



# ENCOUNTERS WITH INDIGENEITY

Writing About Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Peoples

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Aboriginal  
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## Foreword

### *Some contexts of Jeremy Beckett*

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Because of Jeremy Beckett's former membership of a British Communist youth organisation, the Australian government refused him permission to do fieldwork in Highland New Guinea in 1956. In turning to western New South Wales, in 1956–57, Jeremy could enjoy the counsel of others — mainly students of AP Elkin at the University of Sydney — who were then breaking from 'salvage' anthropology's preoccupation with the least colonised and most 'classical' non-Western societies to write an applied sociology of race relations. However, what eventually set Jeremy apart from such students of the Australian temperate zone as Diane Barwick, James Bell, Malcolm Calley, Ruth Fink, Fay Gale, Judy Inglis and Marie Reay is that after observing colonial relationships in the landlocked, arid, interior of New South Wales he then turned to the Torres Strait (where the music, the dancing and the canoe trips 'met my hunger for the exotic.') (Beckett 2005, p. 85).<sup>1</sup> Both far western New South Wales and the Torres Strait came under effective colonial authorities in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the physical environments and cultural traditions that were thus brought into contact with the British–Australian economy and polity were as different as any that we know of among the colonised peoples of Australia. Few anthropologists working in Australia have cast their net so wide (though the diverse field sites of Ronald and Catherine Berndt — Wiradjuri, Ngarrindjeri, Western Desert, Arnhem Land — come to mind).

Jeremy's interest in two very different parts of Australia is well represented in this collection of essays. However, it is a curious feature of his work that Jeremy has rarely made explicit what he sees as the differences and similarities between his two field sites. In a 1994 reflection on the Murray Island land case (that had culminated in the High Court of Australia's Mabo judgment in June 1992), Jeremy cautioned that the differences between the precolonial social organisation of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are 'not all that striking'. 'Both societies were organised in terms of kinship relations, and were further



differentiated in terms of age and gender'; both lacked hereditary chiefs, and the power of senior men was acquired and expressed in their 'leadership in certain religious cults, membership of which was hereditary' (see Chapter 6, p. 129).

What did differentiate the Aborigines of far western New South Wales from the islanders of the Torres Strait was colonial authority's political legacy. Jeremy is recorded as saying in 1964 (shortly after he had been awarded a PhD for his Torres Strait thesis) that, in contrast with Maori, American Indians and Torres Strait Islanders, the Aborigines he had met were remarkably lacking in political organisation.

Where most people, for example the Torres Strait Islanders, had succeeded in organising themselves so as to provide some sort of counter-pressure to government influence and government policy, some kind of feedback so that the government is forced to find out exactly what the reactions to its policies are, the Aborigines, for most of the history of this country, have been a silent and apparently un-reacting mass of passive objects of various sorts of government policies.<sup>2</sup> (in Sharp and Tatz 1966, p. 360)

In 1965, when reporting how one of his friends ('the Chief') at Murrin Bridge had fared since 1957, he ventured another comparison. Surprised that the unusually entrepreneurial Chief had not, evidently, prospered in material terms, he remarked:

Re-entering the Chief's home, I was forcibly reminded just how roughly most Aborigines live. In the interim I had lived with Torres Strait Islanders who were better provided with material things on smaller incomes. They had adopted the European virtues of cleanliness and the 'decent home'. Few Torres Straits homes lack a kerosene pressure lamp; here were Aborigines earning three and four times the money with no more than a hurricane lamp, and that often out of service. (Beckett 2005 [1965], p. 102)

Jeremy had needed the permission of the New South Wales Aborigines' Welfare Board to work at Murrin Bridge in 1956. The sympathetic interest of AP Elkin — whose research students were answering questions about 'assimilation' in which the New South Wales authorities had a practical concern — got him through the settlement gate. When he sought the permission of Queensland's Director of Native Affairs to work in the Torres Strait, he found the Queensland government 'proud of Torres Strait'. As Jeremy's subsequent research shows, the practices of the London Missionary Society (LMS), continued by the Queensland government, constituted forms of local native authority — civic and ecclesiastical — that resembled the 'indirect rule' of Britain's African colonies and Fiji.<sup>3</sup> Councils advised the State government, settled internal disputes, and acted as channels of communication between Islanders and government and as 'agents for containing discontent'

(see Chapter 8, p. 169). As Jeremy described the result in 1965, while ‘things were carefully controlled from above’, the Islanders enjoyed ‘a substantial degree of local autonomy’. When Jeremy sought permission to work among them, the Queensland officials consulted the Islander local government heads; they ‘agreed to my coming’ (Beckett 2005, pp. 94–5).

Paralleling these civic structures in the Strait was an ecclesiastical apparatus. In studies included in this book, Jeremy shows how seriously (and competitively) the Islanders, converted by the LMS in the 1870s and 1880s, were taking parish affairs and the offices of the Anglican Church in the 1960s. By the time of the Islanders’ victory in the High Court in 1992, Torres Strait Islanders had for more than a century been schooled — by delegated authority in specially designed state and church fora — in ‘how to talk to white people’. Notwithstanding that Eddie Mabo was at odds with the Straits’ more Christian and suborned Islanders, his High Court litigation evinced faith in the British common law. Such confidence bespeaks the background political culture described by Jeremy.

In contrast, in the pastoral society of western New South Wales in the 1950s, ‘bridges’ (Jeremy’s term in his 1958 thesis) between black and white society had been few. Aborigines were ‘vitaly involved in’ that social order as labourers, ‘while yet having few encounters with the white population’. Jeremy summed up the racial stand-off: ‘Given the low regard in which the aborigine is held, it is a rare white who will go out of his way to make contact. The Aborigines, for their part, whether out of shyness or lack of inclination, are scarcely more energetic in seeking out white society’ (Beckett 2005 [1958], p. 143). Jeremy saw this social distance as the outcome of two phases in the adaptation of the region’s Aborigines. In the first phase, they had camped on pastoral properties, as employees, and ‘they took as their model the nineteenth century pastoral workers, whose way of life presented many parallels to their own’ (Beckett 1988, p. 117). This adaptation had afforded much autonomy, albeit in material poverty. In the second phase, with the division of large pastoral holdings into smaller units, the Aborigines of the region came under the management of government. Rationing by police or by government ‘mission’ managers characterised a more supervised life, a transition accelerated by the depressed labour market of the Great Depression (Beckett 2005 [1958], p. 46). When Jeremy gives us George Dutton’s life story, both adaptive phases are brought into view: the difference between the self-managed working life that had formed drover George and the more supervised life of his descendants had become a gulf of incomprehension and little respect between generations. Dutton was glad to find Jeremy curious about his Law-filled drover’s life. However, we should be clear about what made his friendship such a gift to Jeremy’s field work. Although anthropology had been developing the ‘life-

cycle' of a typical individual as a frame for the study of a culture, Jeremy has since made clear that his choice of the individual life as an analytical frame was a move away from anthropology and into history. 'It made no sense to interpret my research in the framework of a life cycle; people's lives, far from being a repetition of previous generations, were marked by radical changes' (Beckett 2005, p. 95). Jeremy's gracefully written biographical essay helped to define 'Aboriginal History' when a journal of that name became possible in 1977.

It has been Jeremy's fate and fortune to be compelled to consider the relative significance of 'culture' and 'history' in explaining the Indigenous diversity — within Australia — that is evident in this book. It is this pressure and opportunity to compare colonial theatres, within the one nation-state, that has made him a singularly historical anthropologist. Each in their own way, the cultural formations of western New South Wales and the Torres Strait illustrate Anthony Hopkins' advice that students of colonial relations should attend to the shared values that settler societies and some indigenous elites held in common. 'These values can be considered, in the language of today, as marking the emergence of a "global civil society", albeit one that was largely a projection of Britain overseas' (Hopkins 1999, p. 235). Let me build on Hopkins by saying: that, in Australia, more than one 'Britain' has been projected; that those so affected are not necessarily or obviously 'elites'; and that the forms of their 'civility' included (in the western New South Wales case) insisting on their civil right to consume alcohol to excess (Beckett 1964).<sup>4</sup> To risk caricature: Jeremy's field work had shown by the late 1960s how British-Australian cultures formed a tropical Barchester in the Torres Strait and Aboriginal larrikinism in western New South Wales.

Anthropology has always been a comparative discipline and therefore has an active sense of the commonalities and differences of the global human. Jeremy came to anthropology in London, a capital of empire where a practitioner of that discipline, under the stimulus of forced and voluntary imperial disintegration in the 1950s, could find that the study of the non-West was becoming a concern for the global dynamics of decolonisation. Thus we see Jeremy, in 1958, citing a study of 'town-natives' in French Equatorial Africa by Georges Balandier to suggest that the drinking he observed in western New South Wales was a means to demonstrate *evolué* status (Beckett, p. 130). His work has come out of an international literature — sometimes reaching for sociological models of the micro-political (Simmel, Goffman), other times comparing Australia, as a settler colony, with other colonies from which the colonists will never withdraw. He is one of the few to have applied 'mode of production' theory in Australian studies, describing the incorporation and the

autonomy of Torres Strait Island peoples in terms that (here, within this book) complement his congregation-centred account.

By the late 1960s, however, Jeremy was wondering whether anthropological research could continue by way of ‘community studies, until we had worked out how to conceptualise the system that encapsulated them’ (Beckett 2005 [1958]). The work of Eric Wolf showed one way that could be done, and since the 1980s, Jeremy has found Latin American studies fruitful, particularly on the topic of the personal and collective memories of colonised people.

The more one considers Jeremy as an anthropologist, the clearer it becomes that he is a global historian. Like Charles Rowley (who studied Papua New Guinea before turning to Australia in the 1960s) and William Stanner (who wrote on decolonising east Africa and the South West Pacific before returning to Northern Territory studies in the 1950s), Jeremy has written about Australia within an increasing awareness of global colonial situations. Fifteen years ago, Anthony Hopkins challenged writers on Australian history to give up ‘the tradition of arranging history so that it fits within national borders’ (1999, p. 243). While congratulating British Dominion historiography for overcoming imperial blindness and recognising the place of Indigenous people in each Dominion’s history, Hopkins complained in 1999 that:

even the best of recent studies deal with these events entirely within a national framework, thereby conveying the impression that they are unique. Consequently, Maoris, Aborigines, Indians and others remain subordinated to a historical tradition that purports to emancipate them. An understanding of the imperial context would remove this false sense of isolation, open new possibilities for comparative studies of both settler communities and indigenous peoples, and underline the widespread and growing significance of non-national affiliations in a world divided formally into nation-states. (1999, p. 217)

Jeremy’s attention to the diverse historical formation of Indigenous peoples within Australia and his search for a global context in which to make sense of the trajectories of pastoral New South Wales and the Torres Strait have long propelled him in the direction that Hopkins was advocating, as very few historians of Australia have been so propelled. It is not just that these two regions are in Australia, their similarities and differences enriching a story of Australian colonial authority; it is also that they are instances of a global dynamic of colonisation and settler-colonial reckoning with the colonial past. Through what Jeremy has called ‘welfare colonialism’, the Indigenous people of Australia have acquired dual status: socio-economically deprived citizens of a nation AND honoured bearers of an Indigeneity that is both globally defined and locally instantiated.

Indigenous movements now appeal not only to nation-states but, ‘over their heads’, to institutions and discourses that formulate Indigenous entitlement and judge nations’ responses to its assertion. As the category ‘indigenous’ has become a more prominent term of political art (in global human rights discourse) it has also emerged as a problematic category of comparative social science and humanities scholarship. Jeremy has found in this climate new ways to historicise his Australian materials. He has been particularly interested in the ways that liberal-democratic political culture — ‘welfare colonialism’ — affords a certain ‘Fourth World’ self-representation. The rhetoric in which welfare is claimed and granted in societies such as Australia is ‘moralistic’, he suggests. To be Indigenous is to present oneself as distinctly deserving.

This kind of political culture offers indigenous minorities the possibility of transcending their small numbers and powerlessness, while giving governments the opportunity of demonstrating their humanity at what may be relatively small cost. Thus in Australia, Aborigines as well as various immigrant groups have judged it more advantageous to follow this strategy rather than play class or party politics. (Chapter 8, p. 171)

Anthropology is an important participant in a global constituency that is ‘grounded in the belief that Indigenous Peoples not only have the right to be different from the rest of the world, but should be assisted to do so’, as Jeremy wrote in his introduction to a special issue of *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power* in 1996 (Chapter 11, p. 231). As both propagator and disinterested analyst of the discourse of ‘Indigeneity’, anthropology is attached ambivalently to global Indigenism. Jeremy has recently reflected on this relationship in an essay that uses the writing of Claudio Lomnitz about Mexico, the nation where ‘Indigenism’ originated. When colonists and colonised are co-nationals (as they are in Mexico and Australia), he points out, the idea ‘Indigenous’ performs more than one political service. As Aborigines have been drawn into a revised ‘national narrative’, they have been invited to be both ‘traditional’ and ‘developing’. They are the settlers’ co-nationals as both bearers of an ancient, newly respected culture but also as disadvantaged citizens who must be assisted to modernise. Anthropology — like the colonised, very much shaped by the nation-state, as Jeremy points out — has been of renewed relevance in Australia because it can substantiate Indigenous tradition where public policy has made tradition the basis of entitlements. Anthropology has also been more puzzled (or threatened) about what it can and should say about Indigenous Australians’ socio-economic improvement (Beckett 2010). In Australian anthropology, there is (sometimes bitter) debate about the terms in which to represent their suffering.

In using the Mexican case to cast new light on Australian anthropology’s political role since the inception of land rights in the 1970s, Jeremy might also