

CHAPTER SIX

CHRISTIAN MISSION AND DIFFUSIONIST ANTHROPOLOGY

When Elkin wrote his 'Practical Value' series, he had already intervened once in a practical way in Aboriginal affairs. Early in 1928, during his fieldwork in the Kimberley, he recommended that the Australian Board of Missions should remove the Superintendent of Forrest River Mission, Reverend Ernest Gribble, who deliberately pursued the eradication of Aboriginal culture.¹ In his 'Report on Forrest River Mission', Elkin first advocated the acculturative policy that, while sometimes overshadowed by more expedient alternatives (Ch. 8), nevertheless directed and distinguished his publicity and policy advice thereafter.

The report was Elkin's first political move in the contest between collective Aboriginal autonomy and a totally European settlement. In the Report, Elkin emphasized the importance of social understanding, and the inadequacy of prevailing individualist approaches to culture contact. He argued that traditional, collectively compelling Aboriginal authority must mobilise the 'psychological factors' that might defy the fatalistic prognoses from racial science and historical precedent. He confidently recommended Aboriginal authority against missionary arrogance, but – focused on immediate, practicable goals – he avoided the question of the right of missionaries to be on Aboriginal land at all except as guests. And he assumed that traditional Aboriginal authority could be revived without reference to bases in territory and socio-economic organisation.

These strengths and weaknesses reflected the symbiotic relation between diffusionist anthropology and Christian mission in Melanesia. Scholarship and mission had converged in Melanesia from the 1860s and Rivers' work throughout the first decades of the twentieth century renewed the association. Elkin had to adapt this heritage, particularly because the Aborigines had less chance than did the Indigenous peoples of Melanesia of retaining or regaining their land. Elkin's adaptation of Rivers' idea was complicated by Elkin's

¹ Reverend AP Elkin, 'Report on Forrest River Mission', 1928, EP 1/12/96, unpaginated.

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ambivalent involvement in the racialised policy agenda in the ongoing settlement of Australia, which we studied last chapter.

Before Elkin could attempt systematically to apply in Australia the lessons learnt from the interaction of scientists and missionaries, he tried (as we have seen) to clarify in his own mind the proper domain in Aboriginal studies of social anthropology vis-à-vis physical anthropology. But as we see how Elkin used that distinction to champion Aboriginal agency, we will also see that the more immediate problem in social anthropology was the question of the relation between Indigenous societies and the land from which they had been dispossessed, or which had been colonised. This question remained suppressed in Elkin's analyses and those of his favoured sources.

The Practical Value of Social Anthropology

We saw last chapter that returned from the Kimberley in 1929, Elkin separated the physical from the social aspects of his science.² He tagged their respective subject matters as 'ethnic factors' (biological) and 'psychological factors' (of the mind).³ As we have seen, the first three (including the two longest) of the five articles in the series concerned mainly physical anthropology. In the fourth, 'Social Anthropology', Elkin intended to give to employers, managers of government stations, administrators, and the general public an understanding of the principles of culture change. The fifth he wrote specifically for missionaries.

Physical anthropology was, for the most part, a 'hard' science, concerned with the behaviour of genes, and the classification of biological types. In the previous chapter, we also grouped within physical anthropology the aspect of psychological enquiry that calculated intelligence quotients, because it was associated with neurological findings about racial differences in brain function. Generally, though, psychological enquiry belonged within the 'soft', social strand of anthropology. When Elkin referred to 'the psychological factor', he meant the study of mind in relation to society, and (as he explicated) not biology.⁴

² Elkin, 'Practical Value' I, 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁴ In 1932, Elkin ceased using 'psychological' as an indicator of an open-ended, relational approach to science. This transition coincided with 'The Social Life and Intelligence of the Australian Aborigines: A Review of SD Porteus's *Psychology of a Primitive People*', *Oceania* 3 (1), September 1932, 101–113: a strong rebuttal of the deterministic conclusions (that Aborigines were unable to benefit from European civilization) Porteus drew from intelligence tests. See Ch. 9.

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Each approach, the biological and the social, was useful to native administration in a different way. Physical anthropology was predictive, to the point of being deterministic; social anthropology yielded findings that led to the complications and unpredictability associated with human relationship. Elkin pointed out that in practice, physical and social anthropology, ‘the organic and the cultural’, were often inseparable, as, for example, in the study of miscegenation.⁵ But even in such cases, the physical data furnished trends according to which decision-makers could project possibilities and conceive policies. So Pitt-Rivers, we have seen, organised his analysis of culture contact in the Pacific around racial and not cultural factors impinging upon reproduction, because they enabled decision-makers to generalise on the basis of demographic trends.⁶ In 1929, Elkin similarly used his discussion of physical anthropology to show what the science offered to policy makers. He used his discussion of social anthropology to show how that branch of the science could benefit those ‘on the ground’ who had to find methods to pursue whatever policy their superiors chose.⁷

Elkin’s conception that social anthropology especially concerned volition was not the dominant view. Our distinction between deterministic physical anthropology and instrumental social anthropology is complicated by the rising influence in late 1920s Australia of structural sociology. Professor Radcliffe-Brown, on the cusp of becoming the recognised leader of the structuralist school in British social anthropology, claimed to have developed – from the French school of sociology led by Durkheim – a mode of social anthropology that was a ‘natural’ science.⁸ By bracketing history and obviating the need for subjective evidence, synchronic, sociological science would eventually prove as strongly predictive as any other, Radcliffe-Brown claimed.⁹

In Chapter Seven we will study the influence upon Elkin of Radcliffe-Brown’s development of the sociology of religion. In Chapter Nine we will explore Elkin’s response

⁵ Elkin, ‘Practical Value III’, 24.

⁶ Pitt-Rivers, *Clash of Culture*, 240.

⁷ Elkin, ‘Social Anthropology’, 49.

⁸ AR Radcliffe-Brown, ‘On Social Structure’ (1935), in idem, *Structure and Function: Essays and Addresses* (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), 188–204, at 200.

⁹ He defined ‘applied anthropology’ as ‘the deliberate attempt to control and alter the civilisation of other peoples in administration and education ... based on the application of the discovered laws of anthropological science.’ AR Radcliffe-Brown, ‘Applied Anthropology’, *Report of ANZAAS*, 20 (Brisbane, 1930), cited in 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), 204–216, at 215.

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to Radcliffe-Brown's objective analysis of Aboriginal social organization. In each of these cases, Elkin, by returning volition to the centre of his social theory, rejected Radcliffe-Brown's attempt to build an objective social science.

In 1929, Elkin combined objective and subjective elements in his definition of social anthropology. In the fourth article in the 'Practical Value' series, 'Social Anthropology', he distinguished social from physical anthropology by the claim that human society was of a different type from animal society ('man is not merely an animal of the human type').¹⁰ Society, in its expression as 'culture', including material culture, ensured that 'man' was 'not just a creature wholly dependent on his environment'. Human 'society' differed from an animal 'pack' in that it derived cohesion from 'principles' (contained in 'laws, customs, rites, beliefs and traditions'); and in that its 'leaders – old men, chiefs, medicine-men or thinkers', were capable of 'progress and adaptation to changing circumstances.' Thus, for Elkin, the practical questions surrounding culture as an expression of mentality were diachronic: his social anthropology was of the diffusionist school.

The crucial question for Elkin was how societies maintained cohesion through these adaptations. What enabled society's various parts to function in a co-ordinated way, even as they changed? He looked for an answer in the 'definite meaning and value' that the principles of cohesion had for 'the people that possesses them'.¹¹ Elkin surveyed the subject of social anthropology – separation from animals and from the environment, principles (and not instincts) of cohesion, intellectual authority, 'meaning and values' as means of adaptation – so as to present an understanding of human consciousness and subjectivity as its ultimate goal.

His definition of social anthropology expressed his association with two iterations of 'soft' social anthropology: the school's emergence, via Marett at the turn of the century; and Rivers' elaboration in 1917 and 1922 of why anthropology was important for colonial administration, what problems it might solve, and how it might work. Both Marett and Rivers propagated a 'Social Psychological' approach to anthropology. They, and Elkin after them, focussed on mental phenomena. In each case, but in different ways, the focus on mind was associated with religion: Marett and Elkin were clergymen; Rivers (the son of a clergyman)

¹⁰ Elkin, 'Social Anthropology', 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

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developed his seminal social anthropological insights in partnership with the Melanesian Mission. For these thinkers, social psychology was the study of how society perpetuated its values and beliefs. They pioneered social anthropology as the study of the relation between individual volition, meaning, and society.

The 'Psychological Factor'

British social anthropology was the child of empiricist, individualist speculation, and theoretical, social abstraction. That, at least, is how R. R. Marett conceived the shift from Victorian evolutionism to twentieth century social anthropology.¹² (We saw in Ch. 2 that Marett was the anthropologist whose thinking Elkin's most resembled.) Marett believed that religion was the universal source of those collective 'meanings and values' (to use Elkin's phrase) that enabled humans to face the unknown, and so adapt and change.¹³ Marett judged that Durkheim's structural sociology provided necessary insights into the way religion generated collective meaning.¹⁴ At the same time, the predilection of British anthropologists (Frazer, Robertson-Smith, Tylor, Marett himself) for imaginative projection into the mind-states of hypothetical individuals had the advantage of returning anthropological enquiry to individual agency.

Marett advocated a *via media*: 'Social Psychology'. Anthropology must pursue 'a social subject', but 'must never for an instant ignore the qualifying fact of the existence of the individual subject.'¹⁵ In today's terms, Marett urged that the social scientist must balance structure and agency. Elkin fulfilled this requirement by including in his definition objective elements (laws and rites, authority structures), as well as subjective elements (leadership; meanings and values).

Elkin's crucial phrase, 'the psychological factor' came from W. H. R. Rivers' work (as we noted in the previous chapter.)¹⁶ Published in 1922, Rivers' essay of that name was contemporary with his attempt to restate the academic case for 'Social Psychology', as

¹² RR Marett, 'A Sociological View of Comparative Religion', in *idem*, *The Threshold of Religion* (1909 enlarged 1914; 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1929) 122–144. (*Sociological Review*, Jan 1908, 48–60.)

¹³ *Idem*, 'Pre-Animistic Religion', *The Threshold of Religion* (1909, enlarged 1914; 4th ed., London: Methuen, 1929), 1–28, at 28.

¹⁴ *Idem*, 'A Sociological View', 122–23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, at 144 and 139.

¹⁶ WHR Rivers, 'The Psychological Factor', in *idem* (ed.), *Essays on the Depopulation of Melanesia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1922), 84–113.

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against a purely structural sociology.¹⁷ Each would complement and sometimes correct the other's insights, Rivers argued.¹⁸ Ten years after Marett's advocacy of social psychology, British anthropology threatened to swing to the other extreme of exclusively socio-structural modes of analysis, Rivers feared. He warned that individual agency must always be upheld against a purely objective sociology.¹⁹ Further, Rivers believed that individual agency provided analogies that illumined the interaction of primitive and civilized cultures.

In Rivers' remarkably productive last year of life, he began an inquiry into how primitive cultures responded to contact with civilization. Drawing on his work in Melanesian ethnology, Rivers suggested that the only way to explain how conservative, primitive societies changed in response to various waves of culture contact was by the process of 'transference', which he assumed could be social as well as individual.²⁰ Transference occurred in psychotherapy when the patient projected his task – to resolve an incapacitating conflict of interests – onto the therapist, and became dependent upon him. This denial of responsibility was a regression to childhood, when the father embodied externally the 'group ideal' or authority ideal, and the ego had not yet incorporated it, Rivers wrote.

Rivers supposed that conservative societies such as those in Melanesia had undergone a social process of transference through past contacts with civilized peoples. They had responded to a superior civilization by symbolically adjusting their traditional 'ancestor ideals', but had not grasped the progressive elements of the new culture that elsewhere had led processes of civilization. Just as a dreamer sought to resolve conflicts even while avoiding them, by manipulating 'disassociated' symbols, primitive societies also had attempted to make sense of conflicting authorities (their own and the stronger, invading one), without acknowledging (let alone resolving) the conflict. Rivers intended the paper to explain how cultural diffusion could occur in primitive societies, and he did not draw any contemporary lessons from his historical examples. However, in his argument concerning 'the government of subject races' (below) he applied his psychological theory.

¹⁷ *Idem, Psychology and Politics* (London: Kegan Paul, 1923), 1–26.

¹⁸ *Idem, Social Organisation* (ed. (literary executor) WJ Perry) (London: Kegan Paul, 1924), 3–4.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁰ *Idem, Psychology and Politics*, 23–24. The reader will recall that in Chapter Four we studied this notion with reference to Rivers and Elliot Smith's different interpretations of the historical role of a priestly caste. Here, our concern is Rivers more general theory of cultural transference.

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'Transference' described a process that the therapist ought to avoid.²¹ Similarly, the anthropologist had to find ways to assist the natives to see their problems clearly, and not to evade them by projecting their conflicted loyalties onto European symbols. Just as the therapist aimed to create a safe relationship in which the patient could see and understand his situation, and gain confidence to face it in his own way, the anthropologist could assist the native by persuading those who came into contact with him to wait upon his initiative.

Rivers proposed that religious 'wisdom' and scientific knowledge ought to complement one another in the emerging subfield of medicine, 'psycho-therapeutics'.²² Similarly, in 'The Psychological Factor', he recommended a partnership between religion and social science. He urged that an approach to native administration guided by the restraining hand of the anthropologist ought to be tried as 'an interesting experiment', but not to the exclusion of the work being done by the Melanesian Mission, which he described as 'an influence which I believe to be at the present time potent for good in Melanesia.'²³

Elkin adopted these goals. 'Understanding, recognition and sympathy put into practice go far to ease the jar which follows on the contact of different races,' he wrote.²⁴ Later, he advised that Aborigines appreciated a man who was there only to understand their point of view.²⁵ Like Rivers, Elkin did not expect the new scientific influence to suddenly dominate the field; instead, he envisioned a partnership in which the anthropologist constrained and guided the missionary, the latter remaining 'the best vanguard of the white races in their contact with coloured peoples.'²⁶ Anthropologists could instruct missionaries and other agents of culture contact in problems such as 'the dichotomy of authority', and 'conflict of allegiance', Elkin wrote.²⁷

Elkin remained interested in the processes of transference. He observed how a colonised people's loyalty and sense of identity moved somewhat abruptly back and forth

²¹ *Idem*, *Conflict and Dream* (London: Kegan Paul, 1923), 72–73.

²² *Idem*, 'Psycho-therapeutics', in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Vol. 10, (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1918).

²³ *Idem*, 'The Psychological Factor', 106.

²⁴ Elkin, 'Social Anthropology', 49.

²⁵ Elkin, *A Policy for the Aborigines* (Sydney: Association for the Protection of Native Races, 1934), 8. It should be born in mind that more often, Elkin argued from settler Australian self-interest, that 'the confidence and help of native races can really only be won in so far as we respect their beliefs and traditions.' See his 'Social Anthropology', 49. See also *idem*, *Understanding the Australian Aborigine* (Morpeth, The St. John's College Press, 1931), 3.

²⁶ 'Anthropology and Missionary Methods', *Morpeth Review* II, March 1930, 34–37, at 36.

²⁷ AP Elkin, 'The Secret Life of the Aborigines', *Oceania*, III, (2) Dec 1932, 119–138, at 121.

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between their indigenous culture and a separate, dominating culture. For fifteen years from 1936, initially in a religious journal, Elkin developed his idea of the 'return to the mat', by which he meant the disillusioned Aborigine's attempt to find solace in his own culture after unsuccessfully transferring his values and interests onto the settler society.²⁸ When Elkin first attempted to schematise this process, he noted ways in which the colonising society could assist primitive peoples to solve the problem of transference. He indicated his sense of seeing to fruition a project he had inherited from others: 'In this connection it is a pleasure to be able to write in the preceding sentence "helps" instead of "would help", for we can now speak from experience and not merely from social theorising.'²⁹ This tradition of interest in problems of culture contact continued in Australia the work that Rivers had begun in association with the Melanesian Mission.

Anthropology and Mission

While still working in the evolutionary paradigm, Rivers gained new insight into the diffusion of culture. In 1908, he sailed on the *Southern Cross* between the Solomon Islands with members of the high Anglican Melanesian Mission. His most valuable informant was John Patteson Pantutun, grandson of one of the Mission's first converts (at the hands of Bishop Patteson, in the 1860s), and the Mission's first native teacher. Both during and after his fieldwork, Rivers also collaborated with Reverend Durrad, who became a friend of Ernest Burgmann's (Ch. 2). Rivers gave Durrad pride of place in the acknowledgements prefacing *History of Melanesian Society*.

But the most significant collaboration went on *in absentia*. Several years after Robert Codrington's retirement from the Mission, Rivers used the Reverend's detailed inquiry into Melanesian history as a base from which he could map complex Melanesian cultural exchanges. The evolutionary laws upon which Tylor, Frazer, and others had premised anthropology may be valid, Rivers wrote, but they could only be proven with reference to

²⁸ We will return to this line of enquiry in Ch. 9. See also AP 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, 537–45. For the end-point of this line of Elkin's thinking, see AP Elkin, 'Reaction and Interaction: A Food Gathering People and European Settlement in Australia', *American Anthropologist* 53 (2), 1951, 164–186; for intermediate stages, see Russell McGregor, 'Assimilation as Acculturation: AP Elkin on the Dynamics of Cultural Change' in Rowse, *Contesting Assimilation*, 169–183.

²⁹ Elkin, 'Reaction of Primitive Races', 539–540. The precedents involved Maoris and Indigenous peoples of southern America, and in 1936 not yet Aborigines.

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intricate histories, such as those Codrington had discerned behind even these very primitive cultures.³⁰ Historical choices, and not evolutionary law, determined the course of cultural diffusion.

European influence upon Melanesians increased the historical complication. In 1909, the Mission invited Rivers to address its London meeting – he was the first and last academic anthropologist to do so. He commended its commitment ‘to keep what is good and to build up the new faith on that foundation.’³¹ Implicit in his praise for the Mission was a comparison with rival missionaries, some of whom trained Melanesians as servants and taught that all native religious practice was evil. Rival schools of Christian mission, Rivers saw, initiated widely different paths of cultural diffusion. In 1911, he announced to the anthropological world that he had abandoned the evolutionary frame of inquiry and replaced it with the historical approach.³² To a large extent through contact with the Mission, Rivers’ interest turned away from impersonal trends, and towards the personal qualities that determined the nature of culture contact.³³

The first generation leadership of the Melanesian Mission provided Rivers with crucial methodological and substantive leads for his social anthropology. John Patteson, Bishop of Melanesia, and his Headmaster, Robert Codrington (Ch. 3) pioneered a syncretic approach to Mission. We have seen that Codrington changed the course of British anthropological theory by formulating from the Melanesian concept of *mana* a general principle of primitive religion. Of equal importance, Codrington’s warnings about the way most Europeans built whole systems of analysis upon early misunderstandings of their informants led Marett and Rivers to refine the methodological guide for missionaries, travellers, and especially professional fieldworkers. These innovations followed in part at least from Codrington’s development of Patteson’s principles, which he in turn had derived from a respect for the ancient teachings of Church fathers concerning the centrality of reason to evangelism.³⁴

³⁰ Rivers, ‘Culture-Historical Method’, in Richard Slobodin, *WHR Rivers* (NY: Columbia UP, 1978), 120–121.

³¹ Cited in David Hilliard, *God’s Gentlemen: A History of the Melanesian Mission, 1849–1942* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1978), 192.

³² Stocking, *After Tylor*, 179–180.

³³ Kuklick, *Savage Within*, 122.

³⁴ Sara Harrison Sohmer, ‘A Selection of Fundamentals’: *The Intellectual Background of the Melanesian Mission of the Church of England, 1850-1914*, PhD Thesis 1988, published electronically by Project Canterbury at <http://anglicanhistory.org/oceania/sohmer1988/> sourced 23 March, 2006, 141–167.

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The second generation of Melanesian missionaries were pioneers in quite another direction. Men such as Ernest Burgmann's friend, Walter Durrad, accepted that even their careful approach to Mission had exacerbated the problem of depopulation. They partnered Rivers in an attempt to improve missionary methods, and at the same time pressure other parties to culture contact to adopt social anthropological principles. From 1914, Rivers began collating a collection of essays, mainly by missionaries, on the problem of Melanesian depopulation.

Meanwhile, Rivers publicized for a secular audience the problems that followed from colonial administrators' ignorance. Still in the early twentieth century, colonial governors ruled Melanesia using sandalwood traders' pidgin. Rivers described it as a collection of errors that the natives only used talking with whites. Thus, he wrote, recalling Codrington, native truths submerged, and with them, the prospect of open colonial relations. The result was the bitter laughter of the oppressed, 'with the touch of contempt which comes from the daily sight of people confident in their wisdom yet persisting in gross mistakes'.³⁵ But the laughter was corrosive:

There is no more potent source of the lack of interest in life which is the bane of subject peoples than the knowledge that they are being ruled by men who do not understand them and apparently do not try to understand.³⁶

Rivers did not flatter his imagined reader by offering a complex science to add to his qualifications as an administrator; instead, he sought to shame him into recognising that his ignorance was a straightforward social failing, with fatal consequences.

Rivers published this critique of British colonial governance in 1917, the year in which he talked Sassoon through his shell-shock (Ch. 4). His analyses of military and colonial authority developed in parallel; each emphasized that authority worked counter-productively when it persisted in misunderstanding the point of view of its objects.

³⁵ WHR Rivers, 'The Government of Subject Peoples', in AC Seward (ed.) *Science and the Nation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1917), 302–327, at 309.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 310.

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The British Empire has been built up by character rather than by intelligence. The great success of this mode of growth in the past should not blind us to its insufficiency for the future. ... We can only hope to stand against our competitors if we supplement the character [with] a larger exercise of the intelligence[.]³⁷

For Rivers, intelligence was not a thing to be measured and compared, but an interaction concerned with meanings and options. If an administrator continued to presume that racial difference justified British domination of tropical peoples, then the anthropologist ought to dissuade him. Stated thus, the project seems self-evident. But even the book in which it was published illustrates that Rivers was attempting to hold his own against powerful currents, which converged from scientific as well as general opinion, in a main stream of complacent superiority regarding colonised peoples.

Rivers' was a voice from the edge of the scientific community. In 1917, the editor of the volume to which Rivers contributed 'The Government of Subject Peoples' presented British scientific research as a sustained demonstration of racial superiority, 'aptitude for scientific research' being 'unquestionably a characteristic of the British race.'³⁸ Thus the tenor of the volume was set against Rivers' exposé of how the assumption of racial superiority closed British minds to other cultures. Lord Moulton, who introduced the volume, seemed uneasy with Rivers' argument that the British administrator must learn to see his business from the native point of view. Moulton defended pure research in anti-relativist terms: 'The replies that [nature] gives to our questions are always truthful and will therefore in due time be recognised as consistent.'³⁹ Moulton may have been unwilling to acknowledge that science could illumine inconsistencies in cultural understanding that, to be recognised, required the British to answer *their subjects'* questions; at least that was the impression he created by subsequently alluding to each of the essays except Rivers'.

Colonel John Ainsworth exemplifies the attitudes against which Rivers argued. In 1921, as Chief Native Commissioner in the East African Protectorate, Ainsworth had conducted a forced labour program, evidence of his view that certain constitutional freedoms did not apply to colonised British subjects. Ainsworth's racial expectations and the decisive vigour of his 'character' were evident in the *Report on the Territory of New Guinea* that he

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 327.

³⁸ A. C. Seward, 'Preface', in *ibid.*, iv.

³⁹ Lord Moulton, 'Introduction', in *ibid.*, vii–viii.

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submitted to the Australian government. He described the middle and older generation of the indigenous people of New Guinea as ‘such a low order of humanity that nothing short of a miracle can possibly change them into normal humans.’⁴⁰ But the children were bright. He advised they should be educated lest they become like their parents, ‘listless, apathetic and practically dead to the world.’⁴¹ He observed evidence of what he expected (the inferiority of the natives), not the effects of what he overlooked as the natural order of things (their subjugation).

Rivers had interpreted the listlessness, apathy and morbidity of the Melanesian peoples differently. In his contribution to his collection of essays, *Depopulation in Melanesia*, Rivers argued that the underlying reason for Melanesian depopulation – the multiplier of such material ills as disease and inappropriate clothing – was psychological.⁴² Cultural subjugation had weakened the indigenes’ will to live, and as deaths by sorcery demonstrated, for many Melanesians a morbid state of mind was indeed fatal. Where Europeans diverted Melanesians’ efforts to obtain the blessings of the spirit world into wage labour in the interests of contemptuous foreign bosses; and where they violated the sacred links through which invisible powers were made to support society – in such places, Melanesians ceased breeding, succumbed to disease, and died of despair.⁴³ The contrast between Rivers and Ainsworth’s diagnoses was stark.

Equally significant was the contrast between Rivers’ intellectual status in his 1922 volume compared with his outsider status five years earlier within *Science and the Nation*. Debate within the Melanesian Mission generated the latter collection of essays; in it, Rivers partnered missionaries as they reflected on their own role in depopulation.⁴⁴ The Mission milieu afforded Rivers the opportunity to fully develop the practical implications of his social psychology, building on the premise that it was the object of intelligence not to celebrate racial superiority but to respond to cultural difference.

⁴⁰ John Ainsworth, *Report on the Territory of New Guinea*, 1924, 16. Cited in Rev. J. Burton, ‘The Australian Mandate in New Guinea’, in Persia Campbell, R. C. Mills, G. V. Portus, (eds.) *Studies in Australian Affairs* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1928), 218–240, at 227.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴² Rivers, ‘The Psychological Factor’.

⁴³ Rivers, ‘The Government of Subject Races’, 310.

⁴⁴ WJ Durrad, ‘The Depopulation of Melanesia’, in Rivers, *Depopulation*, 3–24, at 5. See also Hilliard, *God’s Gentlemen*, 95–96. Members of the Mission were aware that depopulation occurred amongst the communities to which they ministered – mainly but not only because the *Southern Cross* spread influenza.

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He also issued the challenge we noticed in Chapter Four. ‘It would be an interesting experiment’, he wrote,

to see how far it is possible [where the indigenous culture persisted vigorously] ... to maintain the old interests and make them the foundation in which to build a culture which would not conflict with the ethical and social ideals of the people who have come to be their rulers.⁴⁵

In a manner we will see (below) Elkin assume in criticising the Forrest River Mission, Rivers suggested that the missionaries should seek Melanesian cultural continuity first, and relegate evangelism to a later stage.

But Rivers’ social psychology for mission only offered practical guidance for extreme cases. On the one hand, missions were the medicine Rivers prescribed to treat the psychological malaise caused by colonisation. His researches suggested that Melanesians who adopted Christianity ‘with a whole-hearted enthusiasm’, thrived. ‘Here the numbers are increasing after an initial drop. Christianity and the occupations connected with it have given the people a new interest to replace that of their indigenous culture.’⁴⁶ On the other hand, Melanesians also flourished where

the people have so far been fierce and strong enough to withstand European influence. The people still believe themselves to be a match for the invader. Here the old zest and interest in life persist and the people are still vigorous and abundant.⁴⁷

In such situations, Rivers argued, ‘a way might possibly be found of assisting ... a [stone-age] people to derive some benefit from another culture’ Here was the optimum scene for the social anthropologist’s practical contribution. But Rivers offered no guidance for the majority of cases, which fell between these two examples.

He concluded with a collaborative principle for missionaries. He called on missions to take their altruistic motivation into the economic realm, but under the aegis of twentieth century new liberalism (as distinct from the *laissez-faire* commercialism prevalent during the earlier era of mission). Acknowledging that there were compelling reasons to keep separate

⁴⁵ Rivers, ‘The Psychological Factor’, 107, 96.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

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spiritual tutelage and economic incentives, he counter-argued that the problem of demoralisation was so urgent that missionaries must extend their lead into more worldly affairs. He cited the Papuan Industries Company, an initiative of Hubert Murray's Australian administration, which profited Papuans only, as a use of economics to return native 'zest in life'.⁴⁸ Missionaries ought to ensure that Melanesians' economic activities continued to perform their necessary, basically religious distribution of purpose between individuals and their societies, Rivers wrote. Thus his challenge extended to the administrator and industrialist: each should follow in his different way the direction established by the Melanesian Mission. Rivers generalised anthropological perspective and authority to advise the full gamut of relations between Europeans and primitive peoples.

Elkin attempts to apply a social psychological approach in Australia

Elkin met problems when he tried to translate Rivers' diagnosis to Australia. A hunter-gatherer society faced with a settler invasion lacked the central organization and protective carapace of the Melanesian village.⁴⁹ No peoples he encountered in the Kimberley retained the 'zest' and 'vigour' of the psychologically unconquered; yet nor did any community display a 'whole-hearted enthusiasm' for Christianity. Depopulation was general; old interests seemed mostly to have passed away, and Christian mission had not brought forth the vitality that obtained, for example, in Samoa.

By 1928, when he lived amongst and studied Aboriginal communities, the problem had concerned Elkin for several years. He had followed debates sparked by Rivers' work. He was familiar with the standard anthropological critique that 'missionary activity arbitrarily seeks to, and often succeeds in, extinguishing native culture. No integral element of native culture can be destroyed without involving the whole cultural complex.'⁵⁰ Thus Pitt-Rivers had written in a long-running war, 1923–24, with an Australian clergyman, Reverend John When in which the weapons were letters to the editor, headed 'Fatal Benevolence', many of which Elkin clipped and kept. The antagonists each cited Rivers in support of their position.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁴⁹ CD Rowley developed the idea that Aborigines required a 'protective carapace' to withstand the insistently, continuously disintegrative effects of settlement. See, for example, *The Remote Aborigines*, 11.

⁵⁰ Captain Pitt-Rivers to the Editor, *Herald*, 8 November 1924; EP, Box 106.

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When contrasted Pitt-Rivers' critical attitude with the constructive approach Rivers had taken. Pitt-Rivers was, When wrote,

an irresponsible tourist who can spend an occasional holiday here and there in the study of 'social anthropology' amid conditions of peace and safety which have been brought into existence largely by the presence and influence of Christian missions.⁵¹

When pointed out that if anthropology succeeded in discouraging missionaries, indigenous people would lose one buffer against the rapacity of capital, and perhaps their only alternative source of meaning once cash incentives had corroded traditional religious life. Like Rivers, Elkin sought to transcend When and Pitt-Rivers' poles of culturally eliminationist mission and segregationist anthropology.

Elkin discretely advocates acculturative mission

The six weeks Elkin spent, April to May 1928, conducting his fieldwork at the Forrest River Mission drew him into the Anglican Church's development of mission policy. Having been impressed by a lantern lecture the Mission superintendent, Rev. E. R. Gribble had given at St. John's Theological College in the early 1920s, and expecting to enjoy his stay at Forrest River, Elkin instead recoiled from it in anger. Shortly afterwards, he wrote his Report on Forrest River Mission to the Australian Board of Missions (ABM).⁵² His interaction with the Australian Board of Missions replayed the previous three decades' history of anthropology, in that he led a change from an individualist perspective to a social analysis and project.

Mission Superintendent Reverend Ernest Gribble aimed to 'save' each Aboriginal child by liberating them as young as three years old from their parents and their parents' culture.⁵³ Remote tens of thousands of kilometres from his supervising body, the ABM, he had no checks upon his power, and a hardened conscience that had come to condone the horsewhipping of Aborigines who hunted cattle on their own land.⁵⁴ Elkin wrote in a letter home to Sally,

⁵¹ Reverend John G. When to the Editor, *Herald*, 12 November 1924; EP, Box 106.

⁵² Elkin, 'Report on Forrest River Mission'.

⁵³ Wise, *Self-made Anthropologist*, 61.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

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Certainly I have been disillusioned about our [that is, Anglican] mission. ... I am pleased that I came, both for the anthropology and to get at the facts of this mission that is hated in the Kimberleys. I can also understand why anthropologists have run down missions especially just killing out the native culture without trying to understand it.⁵⁵

During a brief break from his residence at the Mission, Elkin met the Chairman of the ABM, Canon Needham, aboard ship. Needham encouraged Elkin to file an official report detailing his concerns. Although Elkin acted to some extent under Needham's authority, they differed over the object of mission to Aborigines. Needham, like Gribble, believed that missions should have sole responsibility for the education of 'the individual Aboriginal soul'.⁵⁶

Elkin envisaged something more far-reaching and difficult than enculturation, presumably by a kind of attrition, under church tutelage. Without explicitly arguing against the ABM's existing policy, Elkin presumed in his report that instead of aiming to convert individuals, the church ought to build up collective Aboriginal initiative. Within a matter-of-fact survey of the Mission, he foregrounded the Christian imperative to forego violence; less obviously, he advanced the social-anthropological principle that Europeans ought to support primitive authority.

Pragmatically, Elkin subordinated his ideas within a general, carefully observed survey of the mission. He supported the argument of a report filed by the Reverend Theodore Webb, who had recently acted as Superintendent while Gribble recuperated. Gribble had allowed the mission's agricultural enterprise to run down; the buildings constructed under his authority were indeed fire hazards; he was domineering with white staff; and – Elkin's addition to the list – his Christian teaching failed because he little understood Aboriginal culture. An example supported each point: a windmill lying on the ground, flammable building materials, and paraphrase of Gribble's manner towards his charges:

The superintendent announced through an interpreter that he would drive back with a stockwhip any mission man who went outside the compound to the old men's camp and that the bush men were to hunt back with anything they could, except spears, any such mission man. ...[This was] a weak resort to force.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Elkin to Sally, (March 1928?) cited in *ibid.*, 65.

⁵⁶ JS Needham *Report on the Aborigines of Australia* (Sydney: Australian Board of Missions, c. 1924), 9.

⁵⁷ Elkin, 'Report on Forrest River Mission'.

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But Elkin's criticism went beyond the questions of Gribble's policy and leadership, to the Board's responsibility adequately to fund the Mission's telegraph, and indeed its staff, 'especially if they must buy their own blankets'. He urged that the Board must resolve the question of irrigation for mission agriculture. Elkin had some experience in the practical side of church affairs, having had responsibility for several parishes from 1919 to 1924. The report's authority derived in part from its broad, concrete, practical purview.

Yet it was also the work of a professional anthropologist. Without the particular advantages Elkin accrued from fieldwork, his report would have lacked critical penetration. His knowledge of Aboriginal family life elsewhere in the Kimberleys, for instance, afforded a poignant vignette. During the day, Gribble separated married couples into men and women's huts. As soon as children were mobile they were taken from their parents and housed in their own quarters. Men, women, and children ate separately. But, Elkin protested, family life is 'a trait which is quite strong in the blacks. ... This giving up of children means a lot to the blacks. They are very fond of them and they know that [separated] the child becomes a complete outsider to tribal culture.'⁵⁸ Elsewhere, the families 'love to have their meal together at a little fire at their camp. ... [E]ven when the family receives the food already cooked, they warm it again on their own family campfire.' Domestic detail attested to Aborigines' tendency to translate mission ways into a hybrid culture.

As important as Elkin's knowledge of the contact situation was the political frame within which he utilised it. Like Gribble, he believed that a missionary ought to change aspects of Aboriginal culture to fit the white law. Homicide – of white settlers certainly, but also of fellow aborigines – had better cease, and Elkin cited the continuing violence amongst Aborigines in the Forrest River district as evidence of Gribble's failure to affect his charges.⁵⁹ Elkin supported the rule of settler law over Aborigines as firmly as did Gribble.

Yet, Gribble argued that Elkin had lost his bearings in his own society. 'The Anthropologist', Gribble inveighed,

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

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waxes eloquent over the Aboriginal marriage laws. There is nothing to advocate in these laws, that is from the point of view of the female. The wife is a slave pure and simple. The husband has the power of life and death over his wife. For the most trivial offence he can slay her and get away with it. I have known many such cases.⁶⁰

In fact, Elkin had simply observed that there was no biological reason to depart from traditional marriage laws and had defended domestic routine and intimacy against Gribble's regimentation of family life. Elkin never argued that settler authority should respect the Aboriginal rights of husbands over wives. By the time Gribble was equipped to criticise the Report, Elkin had published his view that settler society could best champion the rights of Aboriginal women through the gradual effect of its own example, and by substituting sacred objects for women in ceremonial and social exchanges.⁶¹ Here again, as with the question of homicide, Elkin upheld core settler laws and values. But he insisted that in other areas, Aboriginal law was compatible with settler ways, and missionaries ought to respect it.

This was the nub of the conflict: Elkin opposed Gribble on the question of whether Aboriginal cultural authority – some norms of which both clerics rejected – ought to continue at all. If so, then should not Missionaries relinquish the field to secular institutions? This was what Genders had proposed, and Neville's policy tended in that direction; Elkin had supported both. He confided to Sally his uncertainty about Christian mission to Aborigines:

I regard the mission as an expression of failure. It either means that Gribble doesn't know how to run a mission, or that the Christian religion can be of no use to the black. I think there may be some truth in the latter.⁶²

Elkin hoped the report would help the Church at least do less harm, even if it could not do much good.

Elkin ascribed a modest goal to the Mission.

If a change of some of the blacks' customs is to be brought about without a wholesale wiping out of their own culture, which is the present policy, it must be done through the older men and for this, a knowledge of the language is necessary.⁶³

⁶⁰ Gribble to the ABM, 23 February 1940, EP, Box 106.

⁶¹ AP Elkin, *Understanding the Australian Aborigine* (Morpeth, The St. John's College Press, 1931), 21–22.

⁶² Elkin to Sally, 1928, cited in Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 64.

⁶³ Elkin, 'Report on Forrest River Mission'.

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His phrase ‘a change of some of the blacks’ customs’ is noteworthy. Neville, but not Needham, might have stated it thus. Elkin offered no supporting argument for his recommendation of this unlikely reduction of the Mission’s aim. Instead, he proceeded briskly to practical matters: no member of the white staff had more than a couple of words of the local language; nor any ‘real knowledge of the customs.’ He claimed that he had observed the mission ‘from many angles’, several of them Aborigines’ points of view – those of Mission residents, ‘bush blacks’ camped nearby, and occasional visitors.⁶⁴ Elkin stressed that some facility with their language was a precondition for adequate relations with Aborigines. He attempted rudimentary exchanges in Aboriginal languages, and entertained his informants by grammatical induction to phrases the Aborigines would never use: ‘he spears, she spears’. It was convenient that only he within the Anglican Church could claim any degree of proficiency in Aboriginal languages.⁶⁵ He focused on the practical contest between knowledge and ignorance.

Less conspicuously, but more importantly, he also urged a new mission method. Instead of converting ‘each individual Aboriginal soul’, the mission was to change ‘some of the blacks’ customs ... through the older men.’ Gribble divided the indigenes, so that they perpetrated colonial violence upon one another. Elkin proposed that – even in the absence of recognisable indigenous political organization – the coloniser should work through an integrative indigenous authority.

Moreover, Elkin’s version of Aboriginal authority was strictly traditional. James Noble was Elkin’s companion and guide during his stay at Forrest River.⁶⁶ Noble was an Aborigine, a Cape York man, and a Christian member of Gribble’s staff. But he did not speak the local language. Other observers, including Bishop White, promoted Noble’s Cape York heritage as a qualification for him to act as a go-between.⁶⁷ By contrast, Elkin made no mention of Noble in his survey of the Mission. He subsumed the fact of an Aborigine

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ Elkin enlisted the assistance of Anglican Reverend Arthur Capell to further study Aboriginal languages. Geoffrey Gray in conversation with me pointed out that Elkin spent no longer than six weeks amongst the speakers of any one language, so his knowledge was scant. Elkin may have had as little knowledge of the language as Radcliffe-Brown, who freely admitted his inability to communicate effectively in any Aboriginal tongue.

⁶⁶ Wise, *Self-Made Anthropologist*, 64–65.

⁶⁷ Gilbert White, *Round About the Torres Straits: A Record of Australian Church Missions* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1925), 13.

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modelling Christian faith and customs to his fellow Indigenous under the criticism that Mission staff in general had no knowledge of the language, and ‘no real knowledge of the customs’ of the Mission blacks. Later, Elkin emphasized that the ‘native teacher ... should be a person of status within his own community and not an agent of something superior or foreign.’⁶⁸

This sensitivity to collective status recalled Rivers’ concern with the problem of transference. By preferring the elders’ authority to Noble’s, Elkin supported an idea of Aboriginality as consciously continuous with its own past, and retaining its distinctive arrangement of reverence, authority, and sanction. Thus began Elkin’s campaign against what he would later call ‘negative policy’ towards Aborigines.

Needham had proposed that the Church should complete the deracination of Aborigines, so that each ‘individual soul’ could rise. But Needham’s Board voted to reward Elkin with ten pounds for the Report without seeming to notice that he had recommended a radical policy departure. Needham duly removed Gribble – Elkin had provided the independent validation of what he had probably already decided to do – and in 1929 sent his replacement, the Reverend J. Hardingham, for a week-long stay with the Elkins at Morpeth House.⁶⁹ Doubtless, Elkin instructed him in the acculturative approach that, early in 1930, he advocated in an article on ‘Missionary Methods’.⁷⁰

The significance of all this lies not in any influence Elkin may have had upon the ABM at this stage, but in Elkin’s dawning self-perception as an agent of a change in opinion and policy. After all, the only other person formally engaged to prepare Australian colonial staff was the Professor of Anthropology. In instructing Hardingham, Elkin was drawing the faint beginning of a line of pedagogy that would broaden from the mid-1930s (Chs 8, 9). Elkin’s career as a policy advisor also dates from the Forrest River Report. His first success in changing the policy of an institution responsible for culture contact was within missionary

⁶⁸ AP Elkin, ‘Education of Native Races in Pacific Countries: Report of a Conference’, *Oceania* 7 (2), December 1936, 145–168, at 166.

⁶⁹ Bishop of Newcastle to Elkin 5 August 1929: Withycombe was to spend a day with Elkin for training in missionary methods; Hardington was to replace Gribble after spending almost a week at Morpeth also studying with Elkin. EP 1/12/95.

⁷⁰ AP Elkin, ‘Anthropology and Missionary Methods’, *Morpeth Review* II (1), March 1930, 34–37.

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circles. In 1933, the National Missionary Council formally incorporated his 'positive policy' for Aboriginal affairs.⁷¹

Elkin's singularity – and equivocation – as a proponent of acculturation

In his 'Practical Value' series in 1929, however, Elkin hedged his bets. In the articles oriented towards secular authority he laid aside the 'psychological factor' as probably unrealistic. But in the last of the series of five articles he recommended it to missionaries.

Acculturation had few supporters in the Australian churches. As we have seen, neither Needham nor Gribble entertained the acculturative ideal. Gilbert White, Bishop of Carpentaria, was the Church's outstanding critic of the white Australia policy, and an advocate of Aboriginal advance, but neither did he see a role for traditional Aboriginal beliefs and customs.⁷² Only the Presbyterian Reverend J. R. B. Love pursued a Christian approach to an acculturative policy, in his mission to the Worora people, 'Kunmunya', at Port George on the mid-west Kimberley coast.⁷³ Elkin visited Kunmunya six weeks after Forrest River.

Love's work revived Elkin's faith in Christian Mission, but afterwards he was reluctant to generalise from this success. Worora country was remote. Few peoples had as unadulterated an experience of settler society. Further, Love himself was exceptional: a talented linguist and something of a saint.⁷⁴ Yet by Love's own account, Christian example was affecting even the Worora only slowly. He owned that his Mission's successes, such as they were, depended upon its isolation, which protected it from the proliferation of half-castes that he believed confused traditional life elsewhere.⁷⁵ Love's example was inspiring as an ideal, but it did not provide answers to the problems of disintegrating Aboriginal culture and depopulation.

⁷¹ AP Elkin, *Citizenship for the Aborigine: A National Aboriginal Policy* (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Co., 1944), 15.

⁷² On enculturative missionary methods see White, *Round About the Torres Straits*, 6–7 and 13–17. By way of contrast, White applauded acculturative tendencies in the Mission to New Guinea, at 83–86. For the Asian character of the Diocese of Carpentaria, see JWC Wand, Lord Bishop of London, *White of Carpentaria* (London: Skeffington and Son, c. 1950), 28–29; and Wand glosses White's enculturative bent at 91.

⁷³ Mary Durack, *The Rock and the Sand* (London: Constable, 1969), 235 and ff. From Durack's account, it seems that Roman Catholic missions were aesthetically syncretic, but not substantially acculturative. From his arrival in Broome in 1931, Father Ernest Worms initiated an acculturative approach to Catholic mission.

⁷⁴ Love's contributions to the policy debate was close to Elkin's ideal goal of very gradual acculturation working itself out from continuing traditions. See JRB Love, *Stone-Age Bushmen of Today: Life and Adventure among a Tribe of Savages in North-western Australia* (London: Blackie & Son, 1936).

⁷⁵ *Idem*, 'What the Missions are Doing', in *Stead's Review* 1 October 1930, 15.

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After this string of negatives, we may ask: How likely was it that acculturation would succeed as missionary policy? Ought it to have been attempted regardless of its chance of success, simply because it was morally preferable to the annihilation of Aboriginal culture? Much was at stake: Pitt-Rivers argued that failed attempts at acculturation of primitive peoples hastened their depopulation.

Elkin responded to this unpromising situation by trying to constrain missionaries' proselytising zeal so that they might learn to work from Aborigines' traditional reverence for the spiritual dimension to life. Recalling Rivers, he also argued that missions were better suited than secular alternatives to assist Aborigines' adjustment to settler society and economy.

Missions with their many-sided activities – spiritual, moral, educational and technical – should be able pre-eminently to help a race to rise in the cultural scale, and also should be the best vanguard of the white races in their contact with coloured peoples. ... [They should be the least inclined] to undervalue the religious sanction and sacramental outlook of the primitive races, [which remain] essential for the preservation of all that is of value in native life and custom.⁷⁶

This had a more confident ring than its substance justified. Missions '*should* be able' to uplift the race; to date they had not. They *should* be an ideal vanguard; too often, as at Forrest River, they were a forward position for the settler attack on traditional culture.⁷⁷ He implied that their goal was preservation of continuity in Aboriginal culture: he expected every missionary to be also an anthropologist.⁷⁸

Conversely, he expected that an anthropologist would understand that religion was the core function of traditional Aboriginal life. A social anthropologist ought always to sustain, extend, and adapt existing spiritual practices. Elkin believed that missions were necessary because only they provided a point of contact – however tenuous – between modernity and primitive spiritual reality, which he believed was embodied in Aboriginal elders. Whatever the distance between Christianity and the Dreaming, faith in the reality of the unseen could provide common ground on which spiritual leaders could meet.

⁷⁶ AP Elkin, 'Anthropology and Missionary Methods', *Morpeth Review* II, March 1930, 36–37.

⁷⁷ Still in 1934, Elkin left open the possibility that the best missionary method, unfortunately in his view, may be consciously to 'disintegrate' traditional culture through compulsion to adopt ways of life that would support assimilation into industrial society. For his transitive use of that verb, see 'Missionary Policy', 34, 36.

⁷⁸ For his explicit call for 'Mission-Anthropologists', see *ibid.*, 42.

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Crucial though collaboration between anthropologist and missionary was, Elkin argued that religion could not suffice. Satisfactory answers to the problems of depopulation and cultural disintegration would only come through more extensive partnerships, as Rivers had suggested. Again like Rivers, from 1931, Elkin turned to the Papuan administration for imperfect but relatively enlightened colonial precedent (Ch. 8).

In 1928-29, Elkin believed that the main problem in culture contact was ignorance.⁷⁹ Settler ignorance undermined Aboriginal morale. Another set of problems, which Elkin was slower to explicate except as it applied within Christian missions, were those Rivers associated with 'transference'. Aborigines who sought to assimilate individually into settler society did not understand the psychological precariousness of their situation; and Aborigines who sought to maintain their traditional culture did not see at what points it could be reconciled with the settler culture. These were some of the 'psychological factors' that Elkin hoped social anthropology would illumine. As we have seen, Elkin drew inspiration for this project from Rivers' Melanesian work. But the Melanesians still owned their land; the Aborigines, through what in 1996 the Federal Court of Australia ruled 'a legal fiction', did not.

'Good intentions' and dispossession

Hindsight highlights two questions concerning Elkin's psychological perspective upon the Australian settler-colonial context.⁸⁰ What was the relation between indigenous psychology and land use? What indigenous authority ideal could assist adaptation to the colonial situation? In 1929, Elkin indicated his approach to each of these issues when he recounted the story of an anthropologist's success in Africa.⁸¹ The story was his main illustration of the practical value of social anthropology.⁸² Elkin retold how Captain Rattray, a student of Marett's, discovered the cause of the Ashanti people's dismay when a British Administrator had attempted to take from them a 'golden stool'. 'He learnt that they believed that their soul

⁷⁹ Elkin, 'The Urgency of Anthropological Work', undated address, in 1929 sermon notebook p. 4, EP 5/3/3. Emphasis in the original.

⁸⁰ We resume this line of analysis in Ch. 9, but from the perspective of pure as well as applied anthropology as they developed from the early 1930s.

⁸¹ Elkin, 'Social Anthropology', 45-46.

⁸² It followed the definitional introduction in the fourth article of the 'Practical Value' series, 'Social Anthropology'.

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– the soul of the people as a whole – reposed in this particular stool’, Elkin wrote.⁸³ The current administrator guaranteed the safety of the stool, and in gratitude ‘the women made a replica of it in silver and sent it as a gift to ... Princess Mary.’⁸⁴ Peace ensued.

The moral Elkin drew from the story of the golden stool overlooked the material basis of political conflict. ‘Problems like this arise whenever there is a clash of “black” and “white”, although the white man is seldom aware that he has raised an insoluble problem *in the mind* of the black man’ he wrote – as if the problem was only mental.⁸⁵ Returning to African precedent later in the article, he similarly evaded the question of the natives’ natural or legal rights in land: ‘the progress of the white race in this continent *implies* the taking away of certain African lands by the white farmer or miner.’⁸⁶ When colonisers compensated Africans by providing them with land elsewhere, cultural problems arose, Elkin wrote. He did not address material questions, such as whether the substituted land was equally productive, or concerning complications in tribal territorial arrangements. Native *morality* suffered because ‘the African does not seem to be able to carry his religion with him when he leaves his ancestral soil’. Again, his analysis remained on the cultural and mental plane.

Turning to Australia, Elkin argued that social anthropology could be of practical value by identifying the ‘sacred sites’ that were necessary for Aborigines’ spiritual health.⁸⁷ When these were desecrated, the Aborigine suffered ‘both from psychological and material points of view’: ‘continuity with the past has, in this particular, been broken’; and, ‘the maintenance of this source of his food supply will, to say the least, be doubtful.’ As a consequence, ‘[t]he outlook appears to him to be very dark ... and so he hangs round the “white”, accepting the latter’s food, but no longer taking that interest in life which is essential to his well-being.’ By identifying these sites, preserving them, and securing the guardians’ visiting and ceremonial rites, anthropologists could lead settlers in ‘an important gesture of understanding, and should really be doing something to maintain the natives’ interest in life.’⁸⁸ In Riversian vein, Elkin considered a ‘gesture of understanding’ from settler authority to be of vital importance to Aborigines.

⁸³ Elkin, ‘Social Anthropology’, 45.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* Emphasis mine.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 47. Emphasis mine.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 47

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The priority Elkin gave to symbolism and dialogue was politically convenient. He added that ‘this would not imply reserving square miles of country in each case.’⁸⁹ Elkin supposed that somehow an ongoing connection with sacred sites, ‘usually only a few square yards in area’, could sustain Aborigines’ worldview, even when the surrounding square miles were not protected.

He argued that the attempt permanently to protect Aborigines from ‘higher’ civilization was futile. He deplored any attempt to preserve indigenous peoples as ‘museum species’. Societies must interact and influence one another. ‘The clash and modifications of culture arising from missionary, colonising and pioneering effort cannot be prevented by the fiat of any power, let alone of Science’, he wrote.⁹⁰ The anthropologist was justified in objecting to settlers’ influence upon Aborigines only when his special knowledge revealed that ‘the good intentions of the white man will not be realised.’⁹¹ That is, the anthropologist could improve the way missionaries, government officials, and responsible employers attempted to ‘raise’ Aborigines. But what was the anthropologist’s role in relation to the consequences of white man’s competition with Aborigines for complete possession of the land?

Concerning the story of the golden stool, scholars have argued that it was ‘disingenuous or naïve’ to suggest (as Elkin did) that the initial conflict was a matter of misunderstanding.⁹² More probably, the first administrator chose to act with flagrant disregard for natives’ sentiment precisely in order to break their will and assert his control over their land. If this was so, Rattray was not so much the agent of a conceptual breakthrough, as the instrument of a second-wave mode of governance, predicated upon sufficient domination of the colonised peoples. Similarly, Elkin’s 1929 account of the practical value of social anthropology – as applied to Aborigines as well as Africans – may now seem both naïve and disingenuous. He aligned himself with ‘white man’s good intentions’, while providing a rationale for settlers to continue and consolidate their usurpation of the sources of Aborigines’ subsistence. In his treatments of African and Australian societies’ basis in land, Elkin’s psychological emphasis overlaid his Idealist

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Elkin, ‘Social Anthropology’, 49.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁹² Adam Kuper, *Anthropology and Anthropologists: The Modern British School* (London: Routledge, 1983 (1973) 3rd ed.), 102–103.

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project. He abstracted conflict over material resources onto a purely psychological, moral, and symbolic plane.

Eventually, Elkin clearly stated his position concerning Aborigine's relation with their land. 'He is living in a country which is no longer his', he wrote early in 1932.⁹³ By 1934, his tone had strengthened: 'Australia was their country. We have taken it. Therefore, we owe them some return unless we are content to be merely conquering thieves.'⁹⁴ Settler Australians owed to Aborigines who were still able to live traditionally 'a livelihood, justice, the opportunity to maintain and develop their social life, and a real share in the land which is their spiritual home as well as the source of their economic necessities.'⁹⁵ 'A share in the land' was a long way from the exclusive and inalienable title that other reformers claimed for Aborigines (Ch. 9): but Elkin also argued that it was in Aborigines' own interests to overcome their dependence upon 'the integrity of particular spots on the earth's surface.'⁹⁶ In this more prominent phase of his publicity, Elkin still chose not to construe ownership of land as the fundamental issue, but he stated unequivocally that it was a factor with which settler Australians must reckon.

Psychological autonomy

Elkin worked for an open-ended psychological interaction such as Rivers urged. He hoped that an emphasis upon religious continuity would mean that whatever legal, political, or economic settlement Aborigines were able to achieve in their various localities would occur through, and have the support of, traditional and collectively meaningful Aboriginal authority. His fundamental concern was that Aborigines were assisted to renovate and develop their authority ideal, and thus eventually to achieve cultural continuity compatible with the instrumental relation with land characteristic of industrial capitalism. This returns us to the second fundamental issue in colonial relations: in the absence of any institutions of political leadership, what authority ideal was to guide or embody Aborigines' adaptation to the colonial situation?

⁹³ Elkin, 'Cultural and Racial Clash', 38

⁹⁴ AP Elkin, 'The Aborigines, Our National Responsibility' in *Australian Quarterly*, 23, 14 September, 1934, 52-60, at 52.

⁹⁵ AP Elkin, 'Anthropology and the Future of the Australian Aborigines', *Oceania* V (1), September 1934, 1-18, at 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

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In typifying social anthropology, Elkin indicated that Aborigines' religious institutions could provide the basis for their independence as a polity (or polities). This argument publicized and extended the position he had already assumed within the Anglican Church: that Aboriginal elders ought to be treated as cultural authorities and partners in culture change. This principle was Elkin's point of departure from Anglican missiological orthodoxy as typified by Edwin Smith, his source for examples of applied social anthropology, including the story of Rattray's success amongst the Ashanti.

Edwin Smith was a missionary and the son of a missionary. He named one of his books *The Golden Stool*, and began it with a long retelling of the story of the Ashanti's journey from conflict to voluntary fealty.⁹⁷ The incident put a liberal face upon Smith's spiritual agenda. He argued for a worldwide British audience that '[a]s a people we simply cannot afford to neglect Africa.'⁹⁸ The commercial opportunity cost would be too great; and on the spiritual plane, 'African paganism is doomed to decay and extinction.'⁹⁹ For the African, Smith averred, religion devolved to a choice between Islam and Christianity. He pursued the same goal as his father: 'To him, as to myself, the object of the missionary work of the church is to win for Jesus Christ the moral supremacy of the world.'¹⁰⁰ Elkin shared with Smith the plea from enlightened self-interest, and the attempt to justify spiritually the seizure of indigenous peoples' lands. But concerning Indigenes' spiritual independence, within the Australian Anglican church Elkin exerted quite the opposite influence from Smith's.

Addressing missionaries specifically, Elkin insisted that the Aborigines must adapt their culture 'from within', and via the traditional authorities.¹⁰¹ In other words, they must pursue their own authority ideal. He urged missionaries to seek to support Aboriginal religious leaders as partners in cultural adjustment, and not to convert individuals. Smith aspired to 'moral supremacy'. In contrast, Elkin emphasised social anthropology as a means

⁹⁷ Edwin W. Smith, *The Golden Stool: Some Aspects of the Conflict of Cultures in Modern Africa* (London: Holborn, 1926), 1–60.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 111.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

¹⁰¹ Elkin, 'Missionary Methods', 37.

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to sustain the culture of the colonised people, overcome the problem of transference, and so assist Aborigines to regain psychological independence.¹⁰²

In 1929 what he considered (and assumed) to be the limits of realism, Elkin took small steps towards a psychological strategy that fitted with Rivers' theory of colonial transference. He positioned anthropologists as the creators of a symbolic space wherein Aborigines could confront their situation on their own terms. He envisioned a relationship, predicated upon the complete political and material defeat of Aboriginal society, which *might* facilitate Aborigines' renaissance through a consensual mode of politics. Specifically, he hoped to help win for Aborigines the understanding and respect of settler public opinion; religious freedom; a viable livelihood; shared title in small portions of land centred on sacred sites; and other, unspecified rights in land consistent with natural justice.

Conclusion and prospect

In 1929, Elkin limited his strong statements about Aboriginal agency to a specifically and officially Christian audience – missionaries. This reflected the Christian influence upon his key anthropological ideas and exemplars, especially the practical example of Rivers. Despite this line of thinking, as we saw in the previous two chapters, Elkin built his general and secular treatment of social anthropology upon a racialist foundation, which concreted over the imperative to respect the Aboriginal authority ideal. This inconsistency reflected his judgment that miscegenation and *enculturative* assimilation might (regrettably, from his point of view) prove the best way forward for most if not all Aborigines.

But we can distinguish what Elkin was saying in 1929 from where he was looking. An extended metaphor may convey the situation most concisely. He climbed the mountain of physical anthropology and from its summit he could survey racial perspectives upon Australia's colonial problem. However, dissatisfied, he then descended down the far side, if you will and, as yet out of sight of the general public, forged a path through church country, using anthropological tools, to a different look-out. Thence, he sought to find a way that all Australians could follow towards the persistence of Aboriginal cultures within settler Australian society.

¹⁰² But see also Elkin, 'Christian Ritual I', 55.

6. Christian mission

We will study in Chapter Eight his call to the general public to undertake that journey. First, in order to understand the confidence with which, from 1931, he pursued what he still considered to be the unlikely outcome of acculturative assimilation, in the next chapter we will explore his recovery of faith in the religious foundation of free will and social psychology.