

CHAPTER NINE
SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND RELIGIOUS NECESSITY

During the 1930s, the idea Elkin opposed, that of the passing race, was driving through the scientific community like a wedge. Administrators, most missionaries, physical anthropologists, and positivist psychologists interpreted Aborigines' doom as racial destiny and moved towards a national policy of racial absorption and the 'uplift' of individual Aborigines (Chs. 4–6, 8, below). Structurally informed proto-land rights advocates, who interpreted the prospect of Aboriginal demise as a moral disgrace moved in the opposite direction. They urged a national policy of racial separation and protection, until the survival of Aboriginal tribes could be assured (below). From his first year in the field, Elkin believed that complete segregation was impracticable, and to attempt it would make things worse.¹ He sought ways to hold off the mounting consensus that as things stood, Aborigines were unassimilable. He tried to show that Aborigines could respond to informed and sympathetic guidance collectively and constructively, and so regain, in modern conditions, their morale and vitality.

Elkin premised his campaign for acculturative assimilation on two suppositions about Aboriginal society: that it might be separable from its territories, and that, even as it lost its basis in land, it could change from within, rapidly and radically. He argued that Aborigines might be able, with the help of an initial period of protection and tutelage, to sustain their cultures even while settlers destroyed or undermined their economic, spiritual, and political ties with 'particular spots on the earth's surface'.² For Elkin, 'the psychological factor', and not political contest over land, showed the way forward. In his view, the crucial point about Aboriginal psychology was its religious nature. And the 'meaning and value' of religion inhered in the individual and corporate cultivation of the will to serve society's best ideals.

¹ In 1944, he wrote that segregation as a policy was 156 years out of date. The Aborigine will not be segregated.' AP Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigine: A National Aboriginal Policy* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1944), 37. At stake was the quality of the formative modes of contact.

² AP Elkin, 'Anthropology and the Future of the Australian Aborigines', *Oceania* V, 1, Sept 1934, 1–18, at 7.

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That religious quality of social volition (and not, for instance, political opposition), was Aborigines' best vehicle for advance into 'industrial civilization', Elkin averred.

His project was principled. But could it work? Was Elkin advocating a policy that he admitted might fail, when in fact he had little or no grounds to believe that it might succeed? Was his acculturative assimilation a desperate, even a reckless, act of idealism, one that would increase governments' intrusion into Aborigines' lives, preponderantly to ill effect? Was it evidence of an attempt by Elkin to reconcile what he had come to see as a spiritual necessity with what science could disclose as practicable? What relation between aspiration, science and governance did Elkin engender?

To better understand these questions, we need to look closely at when and how Elkin marshalled evidence to support the policy of acculturative assimilation, and how well he adjusted the policy to the evidence. We will follow three stages in Elkin's attempt to produce a mode of social anthropology that would support his 'positive policy'.

Firstly, in 1932 he argued on principle and without much in the way of evidence for the *possibility* that Aborigines might adapt their culture to industrial civilization. He refuted new pessimistic results from racial science, and also deflected the dominant, structural functionalist account of Aboriginal society as dependent upon its traditional territorial arrangement. The culmination of this phase was his monograph on totemism. We will focus on how Elkin's monograph – the second collated from *Oceania* articles – differed from its predecessor, by downplaying the basis of society in (inalienable) territory and emphasizing instead the potency of Aborigines' (conveniently immaterial) spiritual life. We will also momentarily set aside chronology to observe the long-term consequences of these two foundational statements concerning Aboriginal society.

In Part Two of the chapter, we see Elkin move in 1933 from an argument that 'merely academic' hypotheses could not over-rule the obligation to attempt acculturative assimilation, to an attempt to gather evidence for his own academic hypothesis. Several years into his campaign for a positive policy, Elkin tried to *prove* that Aboriginal culture did in fact have the adaptive capacity that would make acculturative assimilation feasible.

Despite gathering some evidence for his case, and after a bold declamation in September 1934, the balance of Elkin's observations led him to decide that Aborigines would have to take an intermediary step, a kind of cultural reconnaissance, before they could sustain

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viable relations with settler society in ways that were compatible with their traditional religion and culture.

In a third phase of his attempt to establish a practical mode of social anthropology, beginning in 1936, he analysed comparatively passive types of Aboriginal response to the problems and opportunities of culture contact. He enquired into Aborigines' unwitting reactions to civilization, and he conceptualised Aborigines as reticent students of settler culture. He generalised that a reluctant tutelage was a preliminary stage in Aborigines' journey to regain responsibility in their own 'community of destiny'.³ In making these arguments, Elkin retreated from the optimistic project for anthropology that he propounded in the three years after his central Australian fieldwork. Having studied this development, we will be able to see how he adjusted his policy goals in order to re-articulate the relation between the scientific evidence and his over-riding spiritual aim. He sought to entrench in settler Australian opinion the idea that Aborigines must either retain, regain, or if necessary find in a primarily enculturative Christian submission their sense of spiritual and social integration, while expanding their range of individual freedoms.

I

The rise of a scientist

Elkin's first arguments for a 'positive policy' in Aboriginal affairs did not require much in the way of supporting evidence. In 1928, it was enough for him to argue that his Anglican audience ought not to accept the alternative: violent, forced cultural change (Ch. 6). Elkin produced no evidence for his claim that Aborigines had the capacity to adapt their society 'from within', such that they might collectively benefit from their dispossession. Similarly in 1931, addressing the general public, Elkin was content to argue that his positive policy probably could not work, but that settler Australians were morally obliged nonetheless to attempt it (Ch. 8).

Elkin's prominence as a publicist preceded his career as a professional scientist. His first mention in Sydney's new international journal of anthropology, *Oceania*, was Raymond Firth's review of the published version of the lecture he gave in April 1931 to the APNR. As

³ Elkin used the phrase in a different but compatible context: AP Elkin, *Society, the Individual and Change: with Special Reference to War and Other Present-Day Problems* (Sydney: Camden College, 1940), 69.

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we have seen, Elkin wrote the lecture in response to requests from the APNR – he intended it to show that science pointed towards a new policy. Firth, who was then Radcliffe-Brown's assistant lecturer, wrote that the pamphlet had scientific merit.

In the pamphlet, Elkin offered mainly conjectural argument. He hoped to show merely the possibility that 'understanding the Aborigine' would prepare the way for elders and other initiated men to take a part in adapting traditional culture to European religion and / or economy. He had little evidence of any such collective adjustments actually having been made. The nearest he came to such a 'proof' was when he recounted a successful practice instituted at Walcott Inlet Station, a government pastoral venture. Chief Protector Neville hoped the station would provide training for Aborigines in the beef industry in circumstances amenable to the continuation of tribal life. When bush blacks speared cattle roaming their land, the station manager 'compensated' them by a regular 'gift' of meat. Elkin reported 'excellent results':

The natives are satisfied, they recognise that they are being treated fairly, and that if they disturb or spear the station cattle, they can expect, as they deserve, to be punished; moreover, it is interesting to notice that they do not hang around the station waiting for killing day, but move about visiting ... and for tribal business; and further, work at the station [when requested].'

A predictable, regular, limited form of rationing, apparently agreed upon as a kind of rental contract, demonstrated that white industry, 'civilized' black labour, and Aborigines living traditionally could make mutual accommodations.

Other than in Firth's review, for over twenty months after his return from the field, Elkin did not feature in *Oceania's* pages. Presumably, he was analysing his data from the field. But his list of publications, the content of his sermons, and his mounting public commitments all suggest that he had priorities other than scientific discourse. His policy statements preceded his social-scientific arguments.

Then events thrust Elkin onto the anthropological stage with sudden prominence. Radcliffe-Brown had left for Chicago. Firth, who was also acting head of department, wanted to return to an English University. Firth announced that he was leaving for Britain, and recommended Elkin as his replacement. At this time, Firth raised Elkin's profile amongst Australian anthropologists. In August 1932, Elkin dominated the Sydney meeting of the

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Anthropology Section of the Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science (ANZAAS), which Firth organised. Elkin's 'Secret Life' paper opened the section; another, 'Cultural and Racial Clash in Australia', closed it three days later.⁴ Firth could have timetabled Elkin's presentation of the latter paper in the culture contact morning, for an audience of anthropologists. Instead, he included Elkin's paper in the larger session, attended by historians, medical scientists, geographers, and anthropologists. Next month, the September issue of *Oceania* contained Elkin's first two scientific articles – the timing suggests further evidence of Firth's succession preparations.

Elkin later wrote that at this time he had no intention of applying for a full-time academic appointment.⁵ This claim is credible, because Elkin was writing more for church publications than academic audiences, and his enthusiasm for his religious vocation (Ch. 7) and his potential as a publicist (Ch. 8) was peaking. But by the end of the year, he had accepted a one-year appointment as lecturer in charge of anthropology. (He retained his Rectorship of Morpeth, and so with the help of two curates at Morpeth he held two full-time jobs.) He attained this provisional version of the eminent position within Australian anthropology by default, and when his involvement in non-academic outlets for anthropological expertise was already extensive, and increasing.⁶

Elkin took the opportunity to establish a two-pronged attack against the still mounting wave of scientific opinion that Aboriginal culture was doomed. The first defence was that, after his recent year in the field, Elkin knew just enough about Aborigines' 'secret life' to prove that until now, settler Australians (even recent social anthropologists) had been unable either to assess accurately Aborigines' social capacities in general, or to understand the point of view of particular Aborigines. The second defence was that even if the scientific consensus was against acculturative assimilation, that was 'merely academic' opinion, and a moral obligation supervened. This double defence involved two very different solutions to the problem of evidence for Aborigines' capacity to adapt collectively to their new situation.

⁴ AP Elkin, 'Cultural and Racial Clash in Australia', *Morpeth Review*, 2 (21), 1932, 35–45.

⁵ Elkin's renewed religious enthusiasm (Ch. 7), and his sense that he must seek moral fulfilment in defiance of scientific trends (Ch. 8), explain the change since 1929 (Ch. 5). Elkin's biographer has written that the decision put him to bed for a week with 'complications' secondary to anxiety, see Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 108.

⁶ Elkin had an official advisory status with the National Missionary Council, and was soon to become President of the APNR.

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Quite suddenly in the Spring of 1932, Elkin proposed a reorientation of professional Australian social anthropology. In 1944, in his most comprehensive policy blueprint, he claimed retrospectively that new insights achieved in 1931 made possible a new, positive era in applied Australian social anthropology.⁷ He made comparable if less declarative claims at the time.

A person may spend a lifetime amongst them, employing, feeding, clothing and teaching them, and end up with nothing but the most superficial knowledge. I have met some white persons who have been acclaimed by their fellows as the greatest living authorities on the aborigines. A few words have sufficed to show that they are cognizant of little more than the existence of the secret side of native life.⁸

Aborigines were adept at protecting their secrets, Elkin wrote. ‘The old custodians of secret knowledge’ would rather the tribal secrets die with them than entrust them to unreliable and so uninitiated youths.’ He drew out the implications for anthropology:

Can we, then, ever hope to learn these secrets, that is, apart from the few scraps which are from time to time gathered from the remnants and derelicts of almost defunct tribes? I believe that we can, and, in fact, we have already succeeded in some slight degree, but complete success demands a thorough knowledge of the language, and a sympathetic understanding of the laws and customs of the tribe concerned, and then such tact and sincerity and grip of the principles of secret and sacred societies as will win the confidence of the tribal custodians, of the men of highest degree.⁹

His ‘we’ in the second sentence was a façade of humility. Other than two minor details he drew from Spencer and Gillen, in ‘Secret Life’, Elkin did not cite the work of any other social anthropologist. In particular, Elkin’s criteria for ‘complete success’ reads as a list of what Radcliffe-Brown overlooked: Radcliffe-Brown did not make much headway with Aboriginal languages; he published nothing on Aboriginal laws and customs; and ‘the principles of secret and sacred societies’ was a key concern of the historical diffusionist school, which Radcliffe-Brown spurned.

⁷ AP Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigine: A National Aboriginal Policy* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1944), 39–40.

⁸ Elkin, ‘Secret Life’, 120.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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Thus Elkin's first response to the challenge to gather evidence to support acculturative assimilation was, in effect, a declaration of a new era. Radcliffe-Brown, of course, was in Chicago, and little interested in Elkin's renovation of Australian anthropology. Elkin was able to claim that the evidence that was pertinent to policy decisions was only just beginning to accumulate – it began with his work. When Elkin rose to the (acting) head of Australian anthropology, the Department seemed doomed. At the start of the academic year in 1933, the University warned students taking Anthropology that probably they would not be able to continue the subject the following year. In an Australian variation on the phoenix, Elkin was able to rise above the dust left in the wake of the flight of senior academics from Australian anthropology.

Oceania Monographs One and Two

In building from the premise of Aboriginal adaptability, Elkin, as we have seen (Chs. 5, 6, 8) opposed racialism. He also opposed assumptions that flowed from structuralism. Radcliffe-Brown's structuralist anthropology purported to show that Aboriginal society was integrally bound up with a territorial system that was incompatible with the settler property regime. Elkin's strategy was also opposed to other social anthropologists, whose work encouraged the view that Aborigines should not be expected to make radical social and economic changes when their way of life had been viable and admirable until white settlement disrupted it, and so whites ought to keep out of Aborigines' way as much as possible. Elkin still believed that 'the world conceptions' settlement made available – Christianity and liberal democracy – offered Aborigines a better way of life than their traditional isolation. So, while battling against racial science in the person of Stanley Porteus, Elkin was also conducting a war between rival schools of social anthropology. In a second phase of the contest we observed in Chapter Seven, conducted with reference to objective and scientific criteria instead of subjective and religious criteria, Elkin pitted his diffusionist approach against Radcliffe-Brown's structuralism. At issue, we can now see, was the salience of a vision of Aboriginal society dependent upon traditional bases in land, versus a vision of Aboriginal society sustained through adaptable spiritual beliefs and relations.

In the early 1930s, Radcliffe-Brown and Elkin completed within Sydney's Department of Anthropology alternative models of Australian social anthropology.

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Throughout 1930, Radcliffe-Brown published his in four parts. In 1933, Elkin reinterpreted Radcliffe-Brown's lead. They offered opposed answers to central questions¹⁰: What was the traditional Aboriginal conception of land? And how did the rival schools of Australian social anthropology construe collective Aboriginal agency?

Both scientists' solutions were shaped, to differing extents, by the problems and goals of professional anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown judged his work wholly by its contribution to science. Elkin, who rarely if ever wrote an anthropological article without pointing to ways in which it was not 'merely academic', was nevertheless constrained by the conventions of his discipline, and by the data at his disposal.¹¹ Elkin's insistence upon the immediate practical potential of his findings, as against Radcliffe-Brown's long-term project to found a new natural science, had profound practical consequences. As we will see, Radcliffe-Brown's monograph established the view, from 1930 to the 1950s oppositional but important in the securing of reserves, that Aboriginal territory was central to their future as a distinct people. In his monograph, Elkin implicitly challenged this view.

From the mid-1920s, Radcliffe-Brown competed with Malinowski for the dominance of British social anthropology. The positive reception in 1922 of his long-delayed monograph on the Andaman Islands increased his confidence that a synchronic approach, based exclusively upon professional fieldwork, and spurning historical conjecture, would shape the future of the discipline.¹² The question was, would it be Malinowski's suggestive functionalism, or Radcliffe-Brown's rigorous structuralism? As well as academic posts and prestige, control of research funds from the Rockefeller Foundation was at stake.¹³ From the mid-1920s Malinowski was the Foundation's British gatekeeper, in part because Radcliffe-Brown was so far from the metropolis, in South Africa (as foundation Professor of Anthropology at Cape Town University) and then from late 1925 in Sydney.¹⁴ While occupying the Chair at Sydney, Radcliffe-Brown tried to persuade the Rockefellers' scientific

¹⁰ In 1933 when he published his monograph, Elkin was Lecturer-in-Charge of Anthropology. He became Professor the next year. AR Radcliffe-Brown, *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes* articles bound together from *Oceania*, I (1–4), April, June, September and December, 1930, and designated below as 'Social Organisation I, II, III, or IV'; AP Elkin, *Studies in Australian Totemism: Oceania Monograph 2* (Sydney: Australian National Research Council, 1934).

¹¹ See for example, AP Elkin, 'Totemism in North-Western Australia (The Kimberley Division)', *Oceania* III (3), March 1933, 257–296, at 259.

¹² Stocking, *After Tylor*, 328–329.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 405.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 232–236.

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advisors that only his strictly structuralist approach could build the understanding of society that would yield lasting results.¹⁵

Radcliffe-Brown's strength was the combination of precision, caution, and synthetic brilliance he brought to large and rapidly growing quantities of ethnographic data. These traits followed from his commitment to work with only those concepts that could be objectively defined with reference to professionally obtained data. On this scientific criterion, he was a more faithful follower of W. H. R. Rivers than was Elkin.

Pre-war, Rivers had refined social anthropology by introducing and elaborating the genealogical method. In this procedure, the anthropologist sketched an informant's kin relations, and then checked them against several related family trees. He pursued inconsistencies, and strictly noted the degree of reliability of any questionable information. Elkin and Radcliffe-Brown each used this method, but Radcliffe-Brown suffused its spirit throughout his sociological thinking. Rivers taught Radcliffe-Brown, and for decades the two corresponded, discussing the problems of an objective science of social organization.¹⁶

Radcliffe-Brown's monograph, *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes* furthered this quest for objectivity. From a vast amount of data about kin relations, he resolved a system of local, generational, matrimonial, and inter-society groupings. Fundamental relations emerged: kin filiation, and the territorial basis of horde groupings.¹⁷ By a useful methodological fiction, social structures and processes became, in Radcliffe-Brown's account, creative agencies. Culture 'organize[d] the relations of human beings to one another' and 'the relation of man to his environment.' Within this process, 'a system of customs and beliefs *brought*' human society and its environment into 'a larger structure'. As Marett had warned a generation earlier, this mode of proceeding (as if culture were an active agent) could only satisfy a moral philosopher if the analyst showed how social change occurred through individual agency. But Radcliffe-Brown was heading in the opposite direction, towards wider fields of abstraction. He proceeded thence with caution. The unity of Aborigines' social and environmental relations was 'very important to recognise', he wrote,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 400–406.

¹⁶ W. H. R. Rivers, *Social Organisation* (ed. W. J. Perry, *Rd Cultural anth in Uni London*) (London: Kegan Paul, 1924), 195–201; Stocking, *After Tylor*, 315–320.

¹⁷ Radcliffe-Brown, 'Social Organisation I', 63.

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but difficult to name. He simply called it a ‘wider structure’, and noted that it included myth, ritual, and totemism.

He based this ultimate structure in Aborigines’ territory. ‘The most important determining factor in relation to this wider structure [was] the strong social bond between the horde or local clan and its territory.’ It was methodologically convenient for Radcliffe-Brown to balance the amorphous ‘wider structure’ of religious life, suggestive of personal attitudes and indeterminable values, with the principle of a territorial base. Just when the analysis extended to spiritual or ideal concerns, the natural scientist pinned it down to territorial organization.

In his concluding article, published nine months after the first, Radcliffe-Brown changed his terminology. Instead of ‘territory’, he talked of the patrilineal, horde-based organization around food supply, and the importance of the local clan as the basic unit of social integration, upon which depended the scope of the larger group’s social relations.¹⁸ This change may have been Radcliffe-Brown’s response to the political trouble he had encountered between writing the first and the final articles in the series. Murray considered the relatively non-violent pacification of Papua to have been one of his greatest achievements, and a necessary precursor to a positive and effective ‘native administration’.¹⁹ Taking a broad view of the politics of colonialism, Papuan warfare, and Aboriginal dependence upon vast tracts of land, each posed the administrator similar problems: each was basic to the health of native society, and incompatible with the colonial agenda. Possibly, after realising how the Papuan controversy had weakened his position within Australian science, Radcliffe-Brown toned down his insistence upon the territorial nature of Aborigines’ social organization.

Even so, Aborigines’ land-holding groups, ‘hordes’, remained central to Radcliffe-Brown’s scheme. The horde was the unit upon which he based his conclusion that structural analysis provided a scientific model for the ‘pre-historical’ social development of civilization. He argued that the dynamism of Aboriginal society – its capacity to develop and sustain complications – depended upon a balance between expansion and integration. Tribes with the largest network of inter-tribal associations had evolved that capacity by inventing patterns of

¹⁸ *Idem*, ‘Social Organization IV’, 405, 440–455.

¹⁹ JHP Murray, *Review of the Australian Administration in Papua from 1907 to 1920* (Port Moresby: [Papuan Administration], 1920. Bound photocopy, 23–27.

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relationship that produced ‘an increasing emphasis on the solidarity of the local clan as a unit in the social integration.’²⁰ Logically, then, the task of integration with aspects of settler society would best be met by strengthening and renovating Aborigines’ territorial bases.

Radcliffe-Brown broadcast his view that the problem of depopulation was primarily territorial. ‘A big mistake was made’, he wrote in the Melbourne *Herald*, ‘which can be rectified only by recognising that the Aborigines’ culture is based on land ownership.’²¹ He published this opinion in January 1930, before the Papuan controversy erupted. He did not go so far as to argue that the righting of Australian wrongs could reverse what he regarded as the inevitable doom of the Aborigines’ culture.

Others made more optimistic use of Radcliffe-Brown’s insistence upon the territorial nature of Aboriginal society. Mary Bennett, a leading advocate of the segregation and protection of Aborigines, argued that in the Northern Territory at least, Aborigines could be secured in their tribal lands.²² A few years later, the anthropologist Donald Thomson made the same point from a position of greater influence. In 1927, Thomson had obtained a Diploma of Anthropology, taught by Radcliffe-Brown at the University of Sydney. The Professor entrusted the young student with a research fellowship. From April that year until January the next, Thomson lived with Aborigines in Cape York. In a 1936 report to the Commonwealth government, Thomson proposed ‘absolute segregation’ on inviolable reserves for the Aborigines in Arnhem Land.²³

Over the next two decades, Thomson attempted intermittently to combat the assimilation policy, and replace it with one based in Aboriginal rights to land. In a series of newspaper articles in 1946, Thomson reiterated that Aboriginal land ownership was well defined, and recommended that governments recognize ‘the territorial rights of the aborigines and hereditary ownership of land by clans in Australia’.²⁴ Thomson thus became the leading

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 455.

²¹ Interview with AR Radcliffe-Brown, *The Herald*, Melbourne, 11 January 1930; cited in Bennett, *Australian Aboriginal*, 128.

²² Fiona Paisley, ‘Mary Bennett and Chief Protector Neville: Protection, Absorption and the Future of the Aborigines’, in Tim Rowse, ed., *Contesting Assimilation* (Perth: API Network, 2005), 71–84; Alison Holland, ‘Saving the Race: Critics of Absorption Look for an Alternative’, in *ibid.*, 85–99; McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 120–121.

²³ Donald Thomson, Interim General Report of Preliminary Expedition to Arnhem Land 1935–36, 45.

²⁴ *Idem*, ‘Justice for Aborigines’ reprinted from *The Herald*, Melbourne, December 28, 30, 31, 1946 at the request of G. S. Browne, Professor of Education, University of Melbourne. Available at the NLA.

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anthropologist in support of Radcliffe-Brown's interpretation that Aboriginal society was based fundamentally in territory.

Radcliffe-Brown's major work on the social organization of Aboriginal tribes was an important source for these segregationists. Notably, Thomson did not suggest how Aborigines might eventually emerge from their separate existence. Like Radcliffe-Brown, his insistence upon Aborigines' organization around land ownership left no room in his analyses or policy blueprints for an exploration of how Aborigines might begin collectively to make sense of the settler regime of land ownership. Silence about the potential for a modern Aboriginal agency accompanied Thomson's clarity about the fundamental structure of Aboriginal society.

Elkin's account of religion as the real foundation of Aboriginal society

As Radcliffe-Brown's successor, Elkin wrote and published *Oceania's* second monograph. He wrote a different story of Aborigines' relations with the land, in which subjective factors – 'meanings and values' – played a decisive part. In this, his major anthropological work, and the subject with which he announced his arrival as doyen of anthropology at the University of Sydney and Editor of *Oceania*, Elkin studied Australian totemism.

Radcliffe-Brown had insisted that totemism, as one aspect of the 'larger structure' that integrated Aborigines' social and environmental relations, was determined by territorial organization. Elkin did not rebut Radcliffe-Brown, or even explicate their differences.²⁵ But he used the term 'local grouping', never 'territory'.²⁶ Radcliffe Brown defined the horde as 'a small group of persons owning a certain area of territory'²⁷; Elkin, as 'groups of families related in the patrilineal line and by ties of propinquity.' Focussed on totemism, Elkin was interested in 'locality ... symbolized', and not land owned: 'Each horde is associated with a definite locality, and like the latter is symbolized by one or more of the natural species which are found there,' he wrote.²⁸ 'Ownership' featured in Elkin's account only in relation to

²⁵ He indicated the point at which he contradicted Radcliffe-Brown in a footnote, commenting that 'our knowledge is really insufficient to assert that the totemism was social only, and not ceremonial.' Elkin, *Studies in Australian Totemism*, 139.

²⁶ For example, *ibid.*, 30, 134, 136, 138, 139, 142.

²⁷ Radcliffe-Brown, *Social Organization*, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 141–142.

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ceremony: initiated men ‘ “own” and lead’ increase rites, he wrote.²⁹ We will see below that elsewhere, Elkin granted that Aborigines owned land, but throughout his work, he emphasized spiritual continuity as more fundamental than any traditional base in land – even if even that spiritual through-line depended upon the maintenance of sacred sites. As we have seen, Elkin viewed Aboriginal maintenance of such sites as compatible with pastoralists’ land rites to the surrounding acres.

The element of moral strategy in Elkin’s scientific choices becomes clear when we overlay his statements as a publicist and his scientific writings. We saw in Chapter Six that since 1929, Elkin had been urging a limited version of Aborigine’s territorial rights, and that as his publicity became more assertive, he characterised the settlement of Australia as theft. But what he found useful as public propaganda, he judged would be counter-productive within science. He wanted anthropology to focus upon and so (eventually) strengthen those aspects of Aboriginal social organization that were compatible with settler-Australian occupation of their lands.

Elkin claimed that, from the Aborigine’s point of view, land and kin were secondary aspects of a fundamental order based upon spirit and culture-heroes. Totemism directed the Aborigine’s involvement in his social heritage away from mere locality and kin relations, and towards his spiritual rights and responsibilities as a participant in the ‘eternal dream-time’, Elkin wrote.³⁰ ‘[P]ossibly too much emphasis has been placed on ... classifying kin, at the expense of understanding their totemic significance and function,’ he suggested. ‘[T]hey are just as much concerned with the ordering of man’s relation with nature. The latter function, indeed, may be primary.’³¹ By ‘relation with nature’, Elkin meant the general philosophical system – totemism as ‘an expression of the idea that man and nature form one corporate whole’ – and not the territorial relation to local ‘country’.³² Elkin used his study of totemism to overwrite Radcliffe-Brown’s foundation statement in Australian social anthropology. Elkin discounted the materialist or ‘natural’ formula of territory and kin relations, and focussed attention instead upon a collective spiritual life as the locus of Aborigines’ ‘meaning and value’.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰ Elkin, *Studies in Australian Totemism*, 139–140.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

³² *Ibid.*, 144.

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Elkin claimed to understand Aborigines' abstract thought and its relation to totemism. Whereas Radcliffe-Brown built from knowable entities, tentatively outwards to complex cultural abstractions (his 'wider system'), Elkin, without quoting informants, claimed comprehensive insight into what totemism meant to Aborigines. In maintaining his religion, Elkin wrote, the Aborigine 'interprets nature and its species as personal ... and symbolizes his own individual social life under terms drawn from nature, a symbolism based on the unity of life which he believes exists between natural species and himself.'³³ Elkin drew upon his favourite spiritual terms, 'personality' and 'corporate' spirituality, to convey Aboriginal thought. He wrote from the belief that for Aborigines, as for himself, a spiritual order was somehow more real than the material world. The Aborigine depends on nature, 'and so real is this fact that he expresses it in myth and rite'.³⁴

Reading Elkin, the Aborigine's subsistence from his horde country fades into the background, and his participation in collective spiritual life comes to the fore. Of course, this emphasis upon spirituality followed in part from Elkin's choice of subject matter. But Elkin did not write of Aboriginal religion as one subfield of Aboriginal sociology. He presented totemism as the central line of enquiry for Australian social anthropology.

One year earlier, in his first publication in a specialist anthropological journal, traces of the strategic intent behind this analysis were less subtle. Not only was 'the secret [religious] life of the Aborigines' 'the real drive' behind laws and customs; and not only did it 'inspire the secular doings of every day'; it was 'of *fundamental* importance to all who are concerned with the race.'³⁵ In this article, Elkin wrote of the initiated Aborigine's 'share' in 'a definite area of country', but he presented territory as a distraction from the important – paradoxically, 'real' – dimension of Aborigines' existence: their 'secret life' of the spirit.³⁶ '[T]he bond between a person and his (or her) country is not merely geographic or fortuitous, but living and spiritual and sacred,' Elkin wrote.³⁷ By comparison with the richness of the spiritual tie itself, the actual land was empty of meaning or value: mere geography.

By describing land and not religion as 'fortuitous', Elkin revealed his bias. His previous scientific writing had consisted of two long theses; he had written scores of shorter

³³ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 119, 122, 120.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁷ AP Elkin, 'The Secret Life of the Aborigines', *Oceania*, III, (2) Dec 1932, 119–138, at 130.

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pieces, but only for church audience and the general public. He was an experienced moralist in the essay or article form, and evidently he was adjusting imperfectly to the convention of objectivity that obtained in scientific writing. He wrote the article in 1932; he was a Priest, his family housed in an Anglican rectory; they lived from the offerings of a Church congregation. His avenue into wider intellectual fields had been a church scholarship. He was a scholarship boy, not an inheritor; he looked upon inequalities based in the inheritance of property as the proper object of progressive reform. For Elkin, the 'real', 'fundamental' and enduring source of value inhered in the founts of progressive public opinion: in the words and ideals of the priests, prophets, and publicists. Similarly, Aborigines would find in their 'secret life' the 'source and substance' of cultural continuity.³⁸ Elkin's first statement to this effect was politically revealing; his later iterations had an objective ring, and were politically influential.

In his mature writings, Elkin promoted the view that although Aborigines undeniably owned 'country', 'it is truer to say that the country owns them.' He made this point in 1938, in his most influential book, *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*.³⁹ He wrote it quickly, scarcely needing notes he later claimed, for he had taught the material in WEA classes and university tutorials for several years previously.⁴⁰ The writing was plain and clear. The book ran to several editions through the decades, in many languages. We have seen that Radcliffe-Brown's legacy was important to the segregationists who from the mid-1930s opposed assimilation. Elkin's different view had more direct impact, as he co-wrote an assimilation policy in 1939, and taught and influenced those who administered versions of it. Elkin's impact was also more general, and reached a wider audience, both within Australia and overseas.

Paul Hasluck was the most influential of those who derived their understanding of anthropology in large part from Elkin. As Minister for Territories in Menzies' cabinet from 1951 to 1963, Hasluck promoted his model of assimilation (the enculturative nature of which,

³⁸ AP Elkin, *Society, the Individual and Change: with Special Reference to War and Other Present-Day Problems* (Sydney: Camden College, 1940), 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁰ Elkin, Autobiography, taped 18 May 1965, transcript, EP 5/1/10.

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from 1953 to 1959, Elkin opposed with mounting vehemence.⁴¹ Hasluck wrote in his apologia that ‘the popular interpretation ... was that the Aboriginal belonged to the land rather than that the land belonged to the Aboriginal’.⁴² It seems that this conception, identical with Elkin’s, shaped Hasluck’s interaction with Aborigines: ‘In my conversations with Aborigines’, Hasluck recalled, ‘I knew that there was an attachment of the Aboriginal to his land and a special relationship between him and his land but it was not ownership.’⁴³

Hasluck followed Elkin thus far, but he did not take on Elkin’s idea that even without a basis in territory, Aborigines’ ‘group identity’ remained essential to their adaptation to settler society. One reason for this may have been that in the latter 1930s, when Hasluck began his serious study of Aboriginal policy, Elkin’s campaign to persuade his colleagues that Aborigines had the adaptive capacity to advance collectively had given way to a less visionary focus upon the remedial steps needed before that ideal could be followed more directly. To understand this process, we turn to Elkin’s attempts in 1933, the year that he published his monograph, to demonstrate that the spiritual potency of Aboriginal religion was accompanied by the capacity for deliberate social change, and so comprised a vehicle for adaptation. Despite an early flurry of confidence and excitement, the attempt was unsuccessful, and Elkin changed course.

II

Elkin’s second line of attack: against the ‘academic point of view’

Elkin’s academic eminence from 1932 was convenient for Raymond Firth, but tenuous for Elkin. His sudden prominence attracted critics within the field. In 1932 and 1933, Stanley Porteus and Ralph Piddington each published a critique of Elkin’s approach to applied social anthropology. Piddington argued that Elkin’s religious enthusiasm was likely to expose more Aborigines to an archaic, unrepresentative, and misleading minority movement within secular Australian society.⁴⁴ Porteus insisted that his evidence of Aborigines’ inferior capacities in

⁴¹ Tim Rowse, ‘The Modesty of the State: Hasluck and the Anthropological Critics of Assimilation’, in Tom Stannage, Kay Saunders and Richard Nile (eds.), *Paul Hasluck in Australian History* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1993), 119–132.

⁴² Paul Hasluck, *Shades of Darkness: Aboriginal Affairs 1925–1965* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), 105.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁴ Ralph Piddington, ‘Psychological Aspects of Culture Contact’, *Oceania*, 3 (3), March 1933, 312–24, at 324. Read before Section F. ANZAAS, August 1932.

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literacy and numeracy ought to inform any educational policy, and that Elkin had sidelined them without understanding their significance.⁴⁵ Elkin replied to neither criticism: he was preoccupied with his attempt to consolidate his strategic shift in Australian anthropology.

Elkin's critique of Porteus (to which Porteus responded as above) was pivotal. Porteus, an experienced school-teacher, was a specialist in intelligence testing. He argued that his studies of Aborigines showed that they did not have the capacity to benefit from even elementary European education.⁴⁶ Aborigines were not unintelligent, Porteus wrote, but they were only effective 'in their own peculiar environment'. He argued that his intelligence tests established Aborigines' inadaptability to European civilization, because the Aborigines he tested lacked the capacity for rote learning necessary for even basic literacy and numeracy. In a secondary argument, Porteus claimed that the central desert tribes developed the seminal Aboriginal cultures. The exigencies of surviving in a harsh environment had induced greater conceptual development in those peoples. In contrast, the Aborigines of coastal north-western Australia had strayed little from their landing point, where the desert meets the sea, from which Porteus supposed all Aborigines had diffused. The northerners had stagnated, and had fallen behind their desert neighbours in cultural development.⁴⁷

Elkin's reply helped consolidate his new eminence in Australian studies. Firstly, he drew upon his diffusionist Doctorate, and his field work amongst some of the same tribes with whom Porteus had worked, to demolish Porteus' secondary argument. Elkin established the greater probability that Aborigines had dispersed from two landing points on the north coast. In his respectful rejoinder, Porteus admitted defeat on this front.⁴⁸

As regards Porteus' main argument, concerning racial differences in intelligence, Elkin took a different tack. In a manner reminiscent of his treatment of racial science in the 'Practical Value' series, Elkin came very close to a complete capitulation to Porteus' findings, even though Porteus argued that they invalidated the acculturative project.

We are almost forced [Elkin wrote] to realize the possibility that the aboriginal race may have been so completely adapted biologically as well as mentally to its own cultural environment that it cannot adapt itself to

⁴⁵ SD Porteus, 'Mentality of Australian Aborigines', *Oceania*, 4 (1), September 1933, 30–36.

⁴⁶ SD Porteus, *Psychology of a Primitive People*, (New York, Longmans, Green and Co., 1931).

⁴⁷ Elkin, 'Social Life and Intelligence', 111.

⁴⁸ Porteus, 'Mentality of Australian Aborigines', 31.

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a culture of a different type, or, in other words [returning to Pitt-Rivers formulation], that it lacks the ‘ethnic capacity’ to become civilized.⁴⁹

That Aborigines were ‘unadaptable’ was ‘the general opinion’; their smaller brain was undoubtedly a disadvantage; a century and a half of dismal results from attempts to raise them also counted for something in the assessment of their prospects, Elkin continued. In 1929, he had followed much the same point by appealing for more research. Now, he reversed that tactic.

The best evidence-based analyses of Aborigines’ capacities comprised merely the ‘academic point of view’, Elkin explained. That view was inconclusive. Porteus’s scientific honesty, in setting out the factors militating against the absolute reliability of his results, gave Elkin the ammunition he needed. But from a scientific point of view, Elkin’s rejoinder was less than honest. He urged that the pessimistic conclusions scientists such as Porteus, Radcliffe-Brown, and Pitt-Rivers reached could be verified only by the failure of concerted practical efforts *in the contrary direction*, that is, towards assimilation.⁵⁰ Elkin’s hypocritical appeal to scientists to refrain from attributing any authority – any practical value – to their best conclusions is strong evidence that at this stage he was more committed to his role as a publicist and expert than to the advance of science. That is, he had decided in general terms what he wanted to attempt, and was now only interested in science to the extent that it demonstrated how to go about it. Detachment from any predictive function of science created the space through which he emerged as the expert champion of Aboriginal agency.

And yet, he knew that if acculturative assimilation were to gain sustainable credibility, he must win the scientific argument by justifying evidentially the policy’s feasibility. He had recently propagated the standard line that ‘primitive man clings to the past’.⁵¹ In August 1932, he told an inter-disciplinary gathering of scientists at ANZAAS in Sydney that the relation between an Aboriginal society and its environment was ‘almost a static condition of equilibrium’.⁵² He now saw that these statements empowered scholars such as Porteus who believed that policy makers must prepare Aborigines for a life of subordination within or alongside settler society. After his reply to Porteus, Elkin began a

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 111–113.

⁵¹ Elkin, ‘Primitive Literature – Continued’, *Morpeth Review* II (15), March 1931, 38–47, at 39.

⁵² Elkin, ‘Cultural and Racial Clash’, 36.

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search for scientific evidence that demonstrated not only the possibility but also the fact that Aborigines were able collectively, deliberately ‘to adjust their societies from within’.

In search of cultural dynamism

In June 1933, Elkin claimed to have found evidence that Aborigines could and did make deliberate cultural change.⁵³ By this stage, he was Professor of Anthropology and editor of *Oceania*. He wrote and published in that journal a short analysis of data, provided by a missionary, the Rev. T. T. Webb, concerning the way Aborigines of various tribes in Arnhem land derived new marriage laws from their social organization.⁵⁴ Webb showed how ‘the Murngin’ people manipulated sub-section cycles so that they could legally marry in the same way as their neighbours. According to the W. Lloyd Warner’s anthropological account of the tribe’s structure, the new marriage system was impossible. Elkin concluded that Webb’s interpretation overturned fundamental elements of the classic structuralist account of the region’s social organization.⁵⁵ ‘The Aborigines of this area were not so bound by theory, and faced with a practical problem, they seem to have solved it in a most ingenious manner by doubling the normal length of the cycle’, Elkin wrote.⁵⁶ Here was proof, Elkin claimed, that Aborigines did not ‘cling to the past’; they shaped it to fit present needs.

As editor of *Oceania*, Elkin seized the opportunity to make a concerted move against the structuralists’ claim to objective knowledge of Aboriginal society. He pitted Webb’s self-trained, empirical knowledge (gained through decades of Christian service), against the detached scientific analysis of select data (gathered during months of scientific enquiry). The contrast recalls the debates between Pitt-Rivers and Reverend When, which Elkin had clipped from his local paper a decade earlier (Ch. 6). Now, Elkin sided decisively with the religious party. We can see at work the manipulation of persons and opinions that Elkin’s biographer argued made him an effective ‘committee man’.⁵⁷ Behind the scenes, and in good time, he arranged a trifecta of sorts. He published three articles consecutively: the missionary’s empirical insights, his own, Professorial, interpretive leverage, and an

⁵³ *Idem*, ‘Marriage and Descent in East Arnhem Land’, *Oceania* III (4), June 1933, 406–411.

⁵⁴ Theodor Webb, ‘Social Organisation in East Arnhem Land’, *Oceania* III (4), June 1933, 412–416.

⁵⁵ W. Lloyd Warner, ‘Morphology and Functions of the Australian Murngin Type of Kinship’, *American Anthropologist*, 33 (2), 1930, 207–256.

⁵⁶ Elkin, ‘Marriage and Descent’, 416.

⁵⁷ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 221–240.

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addendum by W. E. H. Stanner – the rising star of the next generation of social anthropologists – reconsidering his field notes in view of the possibilities latent in Aborigines' adaptive intelligence.

The trifecta was Elkin's first blow in his fight to establish a credible account of collective Aboriginal agency. His target was Radcliffe-Brown's legacy of theoretical structuralism. In *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes*, Radcliffe-Brown had recommended Warner's account of the Murngin type of kinship as 'the best account of the actual working of an Australian kinship system in the everyday life of the tribe'.⁵⁸ Elkin, in contrast, preferred Webb's account of the Murngin peoples' marriage laws over W. Lloyd Warner's statement precisely because Webb did not try to fit data to a theory, but discovered a pattern because of his long association with reliable informants. Warner the fieldworker had ignored sub-sections, Elkin wrote; Webb the missionary avoided this mistake, as the sub-section nomenclature '[was] used in daily conversation almost as much as the kinship terms, and it [was] of great value in ascertaining relationships and the associated modes of behaviour at inter-tribal gatherings.'⁵⁹ Webb did not concern himself with abstract structures so much as the collective life in which individual souls found meaning.

The article also demonstrates the immediate effect Elkin's historical perspective and interest in agency had upon his colleagues in the department. Bill Stanner wrote an addendum to 'Dr. Elkin's interpretive article', in which he explained that he now recognized that a similar adaptation had been occurring amongst the Nangiomera, in the Daly River–Fitzmaurice River district.⁶⁰ Previously he had discounted this variation upon known marriage rules as a local oddity. Now he believed that the Nangiomera had imitated the Murngin initiative.

It has obviously not been perfectly assimilated by the Nangiomera. These people quite frankly admit they do not yet understand it. Much of the system as they possess it appears to be functionless, its only real use (since the local organization has completely broken up, and the tribal life disintegrated) being that it makes their occasional visits to and contact with Fitzmaurice and Victoria River tribes very much more satisfactory.

⁵⁸ Radcliffe-Brown, *The Social Organisation of Australian Tribes*, 428.

⁵⁹ Elkin, 'Marriage and Descent', 415.

⁶⁰ WEH Stanner, 'A Note Upon a Similar System Among the Nangiomeri', *Oceania* II (4), June 1933, 416–417.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 416.

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They used to be ‘very sensitive’ about not understanding it, as were neighbouring tribes, Stanner continued, ‘before they were *taught* the new way by the Fitzmaurice and Victoria River tribes.’⁶¹

Thus, Stanner re-assessed his fieldwork notes in the light of Aboriginal agency. What had appeared useless under Radcliffe-Brown’s auspices, because it was non-functional from a traditional perspective, became of interest under Elkin’s diffusionist aegis, because it provided evidence of Aborigines’ attempts to adapt their law to the new, post-contact conditions. And so Stanner, cautiously, began to see in the waste material of functionalist analysis, the evidence of Aborigines’ cultural dynamism. His ‘addendum’, though more cautious than Elkin’s interpretive lead, nevertheless supported the new Professor’s basic point. ‘The anthropologist finds in this [innovation] another reason for not underestimating the intelligence of the Australian aborigine,’ Stanner concluded.⁶²

Elkin stated decisively that Aboriginal culture was adaptive. ‘This fact should be proclaimed from the housetops, respected by all, and taken into consideration in our endeavours to do [the Aborigines] justice and to frame and put into operation a policy designed to raise them in the scale of civilization,’ he wrote.⁶³ Momentarily, he was confident that social anthropology was on the verge of revealing a wealth of examples of traditional dynamism like the cases Webb and Stanner discovered. Despite the ringing tone, Elkin was claiming nothing very dramatic, just that ‘the aborigines do possess a social, economic, legal, political and religious organisation by which they are able to adapt themselves to their own geographic and social environment.’ Still, evidence of conscious adaptation was a step in the right direction. The ‘shout it from the rooftops’ declaration came in an article he called ‘Anthropology and the Future’. That vision of the future soon became far less sanguine.

From propaganda to empirical studies of culture contact

With the principle of Aboriginal acculturation established, and its feasibility proven to his satisfaction, Elkin turned his mind to the question, ‘how’? He first enquired into the way ‘civilized’ Aboriginal communities, which he defined as any groups that were dependent

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 417. Emphasis in the original: Stanner wanted to emphasize the fact that he had observed Aborigines consciously passing on cultural adaptation.

⁶² Elkin, ‘Marriage and Descent’, 416.

⁶³ AP Elkin, ‘Anthropology and the Future of the Australian Aborigines’, *Oceania* V (1), September 1934, 1–18, at 15.

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upon the settler economy, were managing to articulate the old with the new.⁶⁴ In the mid-1930s, Elkin surveyed his first-hand knowledge of communities living on the fringes of white Australia: in the Kimberleys, and on the southern edge of the central desert. He also spent occasional weekends with communities within a few hours' drive from Morpeth, on the north coast of New South Wales. He found that patterns of acculturation reflected the density of the white population in the Aboriginal community's vicinity.

In remote areas, Elkin found a promising situation. Civilized Aborigines were taking part in the settler economy while maintaining their secret life. Generally, they valued their involvement with the settlers and wanted to increase it and, through education, improve its quality. The Wailpi people living near Mt Serle homestead in the Flinders Ranges, South Australia, were skilled labourers with good English. They had been in touch with whites for seventy years. They wanted a mission to teach their children to read and write, and to behave in ways conducive to success in the settler society. They 'had not been civilized, yet they had caught civilization,' Elkin wrote.⁶⁵

At the same time, the Wailpi maintained tradition. Elkin told how, once, in 1930, he had won their trust, and ensured that he and the initiated men could meet without being followed by uninitiated folk, they revealed to him the vitality that remained in their traditional beliefs. He showed them a bullroarer he had been given in the Northern Territory. 'I have never seen more reverence manifested in Christian sanctuaries than was shown by those men as they called to mind all that was meant by that sacred symbol,' he wrote.⁶⁶ His experiences amongst civilized Aborigines in the Kimberleys corroborated the principle that in sparsely settled areas participation in the white economy was consistent with Aborigines' maintenance of some aspects of their secret life.⁶⁷

His impression of communities in more densely settled areas at first seemed to provide further justification for an acculturative policy. Aboriginal communities amongst the towns and farmlands of the north coast of New South Wales had lived in contact with whites probably for only a little longer than the Wailpi, but cultural interaction had been far more disruptive of traditional life. White pastoralists had dispossessed the Bandjalung of their

⁶⁴ AP Elkin, 'Civilized Aborigines and Native Culture', *Oceania* 6 (2), Dec 1935, 117–146, at 117.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 121–122.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 121–126.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 135–139.

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hunting grounds, and then when the Bandjalung began to farm small lots of vacant or leased land, white farmers dispossessed many of them again.⁶⁸ ‘They have likewise been realising, especially of recent years, that their economic future is very circumscribed, being limited to labouring work’ that white people refused to do, Elkin wrote.⁶⁹ In this hostile environment, Aborigines persisted in their native religion, but with even greater than usual reserve: ‘They guard their secrets with the greatest circumspection and usually with a complete air of ignorance.’⁷⁰ Yet he was able to study developments in totemism there that post-dated white settlement by several generations.

The attitudes he encountered amongst the Bandjalung prompted him to think more closely about how acculturation might vary according to density of settlement. Concerning the sparsely settled regions, he had repeated his formula that ‘civilising agents’ ought to ‘preserve and modify or [where that was no longer possible] supplant the Aboriginal view of life and the rites and practices arising from it, that primitive man may still feel at home in the universe.’⁷¹ This advice was not applicable to closely settled areas, Elkin judged. According to Elkin, the Bandjalung had already lost and then attempted to reclaim their traditional beliefs. Accompanying the ‘defeat, disappointment and disillusionment’, there was also evident ‘a return to an appreciation of the indigenous culture and tradition, and in that lies hope, provided that the dominant people then play their part unselfishly, respectfully and without prejudice.’⁷² Between tradition and adaptation there lay an ambivalent phase, part rejection of settler culture, part reinterpretation and reassessment of Aboriginal culture, Elkin adduced.

Evidently, in densely settled areas Aborigines might manage the dynamics of acculturation in ways more complicated than Elkin had envisioned.⁷³ What could the anthropologist do for them? A spokesman for the Aborigines of New South Wales, Bill

⁶⁸ Elkin, ‘The Reaction of Primitive Races to the White Man’s Culture: A Study in Culture-contact’, *Hibbert Journal*, 35 (4), October 1936–July 1937, 537–545, at 541–542. See also Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy: Land in Aboriginal Politics in New South Wales, 1770-1972* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin in association with Black Books, 1996), 127–154.

⁶⁹ Elkin, ‘Reaction of Primitive Races’, 542.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 544.

⁷¹ AP Elkin, ‘Civilized Aborigines’, 145.

⁷² Although Elkin discretely used these descriptors in a general introductory section of his article, they could only have applied to the Bandjalung.

⁷³ But as we noticed in Ch. 6, processes like these were familiar to Elkin in a different context through his reading of Rivers on transference.

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Ferguson, publicly replied with a firm ‘nothing!’⁷⁴ But privately, Ferguson implored Elkin to become more active in the state’s Aboriginal affairs, as one of the few white Australians who had Aborigines’ interests at heart.⁷⁵

The first step was for anthropologists to analyse engulfed Aborigines’ predicament, Elkin proposed. He suggested a three-stage scheme of Aborigines’ reaction to ‘white man’s culture’. First, a sense of loss and bewilderment accompanied Aborigines’ realisation that the new society was a permanent, superior, and alien presence on their land. They were saddened by the attempts their young folk made – ‘forgetting that “man cannot live by bread alone”’ – to benefit from this society that would not understand or accept them.

[T]he old men of wisdom ... retreat into themselves, passing on but little of their old beliefs – their faith, to a doubting generation, unless it be to a few exceptional individuals; and in due time they take their knowledge and their dark forebodings to the grave.⁷⁶

The second stage occurred when the young, who scorned native ways, realised their mistake. They were lost between worlds. As a result, their attitude was ‘negative in emphasis and [could] not make for individual and social integration.’⁷⁷

But three factors offered hope, Elkin inferred. Traditional beliefs about ‘health and sickness, life and death’ persisted; individuals ‘who kept the faith, perhaps unconsciously, [were] strengthened by it’; and consequently, they led their disillusioned peers in a revival of the traditional faith.⁷⁸ Elkin called this state the native people’s ‘return to the mat’. He did not explain the phrase (it may have been clear at the time), but fifteen years later he was still using it, and he clarified the metaphor. When the second stage failed, and Aborigines had no living sense of their own culture to fall back on, then ‘the “mat” to which they will return is death alone—for the pattern of life’s weaving has been lost.’⁷⁹ It follows that when ‘the second stage’ issued in a revival of traditional culture, then the community recovered the vital

⁷⁴ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 187.

⁷⁵ Ferguson to Mark Davidson November 1941: ‘Would you try to talk to Prof Elkin on this matter, he is the only one of the Board who understands.’ Cited in *ibid.*

⁷⁶ Elkin, ‘Reaction of Primitive Races’, 537–538.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 539.

⁷⁹ AP Elkin, ‘Reaction and Interaction: A Food Gathering People and European Settlement in Australia’, *American Anthropologist* 53 (2), 1951, 176–177, at 171.

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beliefs and sanctions: ‘the mat’ represented the symbols, practices and relations through which religion produced its vitalising effect.

From this point on, Elkin’s first concern became settlers’ obligation to ensure that Aborigines were secured in a cultural system that afforded them religious security and hence vitality. Such a system could be either traditional or drawn from settler society, or a hybrid. Where Christianity seemed to prevail for a generation, he anticipated and planned for a ‘return to the mat’. In 1934, he announced this central focus when he urged anthropologists to see themselves as the guardians of Aborigines’ heritage: ‘In the time of transition, let us safeguard for them their ties to the past, to the land, to one another, and to the “eternal dream-time.”’⁸⁰ Elkin noted that individuals who had apparently lost all connection with Aboriginal culture would revert to traditional wailing and avoidances when a death occurred.⁸¹ From 1936, his participation in Aboriginal affairs in New South Wales tended increasingly to reflect his sense that firm ‘anchorage’ could only be found in spiritual tradition. He urged that in some closely settled areas, enculturative Christianity could provide a stop-gap that would preserve a spiritual life that could provide a base from which eventually Aboriginal communities could reclaim Aboriginal spiritual continuity – ‘provided that the dominant people then play their part unselfishly, respectfully and without prejudice’.⁸²

Later developments: the substitution of political solidarity for religious anchorage

In 1944, Elkin developed a sharp distinction between the policy objective that ‘civilising agents’ should pursue in settled as against remote areas. In towns and cities, Aborigines should be encouraged to aim for ‘assimilation’ to settler society, supported as far as possible by the collective warmth generated from whatever forms of collective life survived, but ultimately underpinned by the settler economy, property system, and politics. In contrast, he urged all parties to culture contact in remote areas to pursue a looser goal, ‘citizenship’, by which he meant the continuation of all Aboriginal lifeways consistent with settler law, and Aborigines’ increasing appreciation of and involvement with democratic processes, starting with the vote.⁸³

⁸⁰ AP Elkin, ‘Anthropology and the Future’, 18.

⁸¹ AP Elkin, ‘Civilized Aborigines’, 144–145,

⁸² AP Elkin, ‘Reaction of Primitive Races’, 545.

⁸³ AP Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigine*, throughout.

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He emphasized that group life remained vital to Aborigines in closely settled areas. He ceded that often these Aboriginal communities had no real basis in a spiritual life; that a transitional society might be defined in large part by political opposition and a sense of alienation, with no spiritual mooring so far as he could discern. He urged tolerance in such situations:

[A]dvance and progress must be made in all aspects of life by the whole native community. A strong and potent solidarity must be allowed for in all our endeavours to assist the progress of a group, which we have made 'colour and inferiority conscious.'⁸⁴

Probably, Elkin directed his exhortation of patience and forbearance at himself as well as a general audience.

Certainly he was in need of his own advice. Later in the same tract, he wrote of 'mixed-blood people ... possessing no social life worth the name.' He described an 'absence of moral and spiritual purpose and sanctions', which caused an 'almost amoral type of life.' In his attempts to help such people, from 1940 Elkin took over the administration of the Aborigines Welfare Board in New South Wales. A full view of that commitment lies outside this study, but phrases from his reports illustrate the difficulties Elkin had in reconciling his original interest in Aboriginal religion with the social, economic, and political quandaries in which his sense of civic duty involved him. 'Disgraceful houses, not well kept', 'young men loafing about with the water shower broken', Elkin reported to the AWB in 1949. He returned to the youths later: 'At least twelve to fifteen young men of working age about – work dodgers and cheeky.'⁸⁵ In such cases, well-wishers must guard against their own impatience, Elkin warned. They must continue in the attempt to provide Aborigines with

another view of life and another sanction for behaviour, which will keep their personalities integrated (their souls healthy or 'saved'), and which will prevent them from lapsing into a condition of moral apathy and 'lawlessness'. This process, being intellectual and emotional, individual and social, is not easy. It cannot be accomplished by a fiat: 'your old view is outmoded, here is a new one' It must be worked out slowly by

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁸⁵ Elkin, Report to Aborigines Welfare Board of New South Wales, 1949, cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 188.

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them as a group, and in the long run ... it will be an Aboriginal version of the European view of life and religion.⁸⁶

If there was wisdom in Elkin's words, it came from the same combination of civic duty, intellectual ambition, and religious commitment that led him far outside his study, and far from his lectern, to the pathetic scene in which he lectured the young men standing around the broken shower.

Conclusion

As Elkin had discovered in 1929 (Ch. 5), Aboriginal affairs did not admit a single solution. Some positions he rejected had merit. Piddington warned of the dangers in pinning Aborigines' hopes to the fortunes of corporate religion in an increasingly secular and individualistic age. Porteus's insights, if they had been refined by scholarly debate and tested in practice, rather than sidelined by Elkin, may have assisted Aboriginal educators to develop more effective methods and goals.⁸⁷ Likewise, if in the 1940s the champions of Aboriginal rights in land had received the backing of a long-serving activist Professor of Anthropology, instead of his enmity⁸⁸, then the myriad settlement of those rights might today be further advanced.

On the other hand, Elkin had his reasons for opposing these positions when most scientists agreed that either absorption (which may have constituted genocide) or segregation (which could not avoid association with a kind of apartheid) were the only alternatives.⁸⁹ Elkin's achievement was to establish a central vision of Aboriginal affairs, grounded in Christian Idealism, broadcast and institutionalised in secular and scientific iterations.

By pursuing in scientific forums the moral and spiritual commitment he had already developed as a Christian and a publicist, Elkin achieved a central and pre-eminent position in

⁸⁶ Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigines*, 40.

⁸⁷ Geoffrey Partington, '“Empowered” but Impoverished: Multiculturalism and Aboriginal Education', *Quadrant* 44 (10), 33–43.

⁸⁸ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 143–145. As we have seen, Elkin advocated limited Aboriginal rights in land, but he strongly opposed those who used land rights to promote segregationist policy.

⁸⁹ For the argument that the policy of biological absorption agreed by Neville and Cook at the 1937 conference in Canberra (see Ch. 8) was genocidal, see Robert Manne, 'Aboriginal Child Removal and the Question of Genocide, 1900–1940, in A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Children in Australian History* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 217–243.

On segregation, consider, for example, segregationist tendencies in public schooling in country towns in New South Wales disclosed in Heather Goodall, *Invasion to Embassy*, 140–160.

9. Social Anthropology and religious necessity

Aboriginal affairs. Defying racialist and socio-structuralist prediction, Elkin made his article of faith – that Aborigines would be free and equal like other Australian citizens, while maintaining a spiritual and cultural distinctness, linked to the land but not dependent upon it – part of mainstream Australian opinion.

Whether or not he could have accomplished such a reversal without his own reconciliation of reason and faith is an unanswerable but important question. The steadiness of purpose Elkin eventually found in advocating a complex and seemingly unrealistic acculturative ideal provides the historian with a singular but perhaps representative case study in the relation between principles (such as arise from moral philosophy and scholarly religion) and arguments (such as determine the way evidence is arranged and valued by social scientists).