

CHAPTER FIVE

SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY, RELIGIOUS FORBEARANCE

Following his fieldwork in the Kimberleys, Elkin tried to inter-relate his religious commitment, civic ideals, and scientific ambition. He worked to understand religion scientifically, and to use Anthropology to fulfil perceived national and imperial duties. In retrospect, we can see the fundamental questions for which he sought answers: What authority inhered in scientific findings about racial determinism, miscegenation, or the psychology of culture contact? What authority did he represent as a religious leader? And how did these kinds of authority fit together?

This chapter explores Elkin's thinking in 1929, after his second year-long stint in the field. We will place Elkin in the context of the imperial project of the leaders of Australian science, who envisioned a more humane and sustainable colonialism on the mainland and in the region. The expertise they thought would best serve this goal included biological insights into race. Eminent scientists believed that a clearer perception of racial difference would assist colonial administrators to reverse the depopulation of native peoples; in practice, racialism tended to entrench the subordination of 'coloured races', and encouraged the chauvinist aspects of the white Australia policy. Racial science was authoritative, but its political implications troubled Elkin, especially as encapsulated in the peak study of depopulation in the Pacific, which argued that the attempt to civilize native peoples was counter-productive.¹ Elkin's response to this dilemma reflected his desire for a scientific career, but also his (temporarily muted) Christian commitment.

Elkin's writings in 1929 on applied anthropology set out his reasons for the position he took within Aboriginal affairs in the early 1930s.² After the fieldwork he conducted in

¹ Captain George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers, *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races* (London, George Routledge and Sons, 1927).

² AP Elkin, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (7), March 1929, 23–33; *idem*, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology: Physical Anthropology', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (8), June 1929, 44–47; *idem*, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology III: Physical Anthropology, Man as a Member of the Human World', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (9), September 1929, 33–44; *idem*, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology II: Social Anthropology', *Morpeth Review*, 1 (10), December 1929, 43–50; and *idem*, 'Anthropology and Missionary

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central Australian in 1930, Elkin treated the science of anthropology (pure and applied) strategically; he had surveyed the problems in Aboriginal affairs, and sought to frame a scientific approach that would produce the moral and political outcomes he desired (Ch. 8). Only in the articles of 1929 do we read Elkin attempting to see the problem from a purely scientific vantage point.³ In addition to revealing the scientific problems behind his publicity of the 1930s, the articles also demonstrate that Elkin was unable to clarify his position when he subordinated his personal values to scientific authority.

Between Church and University

Elkin's response to his Kimberleys fieldwork of 1928 was shaped in part by his desire for academic opportunity. Late in 1928, he arrived in Sydney via a holiday in the Blue Mountains. He rented a flat in Kirribilli, on Sydney harbour's northern shore, and regularly travelled by ferry, train, and foot to talk with Professor Radcliffe-Brown about the details and significance of his findings. He was mid-way through a two-year Rockefeller Fellowship, and there was little prospect of a follow-on University appointment. The Professor had given the only lectureship in anthropology at the University of Sydney to his friend from England, Camilla Wedgwood. He tried but failed to get Elkin a job elsewhere. The best he could offer was the strong possibility of another two-year fieldwork project. The world economy was slowing, Elkin's PhD was unpublished, the book he had started, provisionally titled 'The Aborigines of North West Australia', had no publisher. He had already spent three and a half years studying, and now supplemented his stipend by conducting church services on some Sundays. He also resumed tutorial classes with the WEA, arranged by his former colleague at St Paul's College, the Rev. G. V. Portus. It was a sufficient but chaotic combination of incomes.

Sally, keen to have a second child, wanted the security of a full-time Church appointment. Elkin asked his Bishop if there might be an opening within the Church for an official anthropologist. After all, he had begun informally training Anglican missionaries

Methods', *Morpeth Review* II, March 1930, 34–37. As Elkin's numbering system was inconsistent, future references will tag these as 'Practical Value' I, II, and III; 'Social Anthropology', and 'Missionary Methods'.

³ His biographer wrote that the 'Practical Value of Anthropology' series was the last occasion on which we see Elkin 'thinking aloud', and notes that there was little prospect for a country parson with some fieldwork experience to influence decision makers in Aboriginal affairs. See Tigger Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist: A Life of AP Elkin* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), 85–86.

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before they travelled to their posts outback (Ch. 6). Instead, in April 1929, Long offered him the Parish of Morpeth. Morpeth had its consolations, and was the closest Elkin could get to a university appointment. The once wealthy town lined a broad stretch of the Hunter River, a few kilometres from its mouth. Prior to the coming of the railway, it had been the largest port north of Sydney, servicing the rich agriculture of the Hunter Valley. Overtaken economically by the nearby port of Newcastle, which thrived on coal exports, by the late 1920s Morpeth's most valuable export to the wider world was its annual batch of graduates from Ernest Burgmann's Anglican seminary, St John's College. In addition to being the parish priest, Elkin would also teach the students at what Burgmann hoped would become Australia's first 'University College'. Further, Burgmann had asked Elkin to be the third co-editor of his liberal Anglican journal – the public face of the intellectual aspirations embodied in the College – the *Morpeth Review*.

The *Review* was Burgmann's attempt to lead the Anglican Church to a central place in the life of the nation. Burgmann had won the backing of the Anglican Synod to make Morpeth a university town that would do 'something of what Oxford and Cambridge have done for Britain and the world.'⁴ When attracting support for the transfer of St John's from Armidale to the larger and more accessible location in the Hunter Valley, he told Synod that the nation needed a seat of learning that would combine spiritual purpose with free enquiry.

Australia's most urgent need is a school of Christian thought where the needs of this young country and the message of the Church to it, could be studied in freedom and thoroughness. She has no such school. ... The universities do not represent Christian thought and do not pretend to do so. We jog along, living on our past, and we may well thank God that the past has given us so much to live on. But we cannot go on in this way indefinitely or we will be left stranded on some backwater of the nation's life, an interesting antique perhaps, but without vital relation to our nation's life.⁵

⁴ EH Burgmann, 'Editorial', *Review of Life and Work*, I (1), 1927; reprint of a sermon given to Newcastle Synod. Cited in Hempenstall, *Meddlesome Priest*, 133. See HM Green, *Australian Literature, 1900–1950* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1951). For criticism of the *Morpeth Review*, see Hempenstall, *Meddlesome Priest*, 122–123, 135; and for a general criticism of the Idealism that the *Review* shared with the WEA in the 1920s and 1930s, see Tim Rowse, *Australian Liberalism and National Character* (Melbourne: Kibble Books, 1978), 40–75. Their criticism that the *Review* was strong on rhetoric but weak on action misses the point that it was the mouthpiece of the College: the work that grounded the rhetoric was the daily business of teaching ordinands. As the references to primitive parricide, millenia of continuous inspiration, and the models of Oxford (founded late in the eleventh century) and Cambridge (early in the twelfth) bear out, Burgmann's project was long term. His means was future generations of clergy.

⁵ Burgmann, 'Editorial', 5

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Foremost amongst ‘the needs of this young country’, Burgmann believed, was an equal partnership, and a new reconciliation, between religion and science.

We recall that Burgmann had mentored Elkin during and after the First World War. Each of them had been a willing student of Francis Anderson – the eclectic philosopher who had introduced them to Durkheim, William James, and other thinkers seminal to the shift from dogmatic to pragmatic and functionalist approaches to meaning (Ch. 3). As we will see below, Elkin remained a proponent of ‘personality’, and of the view that volition and spiritual aspiration were the basic substance of all thought. It was surely this religious partnership, as well as Elkin’s scientific expertise, that in April 1929 prompted Burgmann to entice Elkin to come to Morpeth to teach and regularly to publish in the *Review*, ‘to articulate attainable social ideals from a Christian point of view’.⁶

Burgmann believed that religion had made science possible, and the two remained co-dependent partners in the humane attempt to shape history. He taught that Christianity was ‘the culture of the future’. By this he meant that the aspirations embodied in Christ – ideals born of ancient Hellenic and Hebraic cultivation – had led European civilization to develop individual and corporate freedoms, under the authority of a merciful God. Burgmann wrote that the spirit of Christ had transformed the patricidal projection of a vengeful tribal God into a culture of forbearance, in which art, science, and the liberal politics of ‘personality’, or individual and corporate self-creation, thrived. Christianity had created the conditions for a better future, and could continue to do so, he believed, if it expressed itself on an equal footing, and in partnership, with science and politics.⁷

Burgmann aimed to encompass the secular state by thinking more holistically, and more boldly, than was the clerical norm. He modelled a sometimes controversialist pedagogy on Socrates; but the majority of contributors to the *Review* reiterated trusted verities.⁸ Still, at its best, the *Review* was a critical goad to the state, exposing its inadequacy, as measured against Christian ideals.

The great ‘personality’, Burgmann insisted, did not keep his moral distance from the machinations of politics; he studied the breadth of human experience in order to represent it

⁶ *Ibid.* For Burgmann’s invitation to Elkin, see Hempenstall, *Meddlesome Priest*, 127.

⁷ EH Burgmann, ‘The Culture of the Future’, *Morpeth Review*, 1 (8), March 1929, 5–10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 101–102, 132.

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in relation to spiritual ideals. 'Personality is a relative term. It measures our representativeness and our sense of relationship to our fellows,' he wrote.⁹ The *Review* contributors sought to create an alliance between faith, beauty, and knowledge; a public vision independent of the state but critically interpenetrating it through its claim better to represent universal imperatives.¹⁰ And, true to its Christian creed, the Morpeth project went beyond the nation; the *Review* was a local attempt to realise 'the New Israel, now freed from all restriction of race – the Church which is His body.'¹¹

In 1929, Elkin did rise to Burgmann's challenge, but scarcely at all in the *Review* they co-edited. Elkin reserved his moral and political argument for the general media. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, for instance, he wrote:

Our efforts to make [the Aborigine] a citizen of our European type have mostly failed, not because he is illogical, but probably, to a great extent, because we have not been quite 'logical'. ... We apparently reasoned that because our culture which has been slowly developed along with our own racial and national histories, suited us, it should therefore suit another people, the blacks, at a moment's notice.¹²

Thus Elkin criticised the thinking that had guided Aboriginal affairs to date and proposed the alternative that Europeans ought to look to Aborigines' interests in order to find better ways to live together. Here was the doctrine of 'personality', the recommendations of Rivers, and the method of the Melanesian Mission (Ch. 6), reduced to simple and secular exhortation. At this stage, Elkin simply did not have any more concrete ideas. He believed he would find them in scientific work, and not in the Church.

Elkin used the *Review* to restate religious, moral, and political concerns as if they waited upon the lead of science. When he faced the decision whether to commit to a full-time job as Rector of Morpeth, he had already begun to publish in this mode in the Anglican journal. The articles he wrote for it in 1929 comprised a turbulent watershed. The river of

⁹ EH Burgmann, *Religion in the Life of the Nation*, (Morpeth: Morpeth Booklet, 1930).

¹⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (London: Polity Press, 1989 [1962]). Were universal interests only ever illusory, as Habermas argued? See Introduction and the discussion of Australian conditions at the turn of the 20th century in Ch. 1. The answer rests on how well each protagonist succeeded in championing agency, an active citizenship, a question that, with reference to Aboriginal affairs, threads through all the following chapters.

¹¹ Charles Gore, *The Anglo-Catholic Movement To-day* (London: A. R. Mowbray and Co., 1925), 7. Burgmann and Elkin taught Gore, the leader of the 1920s' Anglo-Catholic revival, in summer schools throughout the early 1920s (Ch. 1).

¹² *Ibid.*, 83.

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Anthropology rushed in from headwaters far and high: global debates about the bearings of racial science upon the politics of colonialism; regional debates about depopulation in the Pacific; Australian debates about populating the tropical north; and British debates about the conditions in which social anthropology could be applied. This torrent mingled little with the slower and broader Christian stream into which it ran in the *Review*. At this stage, Elkin kept his priestly role firmly out of the way of his scientific ambition.

Elkin wrote against the trend in the *Review*. Its standard authorial address judiciously but openly promoted personal beliefs. By contrast, Elkin aired his opinions and values only to defer them, as ‘more research [was] needed’. On the two occasions when he made a generous estimate of Aborigines’ capacity, he wrote that it was ‘unlikely to be true’ – recommending instead scientific findings that contradicted his intuition. He wrote as ‘the Ethnographer’ and ‘the Anthropologist’; when he broached religious themes, he wrote as ‘the sociologist’.¹³ He attempted (not always successfully, as we will see) scrupulously to observe the conventions of science. He was a priest writing in a Christian review, but even in his sociology of religion, he seemed to signal a belief that science, more than religion, would illumine contemporary problems. We recall that he began writing in this vein when he was living in Sydney, working full-time as a Research Fellow in association with the University of Sydney.

Mid-way through the publication of these scientific articles in a church *Review*, Elkin accepted Bishop Long’s offer of the Parish of Morpeth on the condition that he be allowed to pursue his scientific interests. He specified that he would take on any fieldwork opportunities that may arise, even if that meant twelve months’ absence. In addition, he would continue his anthropological writing, and would pursue opportunities to lecture.¹⁴ Beyond the scientist’s desire to ‘save the data’, Elkin, for practical purposes, wanted precise, detailed, and conclusive knowledge of the Aborigines’ way of life.¹⁵ Present understandings of Aborigines’ adaptive capacity suggested that attempts to ‘raise’ them as a people who could benefit in their own way from full membership of ‘twentieth century’ Australia would probably fail, and instead only hasten their extinction.

¹³ For the first two, citations follow; for the latter, see AP Elkin, ‘The Present Social Function of Religion’, *Morpeth Review* II (16), December 1931, 23–33, at 23. For details about the 1929 draft of this, see Ch. 7.

¹⁴ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 74–76.

¹⁵ Kenelm Burridge, *Encountering Aborigines: Anthropology and the Australian Aboriginal, A Case Study* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1973), 8–40, 232.

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New findings might change that assessment, but only if the fieldworker knew what he was up against: if he had grasped the wide range, and political complexity, of the issues converging on the question of Aboriginal survival. Elkin wrote with three objectives concerning practical anthropology: to persuade his readers – some of whom were influential within government and academe – that the nation needed more of it; to establish his credentials as a practitioner; and so (it seems clear to this writer) to increase his chances of obtaining a career in anthropology. Elkin believed that applying anthropology was a task of first-rate importance, and that he was the man to do it.

Depopulation: The experts' assumed moral elevation

Elkin echoed an official scientific line that Anthropology was of special moral and political value to Australia because of the nation's responsibility for primitive peoples in the region. Anthropology was one science in which Australian and regional questions attracted the attention of world experts; it shone upon national issues the light of international, but especially British, science. The other side of this coin was that Anthropology afforded Australian scientists a rare chance of international collaboration and reputation.¹⁶ As the new discipline rose in status amidst the more traditional sciences, its practitioners advanced also in imperial confidence and aspiration – perhaps most clamorously within peripheral organizations, such as the Australian Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and the much younger Pan Pacific Science Congress. In the major series of articles Elkin published throughout 1929 in the *Morpeth Review*, he updated and advanced the central strand of this scientific propaganda.¹⁷

In the 1920s, Anthropology made inroads into colonial governance. Proponents brought a broader vision of the colonial task, one which revealed colonised peoples as at once more like and more vividly distinct from their rulers.¹⁸ In January 1921, at the Melbourne meeting of the AAAS, Hubert Murray, Lieutenant Governor of Papua, chaired the

¹⁶ See Sybil Jack, 'Science and Technology', in Neville Meaney, (ed.) *Under New Heavens: Cultural Transmission and the making of Australia* (Melbourne: Heinemann Educational Australia, 1989), 107–161 at 137.

¹⁷ Elkin, 'Practical Value I–III'.

¹⁸ In 1923, Murray replied to a letter from Malinowski by claiming that his government anthropologists were already revealing the natives' view of the world through intensive study. JHP Murray, Lieutenant-Governor of Papua, *The Population Problem in Papua*, read before the Pan-Pacific Science conference, Melb, 21st Aug, 1923 (Port Moresby: Govt Printer), 12.

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Anthropology session. On behalf of the session, he put three resolutions to Baldwin Spencer, Chair of the AAAS council, two of which concern us. One was that the Association should arrange for Anthropological fieldwork to be conducted in Australia's northwest (fulfilled in October 1927 to October 1928, by Elkin). Another was that the Federal Government should endow a Chair in Anthropology 'especially in view of its value in the government of subject races' (fulfilled in 1926, Sydney).¹⁹ Murray's phrasing exactly reiterated the title of an essay Rivers had published in 1917.²⁰ Murray wrote that the essay had chastened him, and motivated him to obtain the advice of scientists in his attempt to understand the Papuans' 'interest in civilisation'.²¹ That year, he appointed the first official anthropologists in the Papuan administration. The Victorian ethos of science – in which accuracy, objectivity, and efficiency were associated with impartiality, equity, and stability – was being translated into a new liberal imperialism.²²

Anthropology's imperial virtue also headlined at the first Pan Pacific Science Congress. In 1923, the President of the Congress, Herbert Gregory, surveyed the prospect for scientific collaboration that spanned half the globe: in economics, disaster management, botanical conservation, the ventriloquy of the airwaves. These matters were important; but the Congress formally accepted his resolution 'that the scientific problem of the Pacific which stands first in order of urgency is the preservation of the health and life of the native races.'²³

The Pacific perspective complemented the Australian vista presented two years earlier by Baldwin Spencer in his Presidential opening address to the AAAS conference.

¹⁹ Another was that the ethnology of the northern part of Western Australia should be investigated at once (fulfilled in 1927, by Elkin); see DJ Mulvaney, *Australasian Anthropology and ANZAAS: 'Strictly Scientific and Critical'*, in Roy Macleod, ed., *The Commonwealth of Science: ANZAAS and the Scientific Enterprise on Australasia 1888–1988* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 206.

²⁰ WHR Rivers, 'The Government of Subject Peoples', in AC Seward (ed.) *Science and the Nation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1917), 302–327.

²¹ Sir Hubert Murray, *Papua of Today, or, An Australian Colony in the Making* (London: PS King and Son, 1925), 244.

²² Roy Macleod, ed., *The Commonwealth of Science: ANZAAS and the Scientific Enterprise on Australasia 1888–1988* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988). Murray presented the new imperialism as a continuous English development from Burke writing on India, which culminated in the doctrine of the 'dual mandate', and so preceded the Mandate provisions of the League of Nations Covenant. See Murray, *Review of the Australian Administration in Papua from 1907 to 1920* (Port Moresby: [Papuan Administration], 1920). Bound photocopy, ix–xi. Post-war, the word 'imperialism' was not used, but it remains the best word to capture its proponents' belief in their civilizing mission abroad.

²³ HE Gregory, 'The Pacific Science Congress', *Scientific Monthly* September 1924; cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 40.

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Australian scientists have two duties clearly marked out. The first, to study as carefully as possible Aboriginal culture. The second, to protect Aborigines as far as possible, not only from the white race, but from themselves in the new environment that the white race has created for them with which, left to themselves, they are unable to cope.²⁴

Elkin, then Rector of the Parish of Wollombi, clipped from the *Sydney Morning Herald* Baldwin Spencer's exhortation. Three years later, the physical anthropologist, Frederic Wood Jones, gave the Presidential Address to the AAAS. 'At this period in world history', he began, referring to the era of the League of Nations, there was no need 'to attempt to justify a plea on behalf of the aborigines' claim to continued existence'. Scientists could persuade governments to protect Aborigines, 'and, thereby, justify ourselves in the eyes of the world.'²⁵ In each of these cases, associated scientists committed themselves to be the champions of a more humane colonialism. Given the nature of these 'most urgent problems', anthropologists had to take the lead.

When he spoke as a priest, Elkin gave particularly acute expression to this notion that science was the fulfilment of duty. Explaining to his congregation at Morpeth what he hoped to achieve amongst the Aborigines, he presented himself as a kind of catalyst, whose presence could transform the relations other white frontiersmen had with Aborigines. His sermon notes were emphatic:

Important to go before whites settle amongst blacks; and to try to influence govt [sic] and Missions to base their policy on understanding the Black law and beliefs. Hence importance of *my* work. Must get in first.²⁶

Duty called. At stake was the survival of a race, national honour, and science's place at the forefront of social, and not merely material, progress.

The articles Elkin wrote in 1929 on applied anthropology advanced the conversation about the depopulation of primitive peoples. Although his year in the Kimberleys was, as Murray had recommended (and as we have seen (Ch. 4)), formally an exercise in researching

²⁴ Baldwin Spencer, Opening address, *SMH* 11 Jan 1921, cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 40.

²⁵ FW Jones, 'The Claims of the Australian Aborigine', in *Report of the Eighteenth Meeting of the AAAS*, 1926, 507–8. Cited in McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 113–114.

²⁶ Elkin, 'The Urgency of Anthropological Work', undated address, in 1929 sermon notebook p. 4, EP 5/3/3. Emphasis in the original.

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a culture before it disappeared, he returned from it keenly interested in Aborigines' prospects for survival. He now asked how Australia's governance of Aborigines might benefit from advances in knowledge about depopulation throughout Australasia and the south Pacific.

Elkin's best guide to the problem of depopulation also proved to be his prime antagonist on the issue of colonial governance. In 1923, a committee that formed from the Pan Pacific Science Congress commissioned the anthropologist Captain George Henry Lane-Fox Pitt-Rivers to study depopulation in the Pacific. In accordance with the Congress resolution, Pitt-Rivers sought practical solutions to the decline of native peoples. His preliminary arguments had come to Elkin's mind while in the Kimberleys, suggesting conflict between his clerical and anthropological commitments (Ch. 6).

Pitt-Rivers was the single most important influence upon Elkin's series of articles on applied anthropology. In 1927, Pitt-Rivers published his findings in a monograph called *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races*.²⁷ Late in 1928, when he returned from the Kimberleys to New South Wales, Elkin gave Pitt-Rivers' completed argument detailed, respectful attention.²⁸ The Captain was a member of the Royal Anthropological Institute, the AAAS had commissioned his work, and he was as well connected in London as he was in the Melbourne Club. He deployed the full range of physical and social anthropology, citing Elliot Smith as well as Rivers, Marett, and Malinowski.²⁹ Pitt-Rivers' prognoses had lasting impact upon Elkin's attitudes to each of the policy options in Aboriginal affairs (protection, segregation, miscegenation, and assimilation). So the fact that Elkin found Pitt-Rivers' arguments persuasive, but morally unacceptable, posed a serious difficulty.

Pitt-Rivers was illiberal on race. He claimed that Murray's much-lauded administration of Papua was strong on rhetoric but would yield poor results. He rebutted the diffusionists' refusal after 1911 to countenance racial determinism. (The diffusionists insisted

²⁷ Pitt-Rivers, *Clash of Cultures*. Elkin took the title of his series, 'The Practical Value of Anthropology', from one of Pitt-Rivers' chapter headings.

²⁸ Wise indicated, without noting her source, that Pitt-Rivers' book was one of those – along with the work of Rivers, SH Roberts, *Population Problems of the Pacific* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1927), 365 and a paper by Raphael Cilento (below) – Radcliffe-Brown directed Elkin to after his return from the Kimberleys. See *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 85. However, given Pitt-Rivers' connections in London and his challenge to the diffusionists – but also his high praise for Rivers – it is quite possible that Elkin himself procured the book soon after its 1927 publication and perhaps read it on the voyage from London to Sydney. Nevertheless, like Wise, I presume he read it post Kimberleys. The attitudes he revealed in the Forrest River Report – particularly his unalloyed distaste for the preference he perceived Gribble had for miscegenation – suggested he had not yet considered Pitt-Rivers' arguments.

²⁹ Pitt-Rivers, *Clash of Cultures*, Preface (unpaginated).

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that historical events, and not racially derived capacity and behaviour, made cultures differ (Ch. 4)). Pitt-Rivers claimed to show how the functionalist application of anthropology, which separated cultures one from another, and was thus compatible with racial determinism, did not so much develop as supersede diffusionism. Pitt-Rivers was an important antagonist because Elkin's rebuttal in 1929 was lame; it revealed that he had yet to find a way to authorise his moral and political convictions within scientific debate.³⁰

We will examine Pitt-Rivers' arguments, and their effect upon Elkin, in detail below, after surveying the context of racial science. Elkin also learnt from other authorities that biological differences between white and primitive races were fundamental to colonial policy.

Physical anthropology and demography

In 1920s Australia, the respectable and persuasive face of anthropology was associated with the physical sciences, especially medicine.³¹ Elliot Smith built his world-famous 'human studies' from medicine and neurology. Scientists in Britain, the US, and Australia considered that his findings – especially concerning racially differential increases in the growth during adolescence of the parts of the brain responsible for abstract thinking – proved that the cultures of the world expressed a racial hierarchy. When the Australian National Research council and the Commonwealth government established the Chair of Anthropology at Sydney, Elliot Smith arranged for Rockefeller Foundation money to support its research program. He also advised the Foundation to fund a Board for Anthropological research at the University of Adelaide. Dr Frederic Wood Jones, who had studied anatomy with Elliot Smith at the University of London, became its Director. Thus, Elliot Smith's work on racial neurology was particularly influential in Australia.

³⁰ Pitt-Rivers' book has received attention only in passing. Stocking (*After Tylor*, 393–4), noted that Pitt-Rivers criticised Malinowski's emphasis on native's vision of *his* world, when what was needed was a study of culture change. Stocking's account suggests that *The Clash of Cultures* was one of the 1920s' most significant works of applied anthropology (*After Tylor*, 382–395). Warwick Anderson (*Cultivating Whiteness*, 226) mentioned Pitt-Rivers' 'remarkably influential essay' as one of a number of scientific reports that favoured miscegenation in Australia, but Pitt-Rivers' main argument was against miscegenation on eugenic grounds (see Pitt-Rivers, *The Clash of Cultures and the Contact of Races*, 4–5). Russell McGregor (*Imagined Destinies*, 107–109, 196–7, 202) interpreted Elkin's response as sympathetic to Pitt-Rivers' 'alluring' racial determinism (p. 196), when Elkin's response was, on a moral and political level, fundamentally antagonistic, as the rest of this chapter argues. Even on a scientific level, Elkin was ambivalent towards Pitt-Rivers: after all, Elkin was a proponent of the diffusionist approach that Pitt-Rivers targeted.

³¹ Warwick Anderson, *Cultivating Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002).

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On the whole, statesmen and scientists alike continued throughout the 1920s to conceive Australian nationhood racially. The nation's demographic was increasingly acknowledged to be complex and worthy of study – but not yet critique. The volume which, second to Pitt-Rivers' book, Elkin had most often in his hand as he surveyed the precedents and prospects for the application of anthropology in Australia was a collection of essays about how the country was being populated.³² The Commonwealth Attorney-General, John Latham, set the tone by espousing the liberal apologia for the white Australia policy: that it was the condition for a stable, egalitarian polity; and so a 'platform for world service'. Latham argued (consistently with the position that Elkin had expressed in 1915 (Ch. 1)), that Australians would admit fellow British subjects of Asian race when the time was right.³³

Racial colouration was an index of the success of national development. A pessimistic contributor from the Bureau of Statistics, Jens Lyng, warned that the admixture of Asian and Aboriginal strains was already producing a 'dark race' in the tropical north.³⁴ The editors distanced themselves from his unpatriotic position.³⁵ They had no such qualms about the work of Raphael Cilento, Director of the Division of Tropical Hygiene in the Commonwealth Department of Health, who trumpeted Australia's unique success in inhabiting its tropical third. He credited Australia's ability to defy the curse of the white man in the tropics to hygiene, medical advances, and the exclusion of the 'lower' races – an odd assessment, when 30% of the tropical Australian population was Aboriginal, allegedly the lowest race of all.³⁶

Well-intentioned attempts to ameliorate the scientific authority behind the contempt in which Aborigines were often held began from a low base. R. J. A. Berry, a psychologist and eugenicist at the University of Melbourne, conducted intelligence tests upon Aborigines. He emphasized that Aborigines possessed remarkable strengths in their own environment, but did not qualify his conclusion that they were intellectually unsuited to European civilization.³⁷ (His partner was Stanley Porteus, of whom we will hear a good deal more in Ch. 9.)

³² PD Phillips and GL Wood (eds.), *The Peopling of Australia* (Melbourne: MUP, 1928).

³³ John Latham 'Foreword', in *Ibid.*

³⁴ Jens Lyng, 'Racial Composition of the Australian People', in *Ibid.*, 145-164,

³⁵ PD Phillips and GL Wood, 'Introduction', in *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶ RW Cilento, 'White Settlement of Tropical Australia', 222-245, in *Ibid.* For demographic statistics, see Lyng, 'Racial Composition of the Australian People', 163-164.

³⁷ Elkin, 'Practical Value III', 36

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Social anthropology in Australia had barely emerged from the physical sciences. The most influential student of Aboriginal culture, Baldwin Spencer, trained as a zoologist. It is particularly telling that the Professor of Anthropology at the University of Sydney, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who had no background in the physical sciences, nevertheless wanted to develop social anthropology into a 'natural science': objective, law-oriented, and impersonal (Chs. 7, 9). Elkin consulted work by all these eminent physical and 'natural' scientists. They treated race as an impersonal set of genetic variables. They dominated the Australian scene in part because they cast colonial issues as apolitical matters of health and efficiency.³⁸

Australian racialism was part of a global anxiety about the fall-out from the age of European empire. The shock felt by Theodore Roosevelt when he read Charles Pearson's analysis of the implications of Asian demographics (Ch. 1) had been an early marker of a rising trend. In the 1920s, Lothrop Stoddard and Madison Grant reached wide audiences with their dramatic predictions of race-based cataclysm, unless white supremacy be embraced and defended. As we have seen, liberal proponents of white Australia made the more moderate argument that racial exclusion was temporary, and in fact a necessary phase if the new democracy's high standards of equality of opportunity were to be consolidated and so become a model for the world. Elkin kept strictly within this liberal façade. He referred to Berry, but not to the more aggressive American and English proponents of the school recommended by Pitt-Rivers.³⁹ He cited American scholars with a liberal reputation: a disciple of Boas, and an opponent of 'the Nordic doctrine' of racial supremacy. Even these sources consistently interpreted their data as evidence that race was one of the most significant determinants of history and culture.

A leading physical anthropologist to whom Elkin referred as an authority on race had predicted the emergence of a predominantly white racial unity. Professor of Anthropology at Harvard, Roland B. Dixon developed Franz Boas' work on the plasticity of racial characteristics.⁴⁰ But in the student's account, the main driver of racial history was not racial blending, but racial competition. Of the Aborigines' antecedents, he wrote that 'in the great

³⁸ Anderson, *Cultivating Whiteness* 211.

³⁹ Elkin, 'Practical Value III', 35–6. Pitt-Rivers, in *Clash of Cultures*, recommended 'the work carried on under the auspices of the Eugenic societies of England and America', 5; and Lothrop Stoddard's *Rising Tide of Colour*, at 27–28

⁴⁰ Roland B. Dixon, *The Racial History of Man* (New York and London: Charles's Scribner's Sons, 1923).

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struggle they [proto-Australoids] have, almost from the beginning, been losers.’⁴¹ Dixon concluded his history with an interpretation of the First World War as a veiled instance of the competition for supremacy between races.⁴² His prognosis was that lower racial types would go on being eliminated, higher types would go on homogenizing ‘until in the end, out of many types, through a multitude of races, may come one race, which will be the consummation of them all.’⁴³ This abstractly fascist view, and the associated interest in the possibility of eugenic racial mixture, was the academic prelude to Australian administrators, led by Cecil Cook, who saw themselves as helping along the natural movement towards the elimination of distinctively Aboriginal genes (Ch. 8).⁴⁴

Other physical anthropologists favoured racial diversity, but were just as insistent on the importance of race to cultural development. Drawing on Elliot Smith as the leading authority on the evolution of the human brain, Hankins emphasized that the specialisation of ‘projection centres’ responsible for abstract thinking was a late evolutionary development and while common to all humans, ‘it is scarcely possible that they should have followed the same line of biological development among the varied races of men’.⁴⁵ And in fact, ‘one can perceive a neurological basis for racial differences in behaviour and in characteristic roles in cultural history.’ He claimed to have proved beyond doubt ‘that the races are unequal in mental equipment with consequent difference in cultural powers.’⁴⁶ Yet, elsewhere he observed that ‘lower’ races, such as the Negro peoples, were assimilating to white society, partly through miscegenation, while still retaining racial pride and distinctiveness.⁴⁷ Elkin argued that Hankins’ latter observation was an important corrective to the ethnocentrism that prevailed in racial science.⁴⁸

Geographical anthropology suggested a softer variety of racial determinism, Elkin reported. The Maori scientist, Dr. Peter Buck, claimed in Lamarckian vein that a people’s

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 507.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 522–23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 113, 142–180; Anderson, *Cultivating Whiteness*, 205, 235–239.

⁴⁵ Frank H. Hankins, *The Racial Basis of Civilisation: A Critique of the Nordic Doctrine* (NY and London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1926), 314.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 321–2.

⁴⁷ *Idem*, *Introduction to the Study of Society: An Outline of Primary Factors and Institutions* 2nd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1948).

⁴⁸ ‘We are apt to look at these crosses merely from our own (white) point of view ... but there is, in addition, the point of view of the coloured race.’ Elkin, ‘Practical Value III’, 43.

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‘temperament and energy’ reflect the geography ‘to which they have become attuned’. He concluded that the Maori was a higher type of Polynesian: ‘Five centuries in a temperate climate toughened his constitution, sharpened his mental ability, and altered his material culture.’⁴⁹ (Elkin seems to have considered that Lamarckian and Mendelian genetic theories were complementary: some genetic traits responded to the environment, others recombined through reproduction in the Mendelian manner.)⁵⁰

Since scientists believed that race (whether conceived in Mendelian or Lamarckian terms) was so important in the formation of culture, it followed that cultural adjustments were best achieved through genetic change, that is, through inter-racial breeding. Elkin cited both Dixon’s and Hankins’ arguments that miscegenation could facilitate cultural advance.⁵¹ He also cited them each separately as authorising the important link in that argument, that in the absence of miscegenation, racial constraints upon cultural development remained rigid.⁵² Buck’s Lamarckian argument, even if accepted, barely loosened that rigidity: the Aborigines did not have the luxury of 500 years in which to adjust. The ascendancy of physical anthropology in Australia drew upon and entrenched locally a racially determinist school of thought.

The dominance of physical anthropology in Australia manifested in the quest for employment as well as ideas. The articles Elkin wrote in 1929 and published in the *Review* were in large part exercises in academic credentialing. ‘The Practical Value of Anthropology’ was the major series. He organised its four articles by the science’s sub-disciplines – geographical, animal, racial, and social; in a fifth, he recommended ‘Missionary Methods’. The main thrust of the first and third – the two longest – articles concerned physical anthropology’s usefulness to those responsible for deciding how Aborigines should figure in Australian population policy. The second article demonstrated that medical breakthroughs had followed from the anthropological insight that man’s evolution had required all the preceding ‘lower’ life forms. Evolutionary biology revealed that the results of laboratory tests done on mice (for example) applied to humans as well, and so opened the way to twentieth

⁴⁹ Elkin, ‘Practical Value I’, 25.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 29: genes ‘may be Mendelian in their inheritance, and so become segregated’.

⁵¹ Elkin, ‘Practical Value III’, 34; see Hankins *Racial Basis of Civilisation*, 35, Dixon *Racial History of Man*, 38.

⁵² Elkin, ‘Practical Value III’, 35, 36, 38; see Hankins *Racial Basis of Civilisation*, 321; Dixon *Racial History of Man*, 518.

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century experimental medicine. This topic afforded him the opportunity respectfully to cite Frederic Wood Jones' medical work at Adelaide, in association with the Board of Anthropological Research – a prospective future employer.⁵³ And it enabled him to demonstrate his grasp of a wide range of anthropological approaches and issues.

Elkin hoped to persuade government and university parties that Australia needed more university appointments in Anthropology. Radcliffe-Brown had enquired fruitlessly whether the University of Western Australia might employ Elkin as a Reader in Social Anthropology.⁵⁴ Western Australia did not have an institute for anthropology of any kind. Elkin may have had a better chance at gaining employment at the University of Adelaide, where the Board of Anthropological Research was well funded, and eventually did serve as a precursor to a University Department of Anthropology. The Adelaide Board focussed upon physical anthropology, which might explain why, over the entire 'Practical Value of Anthropology' series, Elkin spent over three pages on that branch of anthropology to every one that promoted its social counterpart – his own area of expertise.⁵⁵ (Social Anthropology was the study of a society on its own terms, that is, the elucidation of the relationships, meanings, and values that members of the society had in common. Physical anthropology was the study of mankind as a biological species (Ch. 6).)

Elkin studied the findings of physical anthropologists because he believed they should inform his readers about colonial (including Aboriginal) affairs. But the fact that he emphasized physical rather than social anthropology reflected the contemporary Australian attitude towards Aborigines: they were most interesting as an anomalous gene pool that complicated the project of white Australia; and as a doomed or dysgenic element in the racial history of the world. This construal of both anthropology and Aboriginal affairs as primarily racial matters inclined Elkin to assent to Pitt-Rivers' assessment of the centrality of biological factors in contact between Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Pacific and Australasia. If scientists were to do their duty, and find ways to protect native peoples, they had better understand the racial factors involved, the argument ran.

⁵³ Elkin, 'Practical Value II', 46–47.

⁵⁴ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 75.

⁵⁵ Taking together the five articles in the 'Practical Value' series (including 'Missionary Methods'), approximately 48 pp. concerned physical, and 15 pp. social anthropology. Elkin demonstrated his knowledge and appreciation of the way Adelaide doyen Dr Frederic Wood Jones used findings from evolutionary biology to pioneer a new treatment for a rare condition that disabled human hips. See 'Practical Value II', 46–47.

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Cultures as racially incompatible ideals

Elkin respected Pitt-Rivers' attempt to integrate the physical and social strands of anthropology. Like Elkin, Pitt-Rivers was interested in the interaction of culture and race, psychology and biology. Like Elkin, he accepted the scientific consensus that the 'psychological factor' was a major cause of depopulation. Europeans had to learn to understand and respect the natives' motives and sanctions. 'Is it too late to hope that now by studying more sympathetically and intelligently native customs and ideas, we may learn their intrinsic value as expressions of social purpose?' he asked.⁵⁶ But Pitt-Rivers also believed that native psychology expressed irremediable racial incompatibility with European culture. Elkin could not accept this conclusion, but nor could he refute the science upon which it was based.

Pitt-Rivers argued that, in practical terms, the most important of primitives' purposes was resistance to their colonisers' culture. The universalist propensities of missionaries and governments alike had obscured this basic fact. Pitt-Rivers held that even when the colonial relationship was quite intimate, as in cases of sustained employment, the natives wanted to secure some degree of independence from their colonisers, and so were intent upon material gain along with spiritual continuity. Against W. H. R. Rivers' argument that 'subject races' wanted to be understood so that European rulers could respect their interests⁵⁷, Pitt-Rivers countered that in fact they would rather be left alone, as much as was compatible with earning a wage and participating in a cash economy.⁵⁸ Pitt-Rivers hoped that functional Anthropology would discourage the counterproductive attempt to civilize the natives.

Diffusionists, in their liberal disdain for racial determinism, had missed the real and non-negotiable basis of cultural difference, Pitt-Rivers argued.⁵⁹ Evolutionary science established incontrovertibly, he found, the fact that European 'culture forms' could not mix with those that had stagnated in the global backwater of Australasia. The latter had 'overspecialised' in an environmental niche, and 'overspecialisation is a prelude to

⁵⁶ Pitt-Rivers, *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races*, 241.

⁵⁷ W. H. R. Rivers, 'The Government of Subject Peoples', in AC Seward (ed.) *Science and the Nation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1917), 302–327, at 310.

⁵⁸ Pitt-Rivers, *The Clash of Culture and the Contact of Races*, 26, 36, 241.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–11.

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extinction'.⁶⁰ (Elkin used this exact phrase, but without citing Pitt-Rivers.)⁶¹ 'Culture potential' (another term that Elkin adopted⁶²) described the extent of a group's ability to adapt, and was 'psycho-physical' – a function of cultural as well as physical factors.⁶³

But Pitt-Rivers believed that his data showed that the physical element was fundamental: 'The facts prove that culture-potential cannot be modified without first modifying blood,' he wrote.⁶⁴ He cited American studies in physical anthropology to support his racial determinism.⁶⁵ But more than these secondary sources, his argument rested upon the data he had collected amongst Melanesian peoples that related fecundity and morbidity to miscegenation. The research showed a strong trend towards the decline of full-blood primitive peoples in contact with European – missionaries, traders, or settlers.⁶⁶

Pitt-Rivers maintained that his findings undermined Christian mission. He argued that W. H. R. Rivers' equivocation regarding Christianity was a bluff that had to be called. 'No environment can change the cultural capacity of a people, nor can a religion do so.'⁶⁷ Indeed, by altering the culture forms to which the Melanesians were culturally bound due to their neurological overspecialisation, or limited culture potential, missions ensured the islanders' demise unless they could be saved by miscegenation.⁶⁸

For all that, Pitt-Rivers did not favour miscegenation. When a 'superior race' overwhelmed an inferior race, 'humanitarian sentiments [are] often irrelevant and for the most part quite unreasonable ... there should be no reason for members of a superior race to regret the gradual extinction of an inferior race if only the future enrichment and welfare of the world is considered.'⁶⁹ He thought the real danger was that inter-breeding with lower races could compromise the superior race. The genetic transfer was dysgenic from the white point of view, he argued. And the political consequences were also bad.

Colonisers' humanitarian sentiments had led to an insincere benevolence, and leaders of mixed blood resented it, Pitt-Rivers wrote. In Papua, as in Africa and Asia, unrealised

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶¹ Elkin, 'Practical Value I', 27.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶³ Pitt-Rivers, *The Clash of Culture*, 7.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 4–7, 240.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 23–47.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 235.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 17–25, quotation at 17.

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promises of universal citizenship and culture had taunted the indigenous people. He gave as an example the race riots that occurred in 1922 in South Africa.⁷⁰ Pitt-Rivers paraphrased Mr. Molema, grandson of a Christian Bantu: ‘the more democracy and self-government for white men has gained ground, the worse it has been for the South African natives.’⁷¹ Such leaders had lost their own cultural forms, despised the Christian, and turned instead to communism.

Against what he saw as the counter-productive attempt to ‘raise’ the native, Pitt-Rivers advocated racial separation as more realistically humane. Natives’ should be left alone so far as their inevitable colonial exploitation allowed.⁷² Even anthropologically informed substitution of cultural elements compounded the difficulties native peoples encountered as a subordinate race. Anthropology, in his hands, showed that indirect rule was little better than direct rule.⁷³ Summing up he gave a kind of benediction:

May they learn to value whatever is sound or beautiful in their own culture, in which may be found the surest promise of their own racial achievement in place of blindly following the lead of people whose proffered cultural gifts they can never truly make their own.⁷⁴

This idyll could not apply to the Aborigines: according to Pitt-Rivers, they were ‘rapidly following [the Tasmanians] along the road to extinction.’⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Pitt-Rivers’ study of culture contact influenced Elkin’s investigation of the possibility that Aborigines might survive somehow.

Elkin reluctantly accepted that Pitt-Rivers’ was the authoritative treatment of the subject, and that his main arguments stood – for the time being. They boiled down to three possibilities.

1. A primitive people could only survive as a distinct race if somehow maintained in a separate, dignified subordination to European society.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 29–31.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 28–29

⁷² *Ibid.*, 36, 238–240.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 238.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

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2. Conversely, Christian or civic impulses to include them would destroy them as a distinct people.

3. The most feasible scenario was the survival of part-native families through miscegenation.

Pitt-Rivers argued that this most likely outcome was dysgenic in that it admitted lower genes into the white race; and, that an associated program of assimilation would be politically counter-productive. He preferred the first option.

The dysgenic assertion was one aspect of Pitt-Rivers' position that (already in 1929) Elkin rejected outright, with important consequences, to which we turn below. But on each of the main points, Elkin accepted that Pitt-Rivers spoke with scientific authority. Elkin would need to introduce new data into the debate if he were to challenge Pitt-Rivers' dire prognosis. Further, such a turnaround could only occur piecemeal, one community at a time, 'after an intense study of the local culture'. Even with this caveat, Elkin's language remained tentative: 'a way might possibly be found of assisting [certain] people to derive some benefit from another culture.'⁷⁶ But when it came, Elkin's 'positive policy' had little to do with science (Chs. 7, 8).

The culture of the future

Elkin's perspective upon Pitt-Rivers' conclusions reflected his Australian focus, his sympathy with Aboriginal religion, and his Christian values. Radcliffe-Brown and others argued that Pitt-Rivers' ideal – discrete, subordinate primitive cultures – was impossible in Australia.⁷⁷ If so, then only two of Pitt-Rivers' alternatives remained: Aborigines could either inter-breed with whites, or retain their racial integrity and die out. Pitt-Rivers preferred, and predicted, the latter outcome. One difference between Elkin and Pitt-Rivers was that Elkin believed miscegenation could be desirable from a national perspective, whereas Pitt-Rivers, taking a global view, argued that it was dysgenic. Elkin also differed from Pitt-Rivers in believing that the exploitation and the disappearance of a colonised race involved questions

⁷⁶ Elkin, 'Practical Value I', 33.

⁷⁷ Radcliffe-Brown had stated that Aborigines could not sustain their culture (Ch. 2); see also SH Roberts, *Population Problems*, 365. On the other hand, physical anthropologists tended to recommend segregation, see McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 113, 225-230.. See next chapter for Donald Thomson's later championing of the policy of complete segregation of Aborigines on inviolable reserves.

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of justice that ought not to be answered by a simple appeal to a natural law such as survival of the fittest.⁷⁸ And most basically, Elkin refused to give up his hope that Aborigines would find ways to adapt their culture to their new environment.

But Elkin was not writing to put his point of view. Despite the faith-orientation of the *Review*, he most wanted to demonstrate the reach and usefulness of his science. His theme was that biological and cultural aspects of the problem were inseparable in fact.⁷⁹ A dilemma he failed to solve – as yet – was that his deepest ideals required that biology and culture be separated in practice.

The first of the two articles in which Elkin addressed these problems concerned the influence of geography upon human development. Elkin interpreted the latest data about miscegenation to mean that Aboriginal strains could help produce an acclimatised northern Australian people. Heretically, Elkin ignored the literal-minded approach to a *white* Australia. By presenting miscegenation in a favourable light, Elkin not only rejected Pitt-Rivers' lead; he also reversed Lyng's value judgment about the racial future of northern Australia, and corrected Cilento's overstatement about the preponderance of 'white' racial strains in Australia's north. Elkin suggested that Lyng was right in fact if not in attitude: in twenty generations, northern Australia would be home to a coloured race. Elkin's observations in the Kimberleys supported that contention.⁸⁰ But unlike Lyng, Elkin expressed no regret or warning: indeed, in a footnote he welcomed the possibility of a darker racial strain prospering in tropical Australia. Certain features of the Aboriginal race – dark skin, the ability to consciously slow their metabolism and circulatory systems – represented an important human resource, adapted over millennia, for the cultivation of the tropics. His compatriots should not allow 'mere racial prejudice' to blind them to this possibility.⁸¹

The point was largely rhetorical. Mendelian genetics had established that controlled breeding of 'a race with European mentality and dark skin' was possible, 'but, of course, this could only be done by laboratory methods. Here is just another of the many problems of

⁷⁸ Significantly, in 1929 he did not voice this moral objection, presumably because it might compromise his scientific credibility. For the argument he mounted in 1931 (and with increasing vehemence until 1934) from natural justice – 'unless we are content to be conquering thieves', see Ch. 6.

⁷⁹ He introduced the series by stating that 'Anthropology deals largely with the interplay of the organic and the cultural'. 'Practical Value I', 24.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 26–27.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 30.

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practical importance, which physical anthropology has set before itself.⁸² This was a footnote; in the paragraph to which it was appended, Elkin emphasized that controlled breeding of humans was neither politically feasible, nor desirable in principle. The liberal sentiments of the main text edged out the eugenic ‘problem of practical importance’ – but it remained on the page as a testament to the material possibilities of science, and to the socially elevating potential of science’s objective eye. This even-handedness was especially significant given the indignation, disgust, and condescension that characterised the general Australian public’s prejudice concerning half-castes.⁸³ Even the most prominent champion of half-castes at the time, the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland, John Bleakley, favoured strong measures to prevent further race mixing.⁸⁴

In this first article, Elkin was only incidentally considering miscegenation as social policy. His main concern was a prognosis, casting ahead many generations, about the interaction of race and geography. This anthropological perspective was of practical value in that it separated the question of Australia’s ‘mandate’ to develop the north, from (what he regarded as) its temporary political and social expedient of a racially exclusive population policy. By replacing racial prejudice with facts, anthropology could loosen the hold of a literal interpretation of white Australia, increase half-caste Aborigines’ social and economic opportunities, and promote national development. As an anthropologist, he hoped to normalise, moralise, and so civilize the trend towards miscegenation; and promote that trend’s subversion of what he would later call the ‘dogma’ of white Australia.

But he was not content to let go unchallenged the assumption that miscegenation was Aborigines’ *only* way forward. In the last section of the article, he switched abruptly (and confusingly) from a series of arguments that seemed to promote miscegenation, to a fundamental argument. He proposed that the more important role of the anthropologist *might* be – he presented it as an outside chance – to promote understanding of ongoing cultural as

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ ‘[I]t might also be advisable to give both the half-caste men and women the benefit of sound European training with the object of making them a useful factor in our civilisation.’⁸³ Compare the indignation, disgust, and condescension others displayed: McGregor, *Imagined Destinies*, 98, 124–128, 130–134.

⁸⁴ *The Aborigines and Half-Castes of Central and Northern Australia*, report by J. W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aborigines, Queensland, 1928. Printed 8 Feb 1929, 29. This point should be taken with another in mind: Bleakley’s main objection to miscegenation concerned the ‘low morality’ of its particulars in his experience, more than any general racial principle.

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against racial trends in Aboriginal affairs. He held on to the hope that social anthropology could inform a dialogue that would transcend the trends extrapolated from the physical data.

If ... the psychological factors are fundamental, a way might possibly be found of assisting such a people to derive some benefit from another culture [T]he changes would have to be made through existing institutions and factors of integration, that is from within.⁸⁵

His footnote was a plea for time: 'More research, however, needs to be carried out on this problem before definite conclusions can be stated.' This was putting on a brave face: in his five 'Practical Value' articles, Elkin did not offer a single example of how psychological factors had in fact assisted Aborigines to benefit from European culture.

Elkin was inconsistent in his treatment of miscegenation. He argued as if Aborigines could not maintain their culture except by maintaining racial purity.⁸⁶ But in a later article in the series, he implied that miscegenation might not mean cultural extinction.⁸⁷ He suggested that the European and Asian strains could provide leaders for groups of half-castes who identified as Aborigines. Rebutting Pitt-Rivers' assessment that racial admixture between white and primitive peoples was dysgenic, Elkin emphasized 'a very important point that is often overlooked': the 'lower' race's genetic gain balanced the white race's loss. He noted that nine tenths of the leaders of the Negro people in the US had been men of mixed blood.'⁸⁸ (Elkin did not respond to Pitt-Rivers' counter-argument that these leaders were likely to oppose the colonising society, if an alternative such as communism was available.)

This approval of half-caste leadership of Negro political interests implied that Elkin looked to Aborigines of mixed blood to lead the fight against prejudice. Thus, a political argument buttressed Elkin's geographical argument in favour of miscegenation. His was a lone Australian scientific voice that considered, even as a remote possibility, that Aborigines might move collectively into Australian society through a process of inter-breeding that could entail political, and so to some extent cultural, continuity.

⁸⁵ Elkin, 'Practical Value' I, 33.

⁸⁶ 'It may therefore be physically impossible for such a people as the Australian blacks ... to change the forms of their culture ... and that the attempt to cause them to do so from without may lead to their extinction *whether through depopulation or miscegenation.*' *Ibid.*, 32. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ The confusion centred on the place of children of mixed blood in Aboriginal society: Elkin did not reach a conclusion about this until 1936: see 'The Reaction of Primitive Races to the White Man's Culture: A Study in Culture-contact', *Hibbert Journal*, 35 (4), October 1936–July 1937, 537–45.

⁸⁸ Elkin, 'Practical Value' III, 43.

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The article's concluding paragraph presented a complex intersection of issues facing the policy maker who would be guided by the findings of anthropology. He identified 'two sets of problems': 'social, cultural and historical aspects of the races concerned'; and 'the biological questions'. He went on,

The consideration of these two sets of problems might lead to quite different conclusions as far as individual and political desires are concerned, and therefore demands much earnest thought from which mere racial prejudice should be excluded.⁸⁹

He did not elaborate upon his 'political and individual desires', nor the differential way culture and race affected each. The fact that we have to tease out what Elkin meant is significant in itself. At this stage, Elkin did not see himself as a problem solver so much as a problem poser.

But we now know enough to sketch Elkin's preferences. His 'political desire' was that Aborigines should enjoy equality within a broadly conceived 'white' Australian classless society, as he hoped in 1927, and as suggested by his pleas that Aborigines be treated without prejudice, and as adults. His 'individual desire' was that the Aboriginal way of life would persist. Elkin had found support for his own faith in Aboriginal religion, he had invested several years in the study of Aboriginal beliefs and practices, his personal preference was evident in his 'Report on Forrest River Mission', and he reiterated it over the next several decades.

But what of the 'quite different conclusions' that the biologist would reach concerning these 'individual and political desires'? Elkin's 'individual desire' – that Aborigines should be assisted to develop 'along their own lines' – was straightforward, in that it led to the same policy whether viewed biologically or culturally. Biologically, this desire predicated against miscegenation, which tended to hasten cultural change. Culturally, the social anthropologist might assist Aborigines' gradual social development 'from within' such that their 'group life' complemented, integrated with, or even assimilated into European society. But this gradual approach, based for the foreseeable future to some extent in racial separation, ran the risk of permanent subordination along the lines Pitt-Rivers favoured, but Elkin deplored.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

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In contrast, the white Australian ‘political desire’ for equality had different aspects, according to whether it was viewed biologically or socially.⁹⁰ Looked at biologically, the Aborigines’ surest path to equality was miscegenation; this was also the policy most compatible with Australian public opinion, if it could be purged of ‘mere prejudice’. Moreover, miscegenation reduced the risk to national honour of a failed attempt to ‘raise’ the Aborigines against the biological odds. But looked at socially (and spiritually), the condition of a true equality was the maintenance and transformation of their ties to the past – the source of meaning. Elkin made this point emphatically in his last two articles in the ‘Practical Value’ series, ‘Social Anthropology’ and ‘Missionary Methods’, as we will see next chapter.

In a series of articles intended to show the usefulness of anthropology, Elkin did not dwell on the conflicts between the discipline’s biological and cultural perspectives. On the other hand, he showed that one of the most useful effects of a holistic anthropological survey was to demonstrate (for himself, if no-one else at the time) that in Aboriginal administration, only partial solutions were possible. Equally necessary solutions seemed contradictory. Administrators could probably best preserve Aboriginal culture – a high priority for Elkin – by minimising contact between European and Aborigine. But following the lead of physical anthropologists, administrators ought to make their first priority the attempt to render miscegenation prosocial, as that was probably their most effective response to the problem of depopulation. Policy-makers had to understand that any one policy was a response to only part of the problem, and if over-extended, would have counter-productive effects. They had to think in subtle tones, not silhouette. The task was to co-ordinate different, and apparently incompatible, approaches.

Amidst this arrangement of ‘grey’ policies, Elkin emphasized one stark fact. Aboriginal depopulation was probably the beginning of their extinction, or utter demoralisation. In the natural order of things, they would die out in the face of the overwhelming, increasing, and permanent presence of a civilization, which was in its material aspect far in advance of theirs. The challenge was to defy the natural course of culture contact. Australian history had proven that ‘good intentions’ would not suffice. Only by fully

⁹⁰ Thus Geoffrey Gray oversimplified when he wrote that Elkin ‘conflated culture and biology’; see ‘The Sydney school] seem[s] to view the Aborigines as forever unchanging’: southeastern Australia and Australian anthropology’, *Aboriginal History*, 24, 2000: 175-199, at 176.

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acknowledging the difficulty of the problem could Australian administrators hope to overcome it.

And yet, the same science that delivered the necessary warning, also threatened to doom the Aborigines prematurely. Returning in a later article to the question of racial determinism, Elkin reiterated the fatalistic consensus, but his treatment of it dramatised his latent dissent. In the third article in the 'Practical Value' series, Elkin discussed 'the inequality of races'. He summarised the hard neurological evidence first (Elliot Smith), then proceeded to the more dubious evidence from intelligence testing (Berry and Porteus). He questioned whether the latter results were valid. Then he summed up the significance of this racial science if it were accepted as fact: 'we must infer that the higher aspects of European culture cannot be fully appreciated by such primitive peoples ... apart from a few exceptions.'⁹¹ Building upon his scepticism regarding inter-cultural intelligence tests, he set his own experience against racial science in general:

The cultural Anthropologist [sic] who, during his fieldwork, has day by day discussed with 'blacks' aspects of their own culture, and in so doing has forgotten that he has been associated with primitive naked savages, will be inclined to doubt [the racially based difference in intelligence] ... [and] to argue... that the difference between black and white is not one between different types or standards of brain, but between different stages of culture, say, the stone and the iron ages.⁹²

But he subordinated his personal experience, and his inclination to prioritise cultural factors. Instead, he privileged the union of racial science and racial ideology. He deferred his first-hand sense of Aborigines' potential to a ubiquitous trope of racial science – one he had read in Pitt-Rivers, Dixon, and Hankins: that the Jews exemplified a 'race' that repeatedly overcame radical change and hostile environments, unlike the Negroes (and now Aborigines).⁹³ Physical anthropologists agreed: the broad sweep of history proved that primitive races such as the Aborigines were unable to overcome or improve their environment. Elkin ended the section by developing a well-worn metaphor: 'They have

⁹¹ Elkin, 'Practical Value' III, 37.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 38. Pitt-Rivers, *Clash of Cultures* 142–143; Dixon, *Racial History of Man*, 518; Hankins, *Racial Basis of Civilisation*, 307.

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become like ships without either engines or rudders and have eventually sunk beneath the waves of culture-clash.⁹⁴

Determined first to heed the danger signs that physical anthropology displayed along the imagined road of Aborigines' destiny, Elkin restrained his opposition to the political implications of racial determinism. But that opposition surfaced recurrently. He concluded both the first and the third of his 'Practical Value' articles by urging that conclusions about race, although backed by evidence, nevertheless be regarded provisionally, until more was known about Aboriginal society, culture, and adaptive potential. At this stage, Elkin ceded to the superior arguments from racial science, and to historical precedent – until the former could be credibly challenged, and the latter defied.

A sign of things to come

Elkin resisted a complete capitulation to Pitt-Rivers and other racial determinists because of his optimistic liberalism, and a muted but stubborn Christian critique. Elkin's optimism had two bases. He viewed Aborigines' adaptation to Australia's climatic extremes as a valuable human resource, and he looked upon miscegenation as, possibly, a route to equality between all Australians, and full participation for at least part-Aborigines in the 'white' Australian ideal.⁹⁵ Elkin based his first and most decisive argument for applied anthropology upon the national interest in the economic development of the north, which would provide part-Aborigines with equal opportunities to participate in the Commonwealth economically, and eventually, socially and politically. This was his 'even if' argument: even if Aborigines are doomed as a race (and probably as a culture), anthropology showed that their descendants should enjoy full membership of 'white' Australia – whatever their colour.

At a more personal level, he objected to science that diminished the 'potentially infinite worth' of every human.⁹⁶ He allowed 'a Christian point of view' to intrude into his discussion of scientific findings in two ways. He refused to countenance a straightforwardly exploitative colonial relationship: all races are fundamentally one, he wrote. 'Physical

⁹⁴ Elkin, 'Practical Value' III, 39.

⁹⁵ In 1929 he expressed this egalitarian agenda tentatively; it is significant inasmuch as it looks forward to a stronger statement of the case in 1932. See, for example, his 'Cultural and Racial Clash in Australia', *Morpeth Review*, 2 (21), 1932, 35–45.

⁹⁶ The phrase is EH Burgmann's, 'The Christian conception of personality makes every individual potentially a person of infinite worth' in *Religion in the Life of the Nation*, (Morpeth: Morpeth Booklet, 1930), 23.

5. Scientific authority, religious forbearance

Anthropology cannot justify a policy which is inclined to treat any primitive race as a beast of burden.⁹⁷ The other Christian caveat was fundamental, because it suspended the whole ‘practical value’ of anthropology. Wherever science doomed a people to extinction, permanent subordination, or cultural annihilation, Elkin appealed to that conveniently malleable figure, the future scientist. At times, the cry ‘more research is needed!’ followed from his exposure of the weakness of current scientific knowledge (most notably concerning intelligence tests); more often, he was playing for time.

Only once, he gave a general reason for stalling. ‘We cannot throw the “first stone”,’ he warned his fellow scientists.⁹⁸ He quoted Jesus’ words to legal experts or pharisees who, saying that the law of Moses required that she be stoned, had brought an adulteress before him.⁹⁹ In Elkin’s use of the parable, as in the original, respect for the importance of prescriptive orders of knowledge combined with sympathy for human frailty to produce the moral of forbearance.

Although Elkin used this ‘Christian point of view’ (‘finally!’ Burgmann may have thought) merely to defer the findings of racial science, to which at this stage he still accorded full credit, it was a sign of more assertive resistance to come. At that one point, invoking that ‘art of renunciation’ upon which Burgmann taught religion and science equally depended, he stepped back from the data and the conclusions, to use the first person, and address the community of scientists.¹⁰⁰ Retrospectively, we can see Elkin’s admonition to his fellow scientists as the first sign of the strategic way he would delimit Australian anthropology in the early 1930s (Ch. 8). But in the late 1920s, overall, Elkin lacked the courage of his convictions: he stalled on the path he considered wrong, but was not yet prepared to lead on the path he considered right. In Chapter Seven, we will study his account of a religious epiphany he experienced in the desert during his second year of field work, which seems to have provided (or symbolised) the necessary gumption, by enlivening in Elkin his belief that religion validly inspired man ‘to seek the unattainable.’¹⁰¹ We turn next to consider how in

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁹⁹ Jesus replied, ‘If any of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.’ The accusers left one by one. Then Jesus said to the woman, ‘Go now and leave your life of sin.’ So he enjoined both parties to restrain themselves. John 8:7.

¹⁰⁰ Burgmann, ‘The Culture of the Future’, 6.

¹⁰¹ ‘Man shall not live by bread alone’, undated sermon filed with 1929 sermon notebook, p. 11. EP 5/3/3. The file’s distinctive consistency of phrasing and themes suggests that the sermon was of that period.

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1928, years before he was prepared to commit his scientific reputation and career to the cause of Aboriginal advance, he became involved in a long-standing argument within Christian mission, and first (albeit to a limited, church audience) espoused the acculturative cause in Aboriginal affairs.