continue on. Mythology is not just stories, but a timeless expression of the meaning of life and existence. Through chants, spoken texts, the paths of the heroes made and followed and the places they visited and left, the depositories of spirits, are retold. More than that, as the myth is re-chanted it is life-giving. So all the designs of the dreaming are chanted on to the performers as well as the emblems on to the wood and stone which in themselves then become the dreaming.

This then becomes a powerful expression and reality of all that is enacted. The dreaming continues on eternally, hence the exactitude of all the ritual painting, decorating, engraving and re-enactments. The arts of dancing, acting and design are the means through which the unseen dreaming becomes real and the cycle of life ensured.

So important are these mysteries that they are guarded by strict secrecy and also by a long and severe period of initiation. Every male is put through these ordeals and instructions from his early teens. His elders help him through these privations, leading to ritual death and rising. In this way he is fitted to receive the sacred symbols of the mysteries and so be equipped to become part of the eternal dreaming, maintaining the sacred rites and the continuance of the life-giving cycle. The interaction through ritual with the shades of the past and those of the present and its double action, the seen



and the unseen, ensures the future. Therefore, as it were, the past and the future merge into the ever present, which implies a certain timelessness.

An Aboriginal is one whose attitude to living is one of 'being' not of 'doing'. He receives from the land, not works and then receives in terms of the work. His contribution towards receiving from the land is made through the corroboree. Through the dance ritual he co-operates with the mystical forces and so brings about the natural increase through the realm of religion. There is a necessity therefore to prevent change in that his approach to living is backward looking. He finds all his values in the past so his society has reached its full development, resulting in a cyclic pattern with no forward horizon at all. Each generation remains the same, so the situation is static and stable, reinforced by an authority which is directed at maintaining this position.<sup>12</sup> An ideal Aboriginal, therefore, is one who has accepted without question what he was told in relation to behaviour and ceremonial life. To question what he was told, or to enquire into areas of ceremony which he was not yet entitled to know was a serious offence and severe punishment could result.

#### *CULTURAL ATTITUDES*

To ask any questions was considered rude and a cause of shame to the family. This fact is reflected linguistically in that it is very difficult to ask 'why?' Such a construction would mean, 'from what time?', 'from what place?' or 'for what reason?' and as such would be misunderstood. Any answer given would be a repetition of the facts rather than the reason for them.<sup>13</sup>

The way we learn then, in Aboriginal society, is only by observation and constant practice. Usually no explanations can be given, only that it is custom and always done that way. Therefore, there does not have to be a reason for doing things other than that is the way it is always done. Constant imitation is practised by the youngsters till all the patterns of social behaviour and skill are mastered. It is by trial and error that an Aboriginal learns. If he sees a thing done he does not practise but just goes ahead and copies it. Aboriginal learning therefore, involved orientation to persons rather than information. The relationship of a person is more important than what he does. Aboriginals are orientated towards 'being' not to 'doing'. His is essentially a state of being in relation to the community and the land for he is of them and receives from them. As he is 'of the land' he co-operates with it through corroboree.

The land itself forced the Aboriginal to be a collector, rather than a producer. He received from it. So he learned to come to terms with it. As nomadic food gatherers and hunters their attention and activities are so directed day by day towards satisfying their basic needs of existence that the past and future are but aspects of the present. One shades into the other. Thus, for a food gatherer, distance and time are basically aspects of one activity. Time is but a commitment of his activity. It is not mandatory to arrive at a certain precise hour, to eventually arrive is all that matters.

Thus an Aboriginal's attitude to time is cyclic as it is bound up with the cyclic pattern of his society. It is not divided into minutes, hours, days and so on, just the sunrise, midday, night cycles or the cycle of the seasons giving the same conditions and normally available foods in rotation. There is virtually no forward horizon at all. Even his language seems to reflect this as there seems to be in the grammar of time, only tenseless moods and moodless tenses, usually always expressing the present active.<sup>14</sup>

From their language we can deduce other attitudes such as 'doing'. There is no real verb of 'doing' in the sense of sheer activity. He participates, co-operates, becomes. He doesn't just 'do'. As in the ceremonies, he takes on the qualities of his totem and receives from it, he doesn't just 'do' anything.

So with adverbs. One doesn't act kindly. Kindness is the person's inherent quality. It is the nature of the kind person to be that way. Again this is in the realm of 'being' rather than 'doing'. It is not that the person *is* kind but that the kindness is of the person, for there is no verb 'to be' in that sense.

The idea of 'having' with the sense of ownership is also different for Aboriginals. Having is usually denoted as a state of being. That is, being associated with, by using a special suffix for the noun. Therefore having is something associated with a person or thing, or of being in a relationship with or having ties with it.

The distinctive feature of the Aboriginal culture therefore is that it reflects attitudes of living as 'being', not as 'doing'.<sup>15</sup>

## II HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CMS MISSIONS TO THE ABORIGINALS IN NORTH AUSTRALIA

### *FOUNDING OF MISSIONS IN NORTH AUSTRALIA*

THE FIRST WORK AMONG ABORIGINALS to be undertaken by CMS in North Australia was along the Roper River at a site about 120 kilometres upstream. This was started in response to a call by the Bishop of North Queensland in 1906. An invitation was also given by the Bishop of Carpentaria a little while later. After an initial survey of the area had been made the first missionaries landed at the Roper River location at the end of August in 1908. The first party included three people of Aboriginal descent from Queensland to enable favourable contacts to be made with local Aboriginal groups. Had not these Aboriginals been in the party it may have been difficult to establish any initial contact as the Aboriginals were very suspicious of the Europeans. They had reason to be, for they had suffered greatly at the hands of some of them. There were many misunderstandings due to lack of cultural appreciation and great injustices were suffered by Aboriginals at the hands of a number of early European settlers.<sup>16</sup>

In due course the Aboriginals came to trust the missionaries, and they settled in the vicinity. The work of reaching them for Christ began to become a reality. Conditions were harsh for the pioneers as there was much to learn and understand about outback tropical living. Staff found it difficult to maintain a continuity of service.

The nomadic nature of the Aboriginals' lifestyle made any lengthy contact difficult. Their lifestyle was so different that the whole cultural outlook took some grappling with. A system had to be devised to come to grips with these new circumstances if these folk were to be reached with the Gospel. To itinerate in a circuit was impractical. A permanent settlement was felt to be the best. It would enable the Aboriginals to acquire other skills of adjusting to a settled way of life. Hopefully they could be trained to be producers of food as well as maintain their traditional skills of foraging from the bush. If he could settle and acquire the means to sustain himself in a new situation by being selfsufficient it would facilitate greatly the consistent teaching of the Gospel. This would enable a church to be soundly based and established in the North among Aboriginal people.

### *POLICY*

Over the years the Society assessed the situation and drafted a general policy. It worked out an organizational system which was

directed towards the fulfilment of the Divine Commission of Matthew, Chapter 28, verses 18 to 20. The central aim at all times was direct evangelism. To meaningfully achieve this, missionaries were first to study a suitable Aboriginal language. This was to be done in the context of a true understanding of Aboriginal social customs and laws. The privilege of membership of the Church of England was to be made available to all, based on an understanding of the teaching and practice of the Book of Common Prayer. Other matters had to be determined by the Society as well, such as standards for baptism and the whole range of Church discipline.

Besides the evangelistic thrust there was the development of communal life. Schools were set up for training in education; hospitals to carry medical work and opportunities for agricultural, pastoral and industrial training.

As for standards of living and lifestyle to be introduced, it was recommended that this be the same as the acceptable general Australian lifestyle. This was also the policy of the Government after World War II. At about the same time assistance was received to promote Aboriginal social welfare as well as training for assimilation into Australian society. To speed up the process, Government bush schools were coming into being throughout the Territory. Where possible the Society co-operated with the Government in its policy.

#### *CROSS CULTURAL STRESSES*

Unfortunately these well-meaning policies greatly accelerated the disintegration of Aboriginal society. After the shameful treatment and neglect shown to them before the advent of missions, the concern for the welfare of Aboriginals shown by mission staff was a real change. In fact, at the time, locals thought such a humane interest for true justice and welfare towards Aboriginals a bit misplaced. They weren't worth it! It would upset the status quo! After all they weren't worth the bother!

Eventually the tide turned in favour of helping Aboriginals because of the persistent advocacy taken on their behalf by the church. An earlier catch cry had been 'to smooth the pillow of a dying race'.<sup>17</sup>

Today we have the benefit of hindsight helping in evaluation of the policies of past years. I have no desire to depreciate the genuine desire to assist Aboriginal people, which dedicated people all over the years have been anxious to do. Each of us is the product of our times. In the past much heartbreaking work has been carried out at great sacrifice and faithfulness, yet at times this has not always been given recognition. Rather we hear rumblings of blame for difficulties of cross cultural communication experienced today.

The early missionaries did not have the advantages of anthropological research which has become readily available in much more recent times. The value of the culture was not appreciated and was often felt to be a hindrance to the establishment of a true church in an area. Children were in various instances segregated into dormitories away from the 'evil' influences of the tribal elders. No doubt it was felt that the Aboriginal was not capable of grasping the complexities of cross cultural lifestyles. The main problem was that it was felt that the Gospel needed to be introduced into an area in a western format. Because all the teaching was presented in European style, all the thought patterns were strange and foreign. This often resulted in misunderstanding and miscues. Communication was not always conducted with the elders in a meaningful way as it was assumed that their outlook was too heathenish. The breach between the two groups at times widened because of the lack of appreciation of how offensive the well-intentioned efforts of some of the missionaries were. A great deal of what was being introduced was really repugnant to the Aboriginal community. It was upsetting the traditional lifestyle and threatening its stability by turning the old patterns of authority upside down.

People who were not normally eligible for certain privileges were gaining all sorts of advantages and this disrupted the authority of the elders and kinship duties. As missionaries were not always well versed in the language or culture they did not realise that in by-passing the elders the community tended to become alienated in its response to the Gospel.

In fact in the whole field of conduct and social relationships there was a lot of psychological stress being felt as a result of all the things the missionaries were introducing. The missionaries genuinely felt all this was beneficial, but in actual fact the situation changed from one of self-reliance to one of dependence. Before the advent of missions Aborigines had adjusted to a relatively stable environment. Now a situation was being created quite different from the previous customs. The dominance of the European society was being felt in an increasing measure. There was a great deal more individual emphasis. Thus the group pattern with all Aborigines being participants was being undermined. The pace was set by foreigners. Aboriginal autonomy was being disrupted. Often no real opportunity was given for Aboriginal initiative in the multifunctional concepts which were being introduced along with the establishment of the church. Missionaries often were not aware of the main thrust of Aboriginal culture and therefore were not aware of the need to somehow correlate the views of two worlds. The traditional authoritarian communal leadership, kinship rights and obligations and behaviour patterns all became confused and undermined.

The old men of the tribe were not consulted so the expatriate was not aware of the accepted pattern of things. Because of this the rightful elders lost their power and prestige. The missionaries determined factors such as young people going to school, what had to be learnt and how it should be done. New aspirations were set before them so that more or less the old order of things tended to be disregarded. Almost immediately by segregating the youngsters from the elders a process of disintegration and collapse of the former culture set in. This caused demoralisation of the Aboriginal with no system of social order to maintain cultural stability and a secure environment.

The young were thought to be the hope of the future. These were the ones promoted to leadership and entrusted with concepts of a new system. It was with them that the missionaries felt at home, because they could be understood and were able to comprehend what was expected of them. In the view of the missionaries, therefore, it seemed that progress was being achieved. By switching the roles as it were, the young were being encouraged to be insubordinate to their tribal authorities. The young were advised to relay their ideas to the elders. The job programs, the community developmental concepts and the establishment of services were all being done by the missionaries. They were using 'alien' methods and language and models that were all strange and not related to the old ways. Old ways were forgotten and the Aboriginals who had come to rely on European goods had more or less to conform with the new ways to live and to obtain the benefits they wanted. Freedom and independence vanished. Kinship ties, relationship obligations and gift duties went awry. People were not free to carry out ceremonial rites when required, nor to teach their young the traditional ways.

In the work situation, wrong people were made leaders and people worked alongside others in incorrect relationships. Benefits were given to all and sundry, greatly upsetting the normal exchange of gift procedures. When at Christmas time everyone received gifts this indicated that all were subordinate to the missionaries, which was distressing because it could be viewed that control was being sought through disregard for kinship relationships.

A most disturbing situation was arising. Conduct was being weakened and old values ignored. People who should have been controlling their communities were ignored. Information was being disseminated the wrong way round. People were getting goods who should not have been entitled to them. Youngsters were adjusting to a European type situation and so were seen to be insubordinate. At times they were entrusted with leadership roles that reversed the whole traditional system. Elders felt shamed and powerless to act. Women were now asserting themselves and being assisted in situations

which were flouting the old laws. They were employed outside their homes, were trained in new skills which were making them superior. They gained freedoms which made them independent of the old system. Besides, they were acquiring levels of education that put the men to shame.

Because of close contacts between Aboriginal and European women the possibility of evangelism among them was greatly enhanced. This made the men very suspicious of what the Gospel was about for it seemed that the women were entrusted with secrets of the Gospel. Very few men were able to be interested in the Gospel as they saw that it seemed to be fit only for women. In a way the Gospel came to be held in contempt by the men, not worthy of them to follow.

The whole system seemed to break down and the old people were powerless to combat it. It created ill feeling and they were at a loss to overcome it. Disaster would befall the Aboriginal people as their totemic beings would be angered at their falling away and disinterest in maintaining the sacred rites. With the definitions of values becoming less and less distinct stealing and trespassing were creeping in. Breakdown of the traditional patterns built up insecurity in the present, for without the finer reference points, life was becoming meaningless.<sup>18</sup>

Is it any wonder then that the message of the Gospel seemed to fall on apathetic ears? Often as not it was presented in a strange language and applied in a foreign way. Its reception would be retarded as it did not seem to fit relevantly into the Aboriginal cultural pattern. The new belief was not expressed through traditional models, therefore did not make a real appeal to their understanding. As the total day to day affairs caused such an upheaval to the traditional behaviour, this certainly had an adverse effect on real acceptance of the proclamation of the Gospel. To the Aboriginal the total European behaviour was associated with considered bad manners, rudeness and dishonest conduct. Aboriginals felt that missionaries said one thing and did another. I was often accused of being a liar, which resulted from confusion and miscues of cultural expectations.

From the above I do not wish to infer that everything the missionaries did was wrong, or always detrimental. I have only just highlighted certain generalities which have, over a long period caused a lack of interest to be shown in Christian evangelism. There are Aboriginals with a real faith and trust in the Lord. The church in some respects does not appear to be a lively one or a growing one, mainly because insensitivity to cultural values has proved a stumbling block and has tended to alienate rather than attract people. Never at any time has the missionary set out to be deliberately destructive, but rather the above observations are only meant to highlight the miscues

which eventuate when one is unaware of the pitfalls in cross cultural communication.

*SOME SITUATIONAL COMPLEXITIES*

Over the years there have been those who have responded to the Gospel. Having learnt to worship in the Anglican communion and loath to see any changes even though they don't understand Prayer Book language, being traditionalists in everything so that things must stay the same as at first received, Aborigines like the conventional phraseology of the services to remain. Anything different would not seem proper to them. In traditional life solemn warnings were given, with terrible consequences arising from failure to keep tradition. This gave rise to a great fear of change. In fact this fear seems to persist even to change coming into Christian worship, so there is resistance to it. Even with hymns that have all been introduced direct from western practices. Aborigines feel that it is wrong to introduce their own tunes or even to use their music styles. No doubt for the first generation Christians the use of the old ways to express the new may bring to mind wrong associations and so could be a hindrance. Though a number are losing their old songs they do not readily adapt hymns to this style. The tendency is to utilise the 'hill billy' and other western styles because of their rhythm and folksy tunes.

For the Aborigine it has not been readily possible to identify with the Gospel claims due to tensions created by the so-called secular patterns and attitudes of our social structure and its attitudes towards theirs. Its distinctive message has been made unintelligible by the seeming by-passing of Aborigine cultural values. Thus all the factors which have adversely affected the total life style of Aborigines have lowered the image of the Gospel. As a consequence in these areas we need to understand in a deeper, more meaningful way, the whole world view of the Aborigine and seek to re-establish meaningful communication through which the Gospel can gain acceptance, for unless it is presented in an intelligible fashion the distinctive message it brings will not be communicated meaningfully.

For a proper foundation to be laid the Word needs to become incarnate in that situation. Otherwise we have a completely new God who has had nothing to do with the past. Yet Scripture says that God has not left himself without a witness so, some way, a bridge needs to be built. Once this is done God is a reality to them. If this is not so, God is a foreigner and has nothing in common with them. The Rev. Len Harris related how when he was doing Bible translation work at Roper River he had read the Gospel portions when completed to the people. At one of these sessions he read from Mark. Madi, an



Aboriginal leader of the Nunggubuyu people was present and showed remarkable interest. Soon after he disappeared. Some days later he was leading canoe loads of his people back to Roper. He approached Rev Harris and asked him to read the same book to his people. When asked why, he replied that on hearing the reading a few days ago he suddenly realised that Jesus spoke Nunggubuyu, therefore was their Lord too.<sup>19</sup> It was a case of the Word becoming incarnate, to the Nunggubuyu people. It is vital that the Scriptures be made available in the languages of the Aboriginal people. Without the Scriptures in their own tongue the Word of God cannot really become the Word of God to them, for the here and now situations of daily living.

At Roper River, though English was thought to be a spoken language, yet it tended to be confusing. In fact it was a form of 'pidgin' in which some English words had different values, using English words but not English thought patterns. The result was that what was understood was often far from the reality of what we thought was being expressed. Now it is recognised as a different language and called Kriol. When an Aboriginal who speaks it talks about 'plant' he means 'hide'. 'To believe' is 'to take notice of' or 'obey', 'cooked' means 'ripe', 'string' is 'sinew' and so on.<sup>20</sup> What do they therefore hear when the Gospel is proclaimed to so-called 'English speaking' Aboriginals? Is it any wonder that a mixed up, syncretic view is the result?

When I reprimanded a Christian Aboriginal man for continually beating up his wife he promptly assured me that he was in his rights. I could no longer advise him as he was OK now that the Bishop had made him. (That is, confirmed him). He now knew everything! He had been through the ceremony and because he participated he had become a complete Christian. This is a reflection of the totemic outlook — I co-operate with the ancestral beings, therefore I am. The Gospel therefore has not really reached some in that it has only been understood within their own cultural framework.

A man understands Kriol but he does not really understand the English concepts, therefore his understanding would not correspond to what it expressed in English. So he interprets the Bible differently from us. His adaption is to his own ideas about religion. Aboriginals also tend to take everything very literally. Metaphorical and allegorical references are at times difficult hurdles in that they can be regarded as real and literal in the way that their totemic background is considered to be. Even the fantasy, space fiction and radio is taken as real life. Care has had to be taken to explain that these situations are 'gammon', that is 'make believe' or 'not real life'. It must be realised, too, that Aboriginal people are a group-orientated people. As such, individuals can't really act in isolation. Yet we tend to promote individualism which is not acceptable in their

society. An approach should be to the whole group to respond to the Gospel so that an individual does not become isolated from his society and made dependent on outside support. Later, as a group becomes a Christian nucleus, then of course personal response to the truth needs also to be stressed as then there will be a meaningful supportive fellowship.

Direct appeals need to be watched with caution as there is a custom of 'saving face' as well as a custom of etiquette whereby an Aboriginal cannot say 'No' directly to others. Therefore custom requires people to be polite and respond to such invitations although they have no intention of following it through. It would only be a commitment of convenience, and so, not binding.

Thus, by the random examples chosen I trust it can be appreciated how vital it is if the Gospel is to be faithfully presented that from a human angle the missionary needs to have a great cultural awareness. Much time needs to be spent in preparing for real cross cultural situations and communication. This is no denial of God's sovereign grace and saving action in the world, but the preparation and equipping of the messengers is important as well, therefore we must really study the ground on which the seed is to fall. Fruit bearing depends not on the seed but on the kind of ground on which it falls. God still chooses to work through human agencies so the distinctive message we need to communicate must be presented in an intelligible manner. Recognising that the power is of God and the appeal is to faith, yet our task in declaring the mysteries of Christ is to make the message clear. Thus we must find features which are culturally relevant and possible cultural parallels to make the message significant within the immediate context of people's lives. Much of this has only recently been recognised as in the past there has been a tendency to be insensitive and to cause a devaluation of Aboriginal culture.

I wish to make some suggestions of ways that traditional approaches utilising insights gained from my past experiences can be made.

### III COMMUNICATING THE GOSPEL

#### UTILISING TRADITIONAL PATTERNS

##### *USE OF CEREMONIAL SONG CYCLE*

Repeating what I stressed earlier, that in Scripture we see how God made his word intelligible by communicating of himself to men, as Saint John states, 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.' (John 1:14). Therefore we need to study the viewpoint of the Aboriginals in the context of their society. This requires much more than just a superficial learning of their language, custom, taboos and so on. To be effective communication must be made. As I stated previously, the use of English can cause a continuing problem and a barrier to real understanding of the truth. It would therefore be by and large an unsuitable medium for a deep expression of the Christian faith.

To establish a real rapport for the reception of the Gospel a good working knowledge of the language in the contexts of the lifestyle and customs of the people is required. Cultural background bears a real relationship to language so it is essential we are conversant with both so that words are used within their thought patterns. Nevertheless there will still be limitations in the full use of the vernacular as some concepts cannot be expressed in existing vocabulary. Some words will have to be introduced, such as for 'God', which are consistent with the biblical view. Difficulties could be found in conveying 'holiness', 'justification' and so on. Then there are things which do not exist in their experience, such as sheep, vines and snow as well as other items. A proper understanding of these needs to be conveyed. Otherwise, what does it mean when Christ said, 'I am the vine', or 'I am the good shepherd'? Vital truths like these need to be conveyed in a meaningful way if the church is to grasp the significance of these teachings.

On meeting an Aboriginal the first thing to be established is one's relationship. This can be done by finding a person known to both groups and their relationship to each other. Unless this is sorted out one remains a stranger. To gain rapport, the best way is to discuss families at length and to establish firmly who you are. This is more important than what you do.

Besides having a good working knowledge of language and customs it is also essential to have good rapport with the elders of a tribe. These men are the custodians of religious knowledge and practice. Respect for them needs to be maintained in the community and with their co-operation the social behaviour and authority can be upheld.

Adoniram Judson working in Burma in the last century used this approach in that he studied the religious texts of the area and became so proficient that he was able to instruct the local priests and so had an open door for the Gospel in that land.<sup>21</sup> It took him about 20 years to reach that stage. The first missionary in Palestine waited 30 years to begin his ministry!

Dr Capell of Sydney University in the late fifties came to Roper River for its fiftieth anniversary and was able to do some research in this area. Quite an interest was created amongst the old men as he got them to explain the mysteries of their beliefs and then in turn was able to use this information as a vehicle for portraying Gospel truths.<sup>22</sup>

In Aboriginal society the way in which information comes or is presented is very important. Because of rules of etiquette, tribal structure and authority patterns, certain procedures need to be observed. Direct instruction and question can be regarded as out of keeping and rude as it can lead to conflict with their requirement to save face. The elders are the custodians of knowledge and conveyors of truth to the community. For a message to have authority and respect it needs to come into the community in the proper manner. Otherwise it is out of keeping for the groups to give credence to information which to them does not come in the accepted way. Then, too, they must have respect for the person conveying the message. No matter how good an instructor a person is, if his life is not in agreement with their standards, he and his message will be rejected. Relationships and the quality of life are most important to Aboriginals.

Our method of presenting a monologue is foreign and often meaningless to the Aboriginal so that the presentation of the Gospel has been confusing and alien. At times the results have been bewildering rather than helpful. This is not to say that all efforts have been in vain. There are worthwhile results to be seen in many areas where Aboriginals have come into a true experience of Christ. Throughout, God has brought folk to himself and his Spirit has illumined his Word. I do not wish to infer that God is unable to break through, or to limit the Spirit of God in his sovereign grace. However, as we are dealing with the matter of indigenous growth, certain cultural factors need to be understood, and utilised as a vehicle so that the Gospel becomes meaningful to those to whom it is preached, in their cultural context. Even as God the Father himself sent his Son into the world every whit as a man, he had to become like us in order that we could be able to comprehend the message within the context of our humanity. Therefore if it was so necessary for the Word to become flesh in order that God could reveal himself to us, so today this must be just as relevant for Aboriginals. Thus the Word must be made flesh within the context of the society and culture to which we are sent, so that it will be acceptable and not rejected because it is

alien to the community through inability to be understood.

In an Aboriginal community, therefore, equals can show each other respect and exchange views. The elders are the ones to whom the community looks for guidance and leadership as well as for the maintenance of law and beliefs. One can seek an invitation from them to discuss viewpoints — if younger, or if older and regarded as of sufficient status, arrangements to meet can be by mutual agreement. As bearers of the truth concerning the Most High God we can have a reasonable recognised status with an Aboriginal group, to talk with their custodians of knowledge, provided we observe all the proper etiquette.

Normally the meeting place would be in a quiet shaded place, in sight of the village, time of meeting, in the 'cool of the evening'. One begins by observing the customary formalities of concern for people's welfare and other generalities and in time comes to the main purpose of the meeting. Aboriginals are interested in how other people function. In this way it is possible to explore how they think and act and the reasons for their behaviour as well as for their outlook. Being out in the open air has the advantage of being able to use the ground for drawing illustrations that can be used for explaining points.

Therefore, the traditional mode can be very effectively used for evangelism using accepted behavioural patterns with which Aboriginals are familiar. Having explored with the elders the cultural factors which are relevant to the understanding of their beliefs, these same patterns can be utilised for a meaningful propagation of the Gospel. In research that both Dr Capell and Wilfred Douglas have undertaken it seems that Aboriginals responded very well to Gospel presentations that utilised traditional symbols and forms of instructions.<sup>23</sup>

To establish rapport and bona fides of the Gospel messages, the 'message stick' can be used to announce God's invitation to all men to join the Christian way, a ceremony. For a great ceremony a special person is sent to all the appropriate groups, carrying a small marked, ochred stick to which is attached kurrajong strings and feathers. This establishes the bona fides as the viewing person will recognise its import and the courier will explain the necessary details. In due course of time the clan groups will prepare and assemble for the ceremony. At the ceremony, the paths or roads of the dreamtime heroes who prepared the country and gave the ceremony are enacted. The active participation in the rite links the past with the present and gives meaning to all of life, providing the law and history of the group. This vehicle of communication can be readily used to help the Aboriginal convey the Gospel to his own people. It can be shown that in the past the message has been misinterpreted and has caused darkness and fear to reign. Now the invitation is clear and plain. The

invitation is to all. Not just men, but now women and children are included. All may come. For Aborigines this all inclusiveness to share represents quite a new concept to be grasped, something which men are not always willing to acknowledge. God sent his Son, who is the Message, the Word. He has shown himself to us. Now all can join in the true ceremony which God has prepared for us. The offer is life in Christ Jesus which is more abundant and never ending. We know the 'road' which is Christ himself, so that we can sing about the true Way, how to live and what are the right laws. Also we can be sure he knows for he has said so.

In consultation with the leaders it can be pointed out that there are many ceremonies on life's way. At first there is the ceremony of hearing God's word, his law and his provision and will for us, then the ceremony of repentance and obeying his word and confessing him as Lord, the initiation ceremony of Baptism, one of growth in God's word and truth, Confirmation, the Lord's Supper, Christian service, church councillor, prayer, and many others.

#### *LEARNING BY PARTICIPATION AND OBSERVATION*

Aborigines become, by participation. They share and take part in everything. There is no reasoning, no querying why? The law and dreamtime says and did, and must be implicitly obeyed. Now we have the whole truth so it can be followed whole-heartedly. Thus as Aborigines are used to an oral tradition the great events and stages in Christian life and growth can all be mimed and enacted in ceremonial form so that all can participate as a group and not as isolated, disinherited beings, lost to their own society. Once the leaders and elders who are the custodians of all values in Aboriginal society have been led of God into his truth they can be used of God to pass the teaching on to their community members. In this way the Gospel enters the culture in a familiar way not as something alien to it. This enables a deeper response. Similar to the coming of the Gospel to the households in Acts where groups could decide to stay together to support each other so bodies of Aboriginal believers could better support each other and grow in their Christian life in the familiar surroundings of their own culture.

Under the guidance of the Spirit of God there would no doubt be many ways in which Aboriginal Christians could participate in Christian worship and practices. Some years ago when speaking with the Director of Catholic Missions in North Australia, Father E. Collins, he spoke of exciting things happening in some of their areas. If I recall correctly, for special occasions the Aboriginal Christians gathered some time before Mass and danced from place to place in the village gathering people for worship as well as receiving the

elements and dancing them into the church service. They were also engaged in other acts of worship earlier in the service as well, all of their own initiatives.<sup>24</sup> These enactments speak very deeply to them and help to emphasise the fact that we all are equal in the body of Christ, his Church. Much encouragement needs to be given to the Aboriginals that it is quite right for them to express themselves in worship in their own way. Often they have been limited, feeling the reserved manner of expression of European Christians to be the proper way. In their traditional pattern of living, all their lifestyle is learnt through observation and participation rather than through formal instruction and question and answer, which are not considered proper in their society. Therefore we need to beware lest we limit and hinder their true growth in Christ by unconsciously confining them to our patterns of worship expressions.

We need to learn from the Aboriginals about how they communicate their traditional beliefs so that changes coming in response to the gospel are met with the minimum of rejection and crisis. It must be appreciated that most Aboriginal learning processes are informal and not conducted within formal institutions or buildings, but by various relatives. Content is related to everyday life and survival and is largely by non-verbal means, observation of real life situations, generally by trial and error with much repetitive activity. Talking is reserved for social purposes only, so that teaching by talking is often regarded as a high pressure tactic, and offensive. Let us beware, then, of seeming to portray Christianity as an institution. Institutionalism is often the basis on which a lot of European culture functions. It needs to be seen as a way of life. Care needs to be taken to ensure that we do not divorce the Aboriginal from his normal communication lines.

As far as the human factor is concerned we need to become as children to learn the language and the culture so that the grace of God can be intelligibly communicated. As stated before, for the church to become indigenous, groups need to remain within the framework of their social context. It should come through the respected elders so that the concept of authority is not destroyed. This would mean that the indigenous church retains control and authority and thus Christ, as the Head; and his authority remains paramount, as well as his word. Aboriginals will need to be able to identify with the past. The Old Testament heroes of faith who were all part of tribes or clans and their wilderness wanderings as part of God's mighty acts of redemption, will provide a bridge between the old and the new. In this way they will be enabled to see that God was involved in their total past, preparing the road for the redemption in Christ, who is the Eternal Road. In this way they will identify with all the people of

God. They will be enabled to see that the children of God are a corporate community and that they can function as a group in Christ. In Christ there is a common bond, a corporate relationship and so their ceremonial system can provide a vehicle into the depth of brotherhood in Christ. Just as in the old traditions was the ritual of the totemic linkages between different spirit beings, so for Christians there is spiritual corporateness. In Christian thinking all acquired original sin from the first Adam and the suffering of the second Adam brings salvation to all. In ritual, Aborigines identify with the spirits of the past and commune and co-operate as a brotherhood by blood-letting. This sacramental sense of community and fellowship in love can be experienced in the Communion meal in which all can share appropriately around a common camp fire.

Greater emphasis needs to be on the concrete than on the abstract in teaching. Therefore, as already stressed, much more needs to be done by way of active participation in all things with spontaneous expressions of worship. In their rituals Aborigines always engaged in something, painting, dancing, song making, rubbing, touching, drawing, miming, drama, story telling and so on. In church life much could be done through active involvement to come to grips with Christian truths. Standing on a rock, running sand through the fingers, contemplating the properties of water, the warmth of a firestick, handling the damper, enacting the parables, bark paintings of great bible truths. Aborigines are used to memorising and observing accurately stories, actions and so on. Once at Roper River after a service the minister forgot to put away a bible poster he had used as a sermon illustration. Later it was noticed that the illiterate Christians were bringing their friends into the church to instruct them in the Gospel truths by means of the picture. After this the practice of leaving out the pictures continued for some time, allowing opportunity for people to witness to others.

#### *USE OF SYMBOLS*

The Bible is full of symbols which could be used more often. An Aboriginal can grasp more readily the spiritual significance through symbols drawn from nature, and as he moves around, these can be a constant reminder of great truth. He is a participant in the great truths he sees around him. A desert Aboriginal would fully appreciate the meaning of Christ as the Water of Life. Barnabas Roberts often sang the song, 'Sun of my soul, Thou Saviour dear', as the light of the sun spoke to him of the light-giving life our Lord brought to him. Therefore, birds, clouds, wind, fire, rocks, bread, light, darkness and many other symbols can be utilised. As in their ritual they made



frequent use of colour, so in worship a greater use of colour could be made use of, such as seasonal vestments, altar cloths, markers and flowers. Banksia, Grevillea and Ixora for red, lots of ferns and leaves for green, Lilies and Frangipanni for white, could all be useful.

A lot of symbolism could also be expressed in music, drama, painting and so on as a great aid of Christian growth and church life. Aboriginals could contribute much to the church through these expressions. It would help in a maximum participation in all forms of church life as well as their being involved in story telling, prayers, reading, assisting at Communion and conducting Baptism, laying on of hands and so on. So in the daily life of the congregation all could readily play an active part and feel that they have a function in the Body of Christ as much as they had in the ritual system, as under the Spirit of God they are created anew, with true life and power.

#### *KNOWING GOD AS ALL POWERFUL*

As in the traditional mortuary and initiation ceremonies there was much shouting of exploits and areas of significance visited through song, so in the new life these power encounters could be emphasised. The Gospel of Christ is one of power. Our God is all powerful, supreme over all creation and spirits. The great encounters related in the Old Testament show God is all sovereign in great crisis situations confronting God's people, such as plagues of Egypt and Elijah's challenge of Baal, Joshua's appeal to his people to make a decision as they took up residence in the land God provided. God revealed that he would intervene in the lives of his people through such incidents as Jacob's ladder and Moses and the burning bush.

In the New Testament we again see the Lord revealed in great power. Here is the acknowledgement of all evil spirits, power of exorcism, spirits cast into the pigs and power associated with God's name to drive out evil spirits and to heal as we see in Acts.

As Aboriginals are received into church membership or as his children fall asleep in Christ or at some other spiritually significant event the members could again shout out the names and places of God's creative and redemptive acts. It would also be very appropriate when it came to expressing the creed, to proclaim with a joyous shout the great events in history and creation for God the Father; for Jesus Christ the Son, events of his life and salvation and for God the Holy Spirit, his power and coming in the church.<sup>26</sup>

#### *KNOWING GOD AS LORD OF ALL*

Once it is established that God is sovereign, Lord of all might and power, he then can demand our total allegiance. God's rule is

therefore supreme over all the universe. The establishment of God's kingdom is what Jesus came to proclaim, and that the centre of all the universe is God and his activity.<sup>27</sup> Within the kingdom is the Church as the chief agent. So entrance into the kingdom is the work of God within our lives through salvation in Christ Jesus and as we enter the church fellowship. There is a great battle in the kingdom in confrontation with evil. Though all order was created as good, sin is now found at all levels. Though our standards within the western world have been influenced by the Bible, yet for the Aboriginal his responsibilities are different. In certain cases an Aboriginal can deliberately do wrong and not be considered responsible as he is not expected to practise self discipline or restraint. An Aboriginal's responsibility is to his tribe and depends on his relationship to the various members of that tribe. Things are wrong if they affect the whole tribe adversely, not because they are wrong in themselves. So the principles of conduct and standards are quite different from ours which are based on Bible teaching. An Aboriginal therefore, must come to realise what it means to offend against God, and when he must be obeyed. Therefore he and the group have violated a relationship and his sin could be held against the group as a whole. - For example, Achan in Joshua Chapter 7. Conviction can only be of the Holy Spirit to convince of sin and to renew their minds to experience the saving and keeping power of Christ in their lives so that God's rule is supreme.

#### *FUNCTIONAL SUBSTITUTES FOR OLD CUSTOMS*

As children of God's kingdom Aboriginals will wish to understand how to know God's will for the everyday decisions for daily life.

In their traditions there has always been a belief in spiritual beings so we need to be careful of secularising their everyday life as has taken place in our own society. There is a spiritual importance in helping them to discover functional substitutes for old customs with a necessity to guard against its becoming a set of magical processes or being fatalistic. They need to be aware of God's will so that it deals with all levels of human concerns and relations. A challenge to a constant abiding relationship with God himself. Because of this relationship in Christ one can meet together in worship and corporate prayer of supplication and intercession, use some rites, such as laying on of hands and anointing with oil, joining with others in the reading of scripture, in council with other brothers, sharing gifts and in service for the welfare of others. God therefore is the sustainer and provider and blesses each, giving wisdom for the daily routines of life, in tasks, harvest, gardening, marriage and social harmony.

Much yet needs to be done in exploring the merits of an approach

using cultural parallels. With a limited understanding of Aboriginal world viewpoint it could give rise to a syncretic development which would create further complications. Over the years plays and dances have been encouraged by mission staff at Easter and Christmas. These were based on biblical themes of the seasons and were performed with enthusiasm but have never been repeated spontaneously by Aboriginals.

I have at times discussed with Aboriginals the idea of using traditional instruments for music in church services and other methods of expression with which they are familiar. The reaction was not favourable. If I shortened services to suit children's needs older people were not happy. This is not how they received the Gospel at first. Traditional culture is at times encouraged in schools. Even here there is a lack of enthusiasm shown by Aboriginals. I think it all goes back to a very deep seated fear of consequences of change which has been instilled in them over the ages which I drew attention to in Chapter I. Granted then that at times the cultural approach may not always meet with a ready acceptance we need yet to learn the use of the cultural vehicle to serve as sharpening the communication focus of the message and applying it. Only the Holy Spirit is able to reveal to them the Gospel truth and prompt them in the application of scriptural principles through their own culture and customs.

*EXPLORING PATTERNS FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT  
OF A LOCAL CHURCH*

What do we really mean by 'an indigenous church' in Aboriginal society? Is it the first generation born into the church? Perhaps it would help if we understood what is an indigenous church in Australian society. Have we got one? I don't really know and I don't know if anyone else could enlighten me as to what it is either.

Let's see if we can glean something from recent events in Arnhem Land. Here we discover that an event of great significance has taken place. It seems that God has provided the appropriate answers to his people there. Early in 1979 at Elcho Island and other places, Aboriginal people came under great conviction of God. After fervent prayer and fasting God's Spirit was poured out and great numbers came to know salvation and freedom in Christ. Since then the movement has kept growing and is spreading to other centres. The principal features are singing, prayer and bible teaching. A number of Aboriginals are being inspired to write songs about biblical themes and about Christian experience. Bands compose and play music for these and they are being learnt daily and sung over and over.<sup>28</sup> This keeps

before the converts a ready depository of knowledge of God's acts and truths in the lives of his people. The encouragement and vitality aroused by theme and rhythm in Aboriginal style helps to nurture Christian growth. Over the ages in other great revival movements similar growth through song flourished. For example, the Reformation period and the Wesleyan Revival. As well as song there is a great yearning for the exercise of other charismatic gifts, intercession for the sick and wayward, laying on of hands and anointing with oil. Meetings are held nightly and continue for long periods. Compared with the traditional Aboriginal pattern, it is similar to preparation for dancing, then growing in fervour and intensity through the night. Another feature of the movement is the great demand for bible teaching for more than an hour daily. Here, it seems we are witnessing a church 'born from within' by the Spirit of God. Perhaps this can truly be termed an indigenous church. A church fellowship is being born in Aboriginal society through the media of the Word of God. As Melvin Hodges states,

'The stability and growth of a budding church requires that it be firmly established in the Word of God. Paul attributed the stability of the church in Thessalonica to the fact that the word had penetrated the lives of the believers. 1 Thes. 2:13 (see Also Acts 2:42). The teaching of the Word must be given to all believers, and not just to those who may become leaders, for the entire congregation needs to be well rooted in the truths of the Gospel.' (p. 16)<sup>29</sup>

Great emphasis is therefore necessary to have the Bible read and studied. At present, because of illiteracy and limitations in the English language for many Aboriginals, the Bible is not a well known book and is generally very little read. To date the Bible has not been translated into vernacular languages except in portions so it's important that classes and seminars be held regularly. Especially too, that for the young Sunday School or some similar function be presented regularly. We are all utterly dependent upon the Scriptures and lack of knowledge of God's Word can be disastrous. It is authoritative and relevant to all Christians. The church has no authoritative source other than the Scriptures. Aboriginals must also learn to think theologically. No doubt the early results will be poor. Aboriginal Christians have at various conferences sought answers to all kinds of cultural questions concerning ceremonies, mortuary rites and so on. It must be a thinking church based on the Scripture. Once a person is converted he must be enabled to go into the world as a new person. What does God mean to each, in his own country? Christians must

think theologically and provide guidelines for all the issues of life.<sup>30</sup> The Christian is there to affirm local culture. In fact Christianity transcends culture. Unless the issues are grappled with, Christianity could be linked to idolatry, which would give rise to syncretism. A solidly based theology can be used by the Holy Spirit to prompt Aboriginals to apply Scriptural principles to their own customs and culture. It would provide strength and foundation to the truth and clarify the daily issues of Christian life and prevent static conformity to dead rules by awareness of the need for obedience to the living God in all things.

Even church buildings ought to be in keeping with local tradition so that they will not appear too foreign. The same with music wherever possible. It should not be imported, but arise out of natural expression rather than being dependent on foreign influence, so that their Christianity is soundly rooted in the scene of similar culture.

A thorough grounding in Scripture is necessary so that the church can be developed as a real thinking church. Then there can be a growth of an indigenous knowledge that Christianity has taken root. People must be able to search for themselves, yet as far as I can recollect very little reading is done. People have not been assisted enough to really seek out truths and to read widely. In fact most of what there is to read is alien material. To bridge the gap greater use of cassettes could be undertaken as they have an advantage of being used over and over again at any time as people feel it is convenient to them. Some material to be provided in this way could be, 'A Life of Christ', 'The Journeys of Paul', 'The Exodus and Journey to the Promised Land', 'Heroes of the Bible', 'Exposition of the Creed', 'A Catechism' and also Bible Stories for children and Christian classics such as Pilgrim's Progress.

Teaching is important about the nature of the church, its character and the need for its organic growth as well as an understanding of the sacraments. As there is great mobility between communities these days education in ecumenical horizons and the mission of the church should be given as well. It needs to be realised that every church group is meant to be both a sending and a receiving one. The planting of a church fellowship in a given location is not an end in itself. In any one place the task is never done. To talk of withdrawal because we have worked ourselves out of a job is a misinterpretation of missionary responsibility unless it means to cede responsibility and authority to local members. Also emphasis on the so called 'three self movements', self-management, self-government and self-support, puts an unbiblical emphasis on 'self' which the Bible condemns. The promotion of self-sufficiency is a contradiction of Scripture as the proclamation of the Gospel is meant to be the death knell of self effort (Ephesians 2:8-9), not providing self-satisfaction,

which finally tends to self-centredness.<sup>31</sup>

There should be an interdependency in the body of Christ. To stress independence would be to imply a sense of cutting off from the members of the body of Christ, yet Paul teaches the body is a whole, the members need and complement each other and cannot function apart from each other. Rather than highlighting the concept of indigeneity in terms of independence or of the three-self movement, it would be better to emphasise the need to increase in wisdom and mature stature in the fulness of Christ.<sup>32</sup> A mature person is one who fully shoulders his commitments and responsibilities. So a mature church, growing in Christ will not limit itself to a stage of 'having arrived' but continue to grow and bear responsibility for witness and mission. Thus the commission of our Lord to make disciples and teach will be maintained in various and numerous avenues in its own society as well as further afield. The church, therefore is mission and thus its work is never done. So in a sense there can be no strategy for withdrawal or of having arrived, but of discovering God's will concerning other needy areas and thus build up the church through further outreach.

In growth towards maturity, leadership, organisation, education, worship, behavioural standards and outreach will all develop as well as means of expressing Christian love and concern for those others in the community. Aboriginals will employ familiar, meaningful forms, adapting them and filling them with Christian content so that the church will have a real impact on their society. So we see that Christianity is always creative and dynamic. Even culture is always changing. A lively church can shape what is emerging in the culture, the task of an indigenous church in Aboriginal society.

## FOOTNOTES

From the materials listed here information and concepts were gleaned as notated. These references contain further useful data and would be useful for further study or to gain greater background detail.

- 1 M.S. Bain, 'Aborigines and Alcohol', in *The Arnhem Land Epistle*, December 1970, p. 1. A.
- 2 A.P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, Reprint 1961, pp. 92-107.
- 3 Ibid. pp. 153-154.
- 4 Ibid. pp. 51-58, p. 108 ff.
- 5 Ibid. pp. 89-92.
- 6 Ibid. pp. 115-122.
- 7 Ibid. pp. 123-127.
- 8 M.S. Bain, loc. cit., A.
- 9 A.P. Elkin, op. cit., pp. 187-197.
- 10 Ibid. pp. 24-48.
- 11 Ibid. pp. 132-136.
- 12 M.S. Bain, 'Being and Doing' in *The Arnhem Land Epistle*, August 1969, p. 2. B.
- 13 B. Sayers, 'Aboriginal World View: Tense, Mood and Aspect in Wik Munkan', typed document from SIL workshop.
- 14 Loc. cit.
- 15 M.S. Bain, op. cit. B., p. 1.
- 16 K. Cole, *A History of the Church Missionary Society of Australia*, Melbourne: CMS Historical Publications, 1971, p. 176ff.
- 17 Expressions such as this were commonly used at one time; I do not know whence they originated.
- 18 L. Sharp, 'Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians', in *Human Organization*, Summer 1952, p. 21.
- 19 The substance of discussion with Rev. L. Harris who worked with CMS in North Australia from 1939 for many years, as chaplain and translator.
- 20 E. Richards & J. Hudson, *The Walmatjari: An Introduction to the Language and Culture*, Darwin: SIL, 1976. Work papers of SIL-AAB, Vol. 1. Well worth reading to understand the complexities of cross-cultural communication.
- 21 Unable to supply the details as it is over 35 years since I read the story of Judson's life.

- 22 A. Capell, 'Interpreting Christianity to Australian Aborigines' in *The International Review of Missions*, April 1959. A very thought provoking research article providing worthwhile insights.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 An outline of remembered discussion with Father Collins.
- 25 P. Hiebert, *An Introduction to Animism*, Printed Lecture Notes, Fuller School of World Mission, Pasadena. Concepts of power encounters relating to the Bible and animistic world viewpoints.
- 26 G. Armstrong, 'The Mission of the Church to Aboriginal Communities' in *The Arnhem Land Epistle*, December 1970, pp.4-5.
- 27 P. Hiebert, op. cit.
- 28 I have no personal experience yet of these nightly fellowship gatherings which I understand are spontaneous, joyful and lengthy. People have related to me how impressed they have been and that the most significant feature that has impressed them is the singing. A new type of singing in which Aborigines have composed the words and music. It is arising from within, not imported from without, which is distinctly different from formerly. It flows from the fellowship.
- 29 M.L. Hodges, *On the Mission Field*, Chicago: Moody Press, p.16.
- 30 L. Morris, 'The Indigenization of Theology', Lecture material, Ridley College, Melbourne.
- 31 un-named, 'The Myth of the Limited Goal', unmarked copy, pp. 75-76.
- 32 *ibid.* pp. 77-78.



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