

Chapter Eight

The Nature of Aboriginal Identity

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For the purposes of this address I am assuming there is a distinct Aboriginal identity, in the sense that any discrete social group can be said to have an identity. My address falls into several parts. The first, and major part, focuses on the nature of the Aboriginal identity. The second looks at some of the factors which have impacted most on this identity, and asks what remains of it. The final part of my address points to the implications of this identity, without however going into detail.

A few moments of reflection will indicate that to deal with all aspects of the Aboriginal identity would require rather more time than has been allocated for this address. Hence I have restricted myself to highlighting aspects which continue to influence the way Aborigines respond to today's world, and which therefore need to be born in mind when devising strategies to deal with Aboriginal disadvantage in its many forms.

Who is an Aborigine? It seems to me that this is the first question which needs to be answered when attempting to define the nature of the Aboriginal identity.

Soon after receiving the invitation to address you tonight, I remember picking up *The Advertiser*, the Adelaide daily of 19 July, 1997. Splashed across its front page was a picture of a middle-aged white woman, with the following story line: "For 44 years Kathy Burgemeister thought she was white. Now she has declared herself Aboriginal. And she is proud of it."

Inside, it gave a truncated family tree which seemed to suggest, and I advisedly say seemed to suggest as the detail was very sparse, that her parents were Australians; that of her grandparents, her grandfather was Swedish and her grandmother Australian; and that, of her great grandparents, her great grandfather was Aboriginal (his name would suggest, of dual Aboriginal/White descent) and her great grandmother was Irish.

The Advertiser went on to say:

"[Since learning of her Aboriginality], Mrs Burgemeister said she had met many Aboriginal people who had begun to fill in her family history. She had visited special sites of significance, including several on the Coorong, where she felt spiritual attachment."

The current federal Government definition makes it possible for Mrs. Burgemeister to claim to be an Aborigine, since that definition is, a person descended from the original inhabitants of this land who chooses to identify as an Aborigine, and who is accepted as such by his/her own group. This definition makes Aboriginality purely and simply a matter of race. So any person whose genealogy includes an Aborigine, or a person of dual Aboriginal/White descent, can claim to be an Aborigine. This creates the confusing situation where people who still live largely according to their Aboriginal traditions are equated with people who for all intents and purposes live as White Australians, and look like White Australians.

When unrelated to other factors, for someone to call him or herself an Aborigine, is really of no great consequence. It's no different from other Australians who draw attention to their ethnic origins by calling themselves Irish, Scottish, German, Greek, Italian, Vietnamese, or whatever. While this may cause some pique among those who believe that all of us should simply call ourselves Australians, I believe this only becomes divisive when people of different ethnic

backgrounds demand special treatment from their fellow Australians, because of their ethnic origins.

Aboriginal identity in the past, i.e., pre-settlement, was not predicated on the basis of race. Nor was it predicated on the basis of an Aboriginal nation, since Australia never was an Aboriginal nation. The small Aboriginal land-owning clans that lived scattered over the Australian continent never thought of themselves as belonging to some larger federation, or making up a nation. The clans did not even have single authority figures like chiefs.

In fact, if the Arrarntic language speaking groups are anything to go by, it is doubtful that the clans even had a generic word for people'. In the Western Arrarnta dialect, the Arrarnta word *relha* is used now as a word for people collectively, i.e., men, women, children, youths, etcetera. But this usage of the word seems to have resulted from contact with Whites. I was alerted to this possibility when doing some translation work in another Arrarntic dialect. The people speaking this dialect had had less contact with Whites, and had no word for people. They had words for children, men, women, old men, grandchildren, etcetera, but no inclusive word for people.

Again, if the Western Arrarnta are anything to go by, people belonging to the various land-owning clans appear to have identified themselves collectively by the major totemic site on their land. For example, the major totemic site of a land-owning clan to the west of Hermannsburg is called *Lthalalthuma*. The people belonging to this clan would in the past have referred to themselves as *Lthalalthumarinya*, *Lthalalthuma* being the name of the major totemic site, and the suffix *-rinya* denoting belonging to.

However, while there does not appear to have been an inclusive word for people, the Western Arrarnta language, for example, is rich in personal pronouns which indicate social relationships and social distinctions. For example, if I wanted to say "my wife and I", to be correct I would have to use the dual form *ilantha*, which not only means the two of us, but also indicates that she is of a different class, and of a different moiety, and from a different land-owning clan. (I will have more to say about the Western Arrarnta classificatory system later.)

If I wanted to say "my brother/sister and I", to be correct I would have to use the dual form *ilirna*, which not only means the two of us, but also indicates that we are of the same class. If I were to say "my father and I", to be correct I would have to use the dual form *ilaaka*, which again not only means the two of us, but also indicates that we stand in a father-son relationship.

The same kind of distinctions apply to the use of we, us and you (plural). The younger generation of Arrarnta speakers no longer use all these pronouns as the older generations did. However, the existence of these pronouns, and their use by the older generation, point to the fact that in the past speakers had to be aware of their relationship with each individual member of the audience, or with the people of whom they were speaking. Even today, people often address others, or speak of others, by using their class name, rather than what we would term their personal name, because their class name is a short-hand term for their relationship with the other person.

The foregoing brief remarks point to the direction in which we must look to discover the Aboriginal identity. These are land and kinship. And to these must be added a third, namely *tjurrunga*. *Tjurrunga* is a generic Arrarnta word which, depending on its context, refers to the objects representing the ancestral spirit beings; the rituals these beings instituted to maintain the orderly functioning of the world and the increase of its flora and fauna; the rituals commemorating the pre-history travels and activities of these spirit beings, and so on.

These then, the land, the *tjurrunga*, and kinship, are the foundation blocks of the individual and corporate Aboriginal identity. These three are indivisible, and in a sense form a larger entity.

Common to all three are the ancestral spirit beings who shaped and now "sleep" in this world, who via their totemic off-spring maintain the flora and fauna and human beings, and who gave to men the rules concerning kinship and social organisation. I will be taking up the matter of land, *tjurrunga* and kinship in greater detail later in my address.

The more traditional Aborigines' definition of who is an Aborigine reflects this. They define as an Aborigine a person who knows his "law" and lives according to it. ("Law" is the generic English term Aborigines use now to denote the totality of their culture, comprising land, *tjurrunga*, kin, actual and classificatory). Whether a person is Aborigine or White, or of dual Aboriginal/White descent, is considered irrelevant. Crucial is whether the person knows the "law" or not.

Traditional Aborigines cannot conceive of a person who no longer knows his "law", his language or his country, as being an Aborigine, in the sense that they apply it to themselves. If one or another of their relatives has lost his language and his culture, this in no way invalidates their relationship. But for them, it does raise serious questions concerning their relatives' claim to Aboriginality, because for them Aboriginality is not a matter of race (they never saw themselves as a race), but of knowing the traditions and observing them.

This "law" of which Aborigines speak establishes and defines their corporate identity vis-a-vis other groups. The culture of any discrete group of people (society) contains the customs, values, institutions, etcetera of that group of people. So if we are seeking to establish the Aboriginal identity, it is in their culture that we must seek this corporate identity. This is not to suggest that the Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal identity are identical. Rather, it is the recognition that the Aboriginal culture is the only means by which we can access their corporate identity.

While the various Aboriginal land-owning clans in Central Australia have established and maintain their own identities vis-a-vis other Aboriginal land-owning clans, by such things as subtle changes to what may otherwise be a common language, by small changes to the way they cook kangaroos, and so on, yet one can speak of an Aboriginal identity because of a shared *weltanschauung* and life style which pre-dated any human efforts to domesticate animals and engage in even subsistence agriculture.

Australian Aboriginal societies, except for those along the northern Australian sea coast, were physically isolated from other societies, and appear to have changed very little over the centuries. Most other societies in the world, which lived in close proximity to each other, changed and developed at a fairly even rate under the stimulus of new ideas and technology. When White settlers came to Australia, they arrived with a form of social organisation, economic system and technology so different from that of the local hunting and gathering societies, that the ways of life of the two groups were mutually unintelligible. They have remained largely mutually unintelligible to this day, because of the conceptual divide.

I previously said that land, *tjurrunga*, and kinship are the three important segments of Aboriginal culture which determine and provide the content of Aboriginal identity. I also said that they are indivisible, so that discussion of one necessarily leads to discussion of the others. However, since I have to begin somewhere, I begin with land.

Much is made of the Aborigines' attachment to their land, and of their need to be on their land for their well-being. There can be no doubt of the importance that Aborigines attach to their land. However, much of what is said, or reported on this subject in the media, gives the impression that the Aborigines' attachment to their land is genetic, something they were born with; something they have even when they are brought up in a white urban setting, without any

knowledge of their own language, and without any in-depth knowledge of the mythology relating to their land.

The Aborigines' attachment to their land has nothing to do with genetics, but everything to do with learning, and the subsequent internalisation of the knowledge that has been passed on. Aborigines were/are animists, believing that the ancestral spirit beings (also known as totemic ancestors) who were active at the dawn of time, are still to be found in the land they shaped and fashioned. They also reside in its flora and fauna, in the natural phenomena like thunder and lightning, in the sun, moon and stars, and in the humans to whom they gave birth.

It is these same spirit beings residing in the land, and in the people of that land, that give the Aborigines their unique attachment to their land, and their sense of oneness with the land. While our relationship with land can be described as an I -- It' relationship, theirs is an I -- Thou' relationship.

This relationship is taught by the adults and initially learned informally by the children. Then, after initiation, comes the more formal and in-depth instruction. Men who are prepared to apply themselves to the rigours of learning -- and I might add, who are prepared to accept the physical pain which is often inflicted as a part of the teaching process -- are eventually taught all the knowledge pertaining to their personal totem, and to the totems of their land.

The individual's identification with his own ancestral spirit being (totem), is complete, even transcending the time-frame between the pre-historical creative period when the ancestral spirit beings were active, and the present. I remember a man telling me the story of his ancestral spirit being, a certain snake. "He came from this place and travelled north", he said. "Then I went under ground and came up at this place. Here he saw this high hill and named it. Then I travelled on." This person's identification with his ancestral spirit being was complete in every sense.

Knowledge of, and access to the creative power of these ancestral spirit beings is via the *tjurrunga*. As mentioned earlier, *tjurrunga* is an Arrarnta generic term which covers the objects representing the ancestral spirit beings; the rituals instituted by these ancestral spirit beings; the words the ancestral spirit beings used to create, shape, heal; the engravings and ground paintings representing the ancestral spirit beings; and the stories and songs of the ancestral spirit beings.

Knowing the creative words used by their ancestral spirit beings is the most important knowledge each land-owning clan has. For the use of these words within the prescribed ritual, at the right place, guarantees the continuance of that particular species of flora or fauna or natural phenomena. It is this that maintains the universe and its flora and fauna. This is why the *tjurrunga* are said "to hold" (*errkuma*) the world. It is not surprising, then, that these words were closely guarded by the old men, the guardians of this knowledge, and only passed on to men when they were considered ready and worthy.

However, all the ancestral spirit beings weren't good. There were also evil spirit beings, who caused sickness and death. The words (chants) they used to cause sickness and death, in the pre-historical period of this world's history, are included in the genre known as *tjurrunga*. As such, these words (chants) are known to men who own these *tjurrunga* and have been instructed in their knowledge. They are therefore able to use these words to cause people to become ill, and also to die.

In Aboriginal eyes, there is no such thing as someone becoming ill for no known reason. When someone becomes ill, the question that comes to the Aborigines' mind is this: "Who was responsible? Who caused this person to be affected by *arrangkultha*, by the occult?" Aborigines will sometimes ask for the medical cause of sickness or death. They will accept this as something

the doctor has discovered, but their prior question still remains: "Who caused this person to become sick or die with this illness?"

However, the ancestral spirit beings also had words (chants) that they used to heal themselves when they had been injured, or had become sick as a result of having had *arrangkultha* worked on them. These words (chants) are also *tjurrunga*, and are known to those who own these words, or who have been taught them. The people in possession of these words are the *ngangkara* (traditional healers). Even today, any sickness which is assumed to have been caused by *arrangkultha* can only be treated successfully by a man or woman *ngangkara*. These people are therefore in great demand, and their services continually used, often in parallel with western medicine.

These ancestral spirit beings who were active at the beginning time, also laid down the rules by which the people they created, and to whom they had given life, were to live and regulate their inter-personal relationships. We can only briefly touch on some of these all-pervasive and important rules.

For the Arrarnta, and the land-owning clans extending as far north as the Northern Territory coast line, many of the rules detailing relationships, personal rights and obligations, marriage partners, etcetera, are encompassed in the class system of social organisation. The people who have this class system, called *arnparnintja* by the Western Arrarnta, are said to be living in the light, whereas those without it, e.g., the Pitjantjatjara, who live to the south of the Arrarnta, are said to be living in darkness. The reason why some live in the light and others live in the darkness is also explained by means of the relevant *tjurrunga*.

The class or *arnparnintja* model I will be using is the Western Arrarnta one. All the class systems with which I am familiar are variations on a single theme. This system places everyone at birth into one of 8 classes of people. It is not possible for a person to move from one class into another. The class you are born into is the class of person you will remain for the whole of your life. These classes are not hierarchically arranged, as for example, in the Indian caste system, where Brahmins are at the top of the social scale, and Untouchables at the bottom. Rather, each class in the Aboriginal system has equal value and is never used to allocate status.

The Western Arrarnta 8 classes are:

Panangka Purrurla

Pangarta Kamarra

Kngwarrea Ngala

Paltharra Mpitjana

These 8 classes are divided into two groups, called moieties, a French way of saying half. *Panangka*, *Pangarta*, *Kngwarrea* and *Paltharra* form one moiety and *Purrurla*, *Kamarra*, *Ngala* and *Mpitjana* form the other.

These two groups are exogamous, meaning they do not marry within their own group, but outside their own group, in the following manner:

Panangka marries *Purrurla*

Pangarta marries *Mpitjana*

Kngwarrea marries *Kamarra*

Paltharra marries Ngala

The class of the child born to a couple is determined by the class of the father. As indicated above, *Panangka* marries *Purrurla*. Now if the male is *Panangka*, and the female *Purrurla*, then the child will be *Pangarta*. However if the male is *Purrurla* and the female *Panangka*, then the child's class is *Kamarra*.

For purposes of land ownership and succession, another principle is related to the above, namely what the Western Arrarnta call *nyinhanga*. The word *nyinhanga* means father and son, and it operates in such a way that where a father is of the class *Panangka*, his children will be of the class *Pangarta*. In turn, if any of his children are male and marry, their children again will be of the class *Panangka*. Similarly the children of a *Purrurla* class of man will be of the *Kamarra* class. In turn, if any of his children are male and marry, their children again will be of the *Purrurla* class.

So the 8 classes of people form 4 *nyinhanga* groups. They are:

Panangka Purrurla

Pangarta Kamarra

Kngwarrea Ngala

Paltharra Mpitjana

These *nyinhanga* are very important, because these are the Western Arrarnta land-owning patrilineals. In certain contexts land is spoken of as *Panangka/Pangarta* land or *Ngala/Mpitjana* land or *Purrurla/Kamarra* land or *Kngwarrea/Paltharra* land. For the Western Arrarnta these *nyinhanganhanga* perform much the same function as incorporated bodies do in our legal system. They continue irrespective of the individuals who may from time to time occupy positions in the body corporate.

This class system fits over the top of the normal kinship system of father, mother, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin, etcetera. But the class system goes beyond what we call kin. It has the effect of including all people in the Western Arrarnta's social landscape, and determining his/her relationship to them, and theirs to him/her, and determining his/her rights and responsibilities vis-a-vis all other people, if and when they should happen to meet.

All the aspects of Aboriginal culture which I have mentioned, and others which I am still to mention, have implications, not only for the way in which Aborigines adapt to today's world, but also for the way they relate to White people.

As I just mentioned, the classificatory system determines an individual's rights and obligations vis-a-vis other people. In view of this, an Aborigine really has no idea how to relate to a White person who has no class. What is their relationship? What are their mutual rights and responsibilities? Since he does not know, and therefore cannot fit him into his social landscape, he is for all intents and purposes simply a part of the environment, and often treated as such.

I will illustrate this from events which actually occurred at Hermannsburg. In the '70s, in an endeavour to return authority to the Aborigines, we, the Finke River Mission, fostered the establishment of democratically elected Aboriginal Councils to take over responsibility for, and carry out many of the functions we had been performing. We thought we had done the right thing by the people, and that they would be happy with this development. Incidentally, they had readily agreed to the establishment of these Councils. Instead, relations between staff and

Aborigines deteriorated badly. Furthermore, staff found themselves being exploited and having unreasonable demands placed on them.

A lot of factors contributed to this development. In this context, I only want to mention one. Over the years the Aborigines had fitted the Mission staff into their social universe, with mutual rights and responsibilities. In establishing the Councils, the staff had altered this relationship, and the Aboriginal people were no longer sure of the staffs' place in their social universe. So no one felt any responsibility for the staff. The staff in a sense had become part of the environment, and the environment was what you exploited for your benefit without any sense of responsibility, apart from ritual obligations.

We learned from this fiasco. When staff were slotted into the social universe of the various family groups again, they, the staff, became part of the social universe. Relations improved. Exploitation and unreasonable demands fell off.

But to return to our subject, the authoritative nature of the rules laid down by the ancestral spirit beings can be gauged also from the language. No Aboriginal language that I know of has words for either/or. Aboriginal societies were not about personal choice for their individual members. They were all about living according to the rules laid down by the ancestral spirit beings.

Again, as far as I know, no Aboriginal language has words for please and thank you. Things were done for another person, not as a personal favour, but because the "law" demanded it. So there was no need for words like please or thank you. Individuals did what they had to do, or another demanded from them what, under the "law", they had a right to demand. This is not to suggest that no favour or gratitude was ever involved in transactions, just that normally actions were not rooted in favour or gratitude.

There are two other aspects of Aboriginal culture to which I want to draw attention, before moving on to land ownership. The first concerns the pre-pubescent socialisation of children. Most White people who interact with Aborigines soon notice that Aboriginal parents rarely discipline their children. Children are virtually allowed to do what they want. Even aggression, such as stone throwing by toddlers, is tolerated with good humour.

In the traditional setting, this created no problems. In fact, it helped to develop very independent, self-reliant individuals. Discipline was imposed on the children around the time of puberty, when their more formal education started with their initiation, and subsequent instruction in the knowledge and ritual of the clan. The latter took place over many years, and was integrated into the normal economic activity of the clan. It was during this period that unquestioned obedience to the "laws" of the clan was inculcated and internalised. The end result was a person who in all areas, apart from the "laws" of the ancestors, was freer than we are, but when it came to the "laws" of the group, more bound than we are.

The second aspect concerns the way in which privacy was accorded in close, open living arrangements. It was largely done through the rule of non-interference in other people's affairs, except as provided for in the kinship rules. There was no public comment on others' behaviour, unless your legitimate interests were threatened. Herein lies part of the reason why traditional Aborigines remain silent in the face of comments made by Aboriginal activists.

All the rules by which Aboriginal people lived are found in the *tjurrunga*, so it can be said that the *tjurrunga* played, and still play, the same role in Aboriginal societies that constitutions do in our society. While we have mechanisms to change our constitutions, their constitutions cannot be changed or amended by men, because they were given to men by the ancestral spirit beings. Hence they are eternal. Men may abandon them in part or whole, but they cannot change them.

The reverse side of this is that, for matters not covered by the *tjurrunga*, there are no laws. The implications of this are not difficult to see for Aboriginal societies confronted with adapting to new situations, and dealing with things like alcohol, for which there are no traditional rules.

The presence of the ancestral spirit beings in the land, in the flora and fauna and people, created an indivisible relationship between the land and its flora and fauna, the *tjurrunga* and people who belonged to the land. The ancestral spirit beings were deemed to have given discrete tracts of land to the patriclans who presently lay claim to these areas. The boundaries of the respective areas of land were determined by the points at which one clan handed the story of the wanderings of these ancestral spirit beings to another clan. Seniority in these clans, rules for succession, principles of land management, all were determined at the beginning of time by these ancestral spirit beings. These patriclans had responsibility to care for this land which had been deeded to them, and also for the performance of the rituals needed to guarantee the well-being of the land, the functioning of the universe, as well as the continuance of the species.

These patriclans, with certain provisos like the requirement to invite neighbouring clans to rituals celebrating the deeds of common ancestral spirit beings, kinship obligations, etcetera, had complete authority on their own land, and any visitors, even on ceremonial occasions, had to abide by the rules of the host group. This authority of the patriclans did not extend beyond their own land boundaries.

When disputes about land arose among Aboriginal patriclans, their common commitment to "laws" laid down by their ancestral spirit beings, e.g., that respective land boundaries coincided with the points at which they handed over the story (and its associated rituals) to the neighbouring patriclan, provided them with the legal framework within which to settle these disputes.

The objective of the foregoing has been to highlight the way Aborigines saw the world, understood cause and effect, and related to their land, and the way in which they organised themselves. It is these that fundamentally influenced and shaped their identity.

The culture which formed the Aborigines' unique identity, i.e., their association with the land and its *tjurrunga*, their form of social organisation, has taken something of a battering since White settlement.

To give a couple of examples: before the arrival of White settlers, fully initiated Aboriginal men would have seen themselves as not only maintaining the flora and fauna of their own estate, but also, in co-operation with other patrilineal groups, in jointly maintaining this world, and providing the food their group and other groups needed to survive.

Then White men came. They performed no rituals that they, the Aborigines, were aware of, and yet they appeared to have a constant and abundant food supply, unaffected by drought. From discussions I have had, the inability of the Aborigines' philosophy/economy to validate itself in the face of the settlers' philosophy/economy, impacted very powerfully over time.

Before the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* 1976 became law, Aboriginal patriclans did not feel that their land was under challenge from other Aborigines. They did not "own" their land in White Australian legal terms. They may not even have been living on the land. But their Aboriginal rights to ownership, and all this entailed in Aboriginal terms, were not challenged by other Aborigines.

The *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act* changed all that. As senior Aboriginal traditional owners are wont to put it, the Act put the Land Council between them and their land. Further, the Act amalgamated discrete parcels of land into Single Land Trusts -- an absolute no-no in Aboriginal terms. And as none of the patriclans received title to their own estate, they felt

as though they did not own their own land in White legal terms either. This perception was reinforced as they discovered that negotiations with another party, in relation to use of their land, were conducted by the Land Councils, often without reference to themselves. And so the people who in Aboriginal terms had responsibility for their land, found they were unable to exercise it. For all intents and purposes, they had been reduced to nobodies.

The change in life-style, from hunting and gathering to living in one location, impacted on the mechanisms for passing on knowledge. Some important knowledge about the ancestral spirit beings, and rituals to commemorate their travels and exploits, could only be taught at the sites where these events were originally deemed to have taken place. As Aboriginal people ceased wandering over their land, either because they were forbidden to, had abandoned their home land, or had simply become sedentary, some of this knowledge ceased being passed on, as it could not be passed on in an alien setting. As well, many of the young men showed a lack of interest in learning, because they could no longer see the value of the knowledge the old men wanted to pass on.

The effect of Missions and the Christian message on the Aboriginal culture is a topic in itself. Time constraints permit only a cursory look at the subject. That the Christian message had an impact on the Aboriginal culture goes without saying. However, to suggest that it destroyed the Aboriginal culture is not sustainable, as there is no evidence to support it. From my observations of the Central Australian scene, there is no appreciable difference in cultural knowledge between Aborigines brought up on Mission stations, and those brought up otherwise in contact with Whites. When it comes to cultural knowledge, the crucial element would appear to be the length of contact with Whites -- not the religious orientation of Whites.

In fact, a good case can be made out for the beneficial effects of Missions, and the Christian message they brought to the Aborigines. Where the Christian message was accepted, this helped fill the void being created by the inability of the fertility rites to validate themselves in the face of White technology and economy, a fact to which I have referred earlier.

Nor did the acceptance of the Christian faith necessarily affect other aspects of the culture. My observations lead me to accept an hypothesis which Wilbert Moore, a sociologist, has put forward, namely that changes in aesthetic forms and strictly supernatural beliefs can occur without necessarily causing changes in other parts of the social system. I quote:

"However, another question must be considered, and that is whether certain standard components of cultures and societies are especially autonomous. Such relative autonomy would have two implications for the analysis of social change: relatively high and long insulation from the effects of other systemic changes, but, correlatively, fairly easy' autonomous changes, including those of external origin, owing to the meagre links to the balance of the system. Although the evidence relating to the independent variability of some standard components of social systems is extremely sketchy, it does appear that aesthetic canons and forms provide one such manifestation, and that strictly super-empirical components of religious belief represent another. To repeat, if these hypotheses are correct, it would follow that aesthetic forms and super-empirical beliefs would be only slightly affected by other social transformations, but by the same token might well exhibit changes that have little to do with their immediate social environment, and in fact possibly are a result of external influence. The loose connection with other role structures and ordinary patterns of behaviour means that relatively autonomous change might occur without a kind of systemic resistance' deriving from interlocking patterns." (Wilbert E. Moore, *Social Change*, p.75. Prentice-Hall of India(Private) Ltd. 1965)

In more recent years, alcohol more than any other single factor has had a deleterious effect on Aboriginal societies, by insidiously eating away at the very fabric of such societies. There are two major reasons why alcohol has such a detrimental effect. First, since there are no traditional rules regarding its use, and only rules instituted by the ancestral spirit beings have binding force, it has so far proved impossible for Aboriginal societies to establish new rules which its members consider binding. The second is that, as yet, there are no traditional or learned mechanisms for different land-owning clans to work together on social issues. And as most Aboriginal communities' are made up of different land-owning clans or remnants of clans, they have no mechanisms for arriving at an acceptable consensus for dealing with their alcohol problem.

With all that has happened, what then remains of the Aboriginal identity? Interestingly, despite the impact of the White technology/economy, against which traditional beliefs have been unable to validate themselves; despite laws like the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*; and despite increasing social dislocation and breakdown, the basic *Weltanschauung* remains, and with it the original identity of the Aborigines. Their relationship to the land, their understanding of economy, their understanding of the causes of morbidity and mortality, are still fundamentally influenced and shaped by their traditional beliefs.

This has fundamental and far reaching implications for all programs devised to ameliorate Aboriginal disadvantage. Programs based on a White understanding of Aboriginal needs are going to continue to have some success among people whose Aboriginal identity is based primarily on race, and not culture. However, these programs are going to continue to be spectacularly unsuccessful among Aborigines who still have an Aboriginal *Weltanschauung*. The truth of this should by now be evident for all to see.

After years of quite substantial expenditure on programs to improve Aboriginal health and poverty, nothing has changed. And yet we continue to see Aboriginal health, or rather the lack of it, in terms of health clinics, sewerage systems, housing, career paths for Aboriginal health workers, etcetera, and not in terms of assisting Aborigines to work through the implications of their own belief systems.

The Government policy of establishing Aboriginal organisations to provide advice on matters Aboriginal is a recognition of the need to match programs to Aboriginal realities. However, most of the Aborigines who have accepted or sought membership of these organisations are those who have only a racial Aboriginal identity, and not a cultural one. Hence the programs they devise and support are really no different from the programs which White Australian advisers used to propose to government in the past.

For programs to have any chance of success, they have to address Aboriginal needs in ways with which Aborigines can identify, and then can incorporate into their ideological and social systems. If they cannot be incorporated, they will remain outside their systems, and remain spectacularly ineffective in dealing with Aboriginal disadvantage.