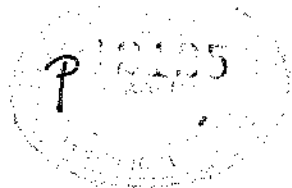


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# ABORIGINAL POLITICAL LIFE

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In 1959 Mr W.C. Wentworth prepared a document entitled "An Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies". Inspired partly by UNESCO developments overseas, it argued for a comprehensive and co-ordinated effort by the Australian Government to record for posterity what remained of the culture of the Australian Aborigines. This objective, Mr Wentworth believed, was probably the most important specific task currently facing Australian scholarship. If it was not undertaken immediately, he said, "humanity will lose something of permanent value and we Australians, as its custodians, will lay ourselves open to perpetual reproach".

Mr Wentworth's initiative led to the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies by Act of Parliament in 1964. There is no doubt that when, in 1959, he identified "we Australians" as the custodians of Aboriginal culture, he was referring primarily to European white Australians. That would have been the enlightened concept of the times. Few could have imagined then that twenty-odd years later a number of members of the Institute would be of Aboriginal descent and that the Institute itself would have become a rallying point for Aboriginal dignity and pride, and a source of hope for a future in which the achievements of the first inhabitants of this country would be regarded not just as subjects of scientific curiosity but as objects of genuine admiration.

This, in fact, is how it has turned out, and it is a measure of W.C. Wentworth's progressive spirit that he has continued to give the Institute his unswerving loyalty and support. The Wentworth Lectures were inaugurated in 1978 to pay tribute to his vision, and simultaneously to bring to a wider public the findings and viewpoints of scholars eminent in particular fields of Aboriginal studies.

# ABORIGINAL POLITICAL LIFE

In 1841 Edward John Eyre took up a selection on the Murray River at Moorundie, a few miles south of what is now Blanchetown. He was twenty-six years of age and had just returned from his heroic journey from Adelaide to Albany. In acknowledgment of his achievement, the Governor of South Australia appointed him Resident Magistrate and Protector of Aborigines on the Murray River.

At Moorundie, Eyre found himself in a region "more densely populated by natives than any in [the] colony, where no settler had ventured to locate, and where, prior to my arrival . . . frightful scenes of bloodshed, rapine, and hostility between the natives and parties coming overland with stock, had been of frequent and very recent occurrence" (Eyre 1845, 317). Over the next three years Eyre travelled widely among the Murray and Darling tribes and evidently established a humane and peaceful relationship with them. He resigned as Protector late in 1844 and soon afterwards returned to England. On the voyage home he drafted an account of his expeditions of discovery, together with a description of the manners and customs of the Aborigines. The work was published in two volumes in 1845.

On the question of indigenous government, Eyre's view was that there was none. The natives of Australia, he thought, recognize no authority apart from time-honoured traditions: "Through custom's irresistible sway has been forged the chain that binds in fetters a people, who might otherwise be said to be without government or restraint" (Eyre 1845, 384). Admittedly, he said, men of influence exist: they are typically individuals from 45 to 60 years of age, possessing strength, courage, energy, prudence, skill, and so on, and often belonging to powerful families (Eyre 1845, 307). Male elders discuss and decide upon matters of importance, and influential men may address the community. But, ". . . though at such times a loud tone and strong expressions are made use of, there is rarely anything amounting to an order or command; the subject is explained, reasons are given for what is advanced, and the result of an opposite course to that suggested fully pointed out" (Eyre 1845, 318). After that, people are left to form their own judgments and to act as they think proper.

In Eyre's opinion, then, talking things over and offering advice do not amount to government. Government means the power to give orders and have them obeyed. Years later, as Governor of Jamaica, Eyre demonstrated executive powers in their most awesome form. Following a massacre of whites at Morant Bay in 1865, he declared a period of martial law in the course of which 439 people were executed and 600 flogged. I put the matter curtly to make an analytical point, not a moral judgment; many of you will be familiar with Geoffrey Dutton's sympathetic account of Eyre, *The hero as murderer* (1967).

Some years ago John Mulvaney praised Eyre's contribution to Aboriginal studies and expressed regret that it had "never emerged from its oblivion as an appendage to his exploration memoirs" (Mulvaney 1958, 146). By then Eyre's description of government had been superseded by formulations attributing to Aboriginal social organization a greater degree of hierarchy and centralization of power than Eyre had been able to discern at Moorundie. However, in that same year (1958), in a symposium entitled "Systems of political control and bureaucracy in human societies" organized by the American Ethnological Society, Lauriston Sharp gave a paper on the Yir-Yoront of western Cape York Peninsula, and Eyre, had he been present, would certainly have applauded, even if he might not have been able to understand all of it. Sharp, who had carried out fieldwork in the Mitchell River area in the early 1930s, referred to a number of concepts that had, as he put it, "seeped into and seriously rigidified much of the discussion of Australian Aboriginal social structure" (Sharp, 1958, 2); these were concepts such as "chief", "headman", "council of elders", and "gerontocracy". Yet, he went on, in the whole of north Queensland no such institutions or structures are to be found.

To the European mind, accustomed as it is to positions of authority and hierarchies of command, a state of ordered anarchy poses a set of intellectual and emotional problems: how do people know what to do? who punishes wrongdoers? how are the weak protected from the strong? who organizes the community's defence against its enemies? who takes responsibility for the society's religious life? and so on. Eyre, as we have seen, attributed the performance of such civic tasks to the invisible hand of custom. Sharp, with the benefit of a century of ethnography, sought to give flesh to this notion by locating it in the domain of kinship: "As an orderly organization of a very limited number of highly standardized roles which an individual plays over and over again in almost all his interactions with others, the Yir-Yoront or any other Australian kinship system constitutes an extremely simple but almost complete social system" (Sharp 1958, 4).

What Sharp meant was something like this. In accordance with well-understood principles of classification, each individual in an Aboriginal community stands to every other individual in one or other of a limited number of relationships stated in the idiom of kinship. For example, approximately one-

eighth of the males in my social universe may be classified as my "fathers", one-eighth of the females as my "mothers", and so on. All my rights, privileges, and obligations are defined on the basis of kinship, either actual or classificatory, and as I grow up I also learn rules of etiquette which constrain or shape my behaviour towards others according to my predetermined relationship with them. In short, kinship rules provide a total framework for social interaction.

So far the formulation is more or less classical Radcliffe-Brown (see, for example, 1952, 79). Sharp, however, made two interesting additions. First, all kinship relations among the Yir-Yoront (or, at any rate, Yir-Yoront males) are characterized by an imbalance of status; that is to say, one party to the relationship is superior or superordinate, the other is inferior or subordinate. The basis of this asymmetry has to do either with the giving and receiving of women in marriage (that is, the gift of a bride and its attendant obligations) or with relative age. The important point is that, while no man has dealings with any other man on exactly equal terms, in half of his relationships he is superior and in the other half inferior. In such circumstances, Sharp argues, no one can be absolutely strong or absolutely weak. A fixed hierarchy of authority is an impossibility. In point of fact, "the Yir-Yoront cannot even tolerate mild chiefs or headmen, while a leader with absolute authority over the whole group would be unthinkable" (Sharp 1958, 5). If authority above the level of the family is a necessary criterion for true political organization, then the Yir-Yoront are "a people without politics" (Sharp 1958, 7).

Sharp's second point was that kinship roles have an aggressive or punitive aspect as well as a benevolent one. Normally the altruistic or supportive aspect is uppermost. But kinsmen also exercise some surveillance over each other's behaviour, and they may take measures against neglect of duty, breach of promise, or other delinquencies. Although there is no judiciary or police force as such in Aboriginal societies, these surveillance and disciplinary components in kinship roles serve a quasi-legal function (Sharp 1958, 7).

Sharp concluded that Aboriginal society lacks special institutions or organizations existing for the purpose of government. A few years later, M. J. Meggitt independently advanced a similar viewpoint. In a paper entitled "Indigenous forms of government among the Australian Aborigines" (1964), he described Aboriginal society as "intensely egalitarian" (Meggitt 1964, 176) and maintained that "although the local communities that made up the Australian tribes were the significant political and administrative units, they had no formal apparatus of government, no enduring hierarchy of authority, no recognized political leaders" (Meggitt 1964, 178). In support of this proposition he made three main points. First, religious precedent as conceptualized and articulated within the framework of the Dreamtime provided a moral master plan for behaviour that largely obviated the need for chiefs or headmen (Meggitt 1964, 174). Second, although men gained ritual knowledge and ceremonial status as they grew older, the

authority and prestige of male elders in the sacred sphere did not carry over into the secular sphere (Meggitt 1964, 176). Third, the organization of co-operative undertakings such as initiation rites, death rites, or revenge expeditions was not the prerogative of a chief, headman, or council of elders, but (depending on the circumstances) of any and every man of mature age in the community (Meggitt 1964, 178).

In the following year, I supported Meggitt's proposition on the basis both of a critical appraisal of the previous literature and of my own research among the Gidjingali (Hiatt 1965). In speaking of the latter, I gave details of an ethic of generosity regulating access to resources, and I tried to bring out the importance of a set of common values and formally defined rights and obligations operating within a political system lacking institutionalized authority. In 1972 Maddock, in his general work on the Australian Aborigines, described the traditional polity, with its freedom from institutions of enforcement and its stress on self-reliance and mutual aid, as a "kind of anarchy, in which it was open to active and enterprising men to obtain some degree of influence with age, but in which none were sovereign" (Maddock 1972, 44).

One aspect of Meggitt's formulation about which I had some reservations was the significance he attached to the notion of a transcendental master plan. Undoubtedly, Aboriginal conceptions of correct behaviour have a basis in those cosmological and metaphysical speculations that have come to be known collectively as the Dreaming; furthermore, sanctions are certainly believed to issue from the transcendental here and now. But the existence of a supernaturally-sanctioned moral code does not imply the non-existence of a governmental authority; indeed, there are innumerable instances in which the two flourish side by side. A second point is that Dreamtime heroes, like those in many other mythologies, are not always heroic, nor are they always punished for setting a bad example. As the late Professor Strehlow once commented, "the lives of the totemic ancestors are deeply stained with deeds of treachery and violence and lust and cruelty: their 'morals' are definitely inferior to those of the natives of today" (Strehlow 1947, 38).

In short, Aboriginal religious beliefs are not so explicit and unequivocal, nor sanctions so unerring, as to constitute a set of instructions which people follow automatically. Indeed, Dreamtime formulations often manifest a deeper concern with understanding what man is than with prescribing how he ought to behave. If traditional Aboriginal society truly lacked government, the reason is unlikely to be found in the content of the traditional religion (*see* Sackett 1978, 42; Hiatt 1975; 1983).

Putting this particular issue to one side, the common ground between me and Meggitt, and between us and Sharp, is clear enough: Aboriginal political life is characterized by a uniform distribution of rights, privileges, and duties throughout a social order based on kinship and suffused by an egalitarian ideology. In

recent years this position has been assailed from two directions: on the one hand, there has been what we can refer to as "class-oriented" Marxist critique; and, on the other, a kind of Hobbesian individualism. Let us begin with the second.

\* \* \* \*

After Sharp left Mitchell River in 1935, no further anthropological research was carried out in western Cape York until 1968, following the establishment of a chair of anthropology in the University of Queensland. John von Sturmer and Peter Sutton, who worked at Aurukun and Cape Keerweer respectively and who submitted important doctoral theses in 1978, have both explicitly challenged Sharp's formulation. Sutton underscores the point by referring to Aborigines as "people *with* politicks". In his thesis on Cape Keerweer he reported that each clan usually has a senior man or woman who is unambiguously the spokesperson for that clan's country; that "big men" or "bosses" occur at a regional level, encompassing numerous clans; and that the success of these leaders depends on qualities such as political astuteness, skill in argument, fighting prowess, and the ability to mobilize large numbers of kinsmen and kinswomen as supporters. In a recent paper (1982), written in collaboration with Bruce Rigsby, he argues that traditional Aboriginal political life has been misrepresented because anthropologists have preferred to believe that Aborigines lack the competitiveness and shrewdness of urban industrial peoples.

Political life among the Kugu-Nganychara, as described by von Sturmer (1978), revolves around the pursuit of pre-eminence as a ceremonial "big man" or "boss". Two vital ingredients for success are an aptitude for ritual discipline and control of an important totemic site. While all men of normal intelligence and ability graduate to the status of *pama manu thaiyan* (a man of thick or strong neck), only some are singled out for the special training necessary for big-man status (*pama kathawawa*). This involves periods of celibacy and fasting, undergoing various other mental ordeals and indignities, as well as instruction in the performing arts. But talent and special training, while necessary for pre-eminence, are not sufficient. Ceremonies focus on particular sites, and to be boss of a big ceremony one has to control a big site. Ownership is normally transmitted from father to eldest son, but unless an inheritance is actively protected and reaffirmed it may be lost to more forceful rivals. In short, land tenure is subject to competition, and von Sturmer surmises that over time the most powerful individuals and their supporters will gravitate towards the most important sites.

Important ritual sites are often located at or near favoured camp locations (for example, at the mouth of a river, offering ready access to ample water and food resources). They constituted the premium ecological vantage points along the coast, and in von Sturmer's judgment there would have been a tendency in pre-European times for the boss of such a focal site to have become the focal male



for a whole riverine community. There can be no question, he says, "that certain individuals . . . achieved a level of eminence and prestige beyond that enjoyed by their peers [*sic*], and wielded authority at a supra-familial level" (von Sturmer 1978, 421). The nature of this authority is a question I shall return to.

In 1974, in his thesis on political struggle and competition in southeastern Arnhem Land, John Bern advanced a similar analysis of the relationship between land, ritual, and politics. According to Bern, "Control of the major rites is based on the custody of the ritual estates, and both are subject to competition. Success in this competition confers prestige on the victor, a prestige whose relevance is largely restricted to ritual performances and associated activities. The competition for prestige is a major interest in the holding of the ceremonies" (Bern 1974, 217).

Subsequently, Bern was led to consider whether Aboriginal political life is amenable to analysis within a "Marxist problematic". And in 1979 he published in *Oceania* a critique of the Sharp/Meggitt/Hiatt position in which he asserted that not only were the conclusions false but the wrong questions were being asked. According to Bern, the representation of Aboriginal politics as an embodiment of ordered anarchy and equality can be sustained only by pretending that the female sex and the junior half of the male population do not exist. In addition, we must assent to an analytic division of the social milieu into secular and ceremonial activities as though they constitute two separate and unconnected domains. On the contrary, Bern argues, religion is the ruling ideology where the relations of domination in the Aboriginal social formation are articulated and justified. The dominant category in traditional society is made up of senior males. It is they who control the secret religious cults, from which women are excluded and into which junior males are inducted through elaborate initiation procedures. And it is they who control female reproductivity through the institution of bestowal. Typically, young women marry senior males who not uncommonly acquire a plurality of wives as they grow older. Young men are thus deprived of wives and, moreover, are officially expected to remain celibate throughout their bachelorhood (which roughly coincides with the period of their induction into religious mysteries).

\* \* \* \*

Now, the immediate question is whether these three formulations represent contradictory viewpoints or whether in fact they are mutually compatible statements about different aspects of a complex field of inquiry. I want to argue for the latter alternative, but let me straightaway dispose of what I consider to be a non-issue: the question whether Aborigines have or do not have politics (spelt with a "k" or without one). We could agree about the facts of Aboriginal social life, yet continue to disagree about whether or not Aborigines have politics simply because we disagree about the definition of politics. I do not intend to get into

an argument about terminology. I see no special virtue in the evolutionist taxonomy accepted by Sharp for the purposes of his discussion in 1958, and I am perfectly happy with the broad usage advocated by Sutton and von Sturmer. Indeed, from 1962 onwards, following Hart and Pilling in their book, *The Tiwi*, I have regularly used the expression "politics of bestowal" to refer to strategies used by bestowers and seekers of wives to advance their interests in a context of scarcity. In short, I do not argue, and never have argued, that Aborigines are "people without politics".

In making a retrospective evaluation of Meggitt's paper on Aboriginal government, we should remember that its objectives were largely set by programs established within the British structuralist school of social anthropology, then still flourishing. Meggitt refers at the beginning to two exemplary collections of essays on African political systems, one edited by Fortes and Evans-Pritchard (1940), and the other by Middleton and Tait (1958), and his own paper can be fairly described as a contribution to what Radcliffe-Brown called "comparative morphology" (1952, 195). "In the political structure of the United States", Radcliffe-Brown wrote, "there must always be a President; at one time it is Herbert Hoover, at another time Franklin Roosevelt, but the structure as an arrangement remains continuous" (Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 10). The question Meggitt therefore asked himself was whether in traditional Aboriginal society there is a structure of government which can be described independently of the individuals who, as it were, pass through it.

Against this background it is clear that when Meggitt concludes that Aboriginal communities have no enduring hierarchy of authority, the critical word is "enduring". With respect to the administration of public affairs, he is asserting that there is no single articulated set of superordinate and subordinate statuses which operates from one situation to another and which persists as a system over time in accordance with acknowledged rules of recruitment. In these terms, the Aboriginal polity would seem to be morphologically distinct from, say, a Polynesian chieftdom, which comprises a pyramidal structure of positions filled by a formal process of installation, designated by titles, and carrying with them as an inherent feature authority over a wide range of public matters.

From such a viewpoint, statements about relations of domination and subordination on the basis of age and sex differences, as well as about individual differences in achievement and prestige, might be regarded as true but irrelevant. To make a simple analogy, the author of an essay on school government might consider it important to describe the prefect system (the duties and privileges of office, method of appointment, powers of the head prefect, and so on) but regard it as outside the scope of the analysis to investigate bullying and bastardization of juniors by seniors or competition for success in various spheres of activity such as scholarship, sport, performing arts, and so on.

For my own part, I see no logical difficulty in maintaining simultaneously that

traditional Aboriginal communities lack enduring hierarchies of authority for the administration of public affairs; that individuals, especially senior males, compete for control of scarce natural and metaphysical resources in order to gain or enhance reputations as ceremonial big men; and that, collectively, senior males exercise a degree of domination over junior males and females, especially in the sphere of religion. Furthermore, I believe that all three propositions are substantially true. In that case, however, what do we make of Meggitt's description of Aboriginal society as "intensely egalitarian"? Was he mistaken? or are we confronted here in this Wentworth Lecture of 1984 with a version of Orwell's paradox "all [men] are equal, but some are more equal than others"?

Now, as it happens, Fred Myers has argued in a recent series of papers (1980a; 1980b; 1982) that a central paradox of Pintupi political life is the co-existence of hierarchy and egalitarianism; furthermore, the traditional resolution of this problematic, as Myers phrases it, comes remarkably close to the Orwellian formula. He says, "The content of this mediation might be summarised as the statement that while all men are . . . equal because all are subordinate to the same moral imperative, those who came before [that is the] (elders) hold and represent The Dreaming for those who come after" (Myers 1980b, 312). What the elders hold in trust is esoteric knowledge, deemed necessary for the attainment of full manhood. The only legitimate way to procure it is through initiation. Therefore, to put the matter somewhat more bluntly, while all men are subordinate to the transcendental, those who need the word are subordinate to those who have it (*see* Kolig 1982).

The disciplines imposed by Pintupi men are sustained and severe. They include tooth avulsion, nose piercing, circumcision, subincision, fire ordeals, and the removal of fingernails. Novices may be beaten for too much talking, inattention, or insolence. They may be awakened at any hour of the night and chased with bullroarers. From time to time they stand in a line with heads bowed, signifying subordination, and during ritual performances senior men shout orders at them and threaten them with violence. Indeed, according to Strehlow, "Executions of younger males, especially of those who were considered to be disrespectful to the authority of their own elders, on charges of sacrilege were . . . a feature of the accepted penal systems of all . . . tribes in the Centre" (1970, 120).

This may seem a harsh regime. Yet, by focussing upon the Pintupi concept of "holding" or "looking after", Myers is able to show how the conservation and transmission of transcendental knowledge is represented as a kind of nurture. Within the context of the secret cult, initiated men act symbolically as "male mothers" who pass on to neophytes the wherewithal for spiritual development. The subordination of young men and their maintenance in a protracted state of immaturity and bachelorhood is conceived as a necessary condition for the discharge of a sacred duty: the custodians of esoteric knowledge act out of a

loving responsibility for succeeding generations and for the cosmos itself.

This profound and pervasive paternalism would hardly seem to provide a fertile ground for the development of egalitarianism. Yet, according to Myers, egalitarianism is a central value in Pintupi culture. He speaks of "the contemporary community at Yayayi with its egalitarian ethos" (1980b, 313), of the Pintupi as a "society of autonomous, egalitarian actors" (Myers 1980b, 311), of "the over-riding concern of individuals with 'egalitarianism'" (Myers 1980b, 315), and so on. In essence, Pintupi egalitarianism means "no one is better than me"; and it is common for men to say such things as "he's only a man like me". From Myers' account, it would seem that the concept embraces both a sentiment of equal intrinsic worth and a notion of an equality of rights and privileges (compare Jayawardena 1968). The question is, how can it flourish side by side with religious authoritarianism?

Meggitt's answer, as we have seen, is that religious authority is non-portable. To quote his precise words:

. . . no matter how much authority people conceded to a ritual leader in the sacred sphere, it did not as a rule extend at all into secular affairs . . . the religious expert did not on this account derive any special freedom from social conventions in the secular world; he had no immunity from criticism or from open violence in everyday disputes. Away from the ceremonial ground he was but another member of an intensely egalitarian society . . . [Meggitt 1964, 176].

Strehlow (1970) has challenged this formulation on empirical grounds, asserting that in pre-European times ceremonial leaders and old men of authority terrorized whole communities through their monopoly of cult-based power. However that may be, Meggitt's final sentence now seems unsatisfactory to me on logical grounds, since it leaves the existential status of the ceremonial ground completely obscure: is it part of Aboriginal society or not? Assuming that it is, and that the values in force there are non-egalitarian, the description of Aboriginal society as intensely egalitarian is clearly in need of some correction.

Myers' argument, so far as I can follow it, is not merely that hierarchy and egalitarianism flourish together in Pintupi society but that, in some sense or in some degree, the latter is actually a product of the former. Like others before him, he contrasts the severity of initiation procedures with the lack of discipline in childhood. To an American observer, he says, the freedom enjoyed by Aboriginal children is truly remarkable. Nowadays Pintupi youths refer to the period of seclusion for initiation as "high school" (thereby alluding to its educational content), but also as "prison". The newly initiated are said to be "free men". What we have, then, is a transition from the irresponsible freedom of childhood to the responsible freedom of adulthood, mediated by a period of humiliation, suffering, and subordination. The experience certainly induces an abiding respect for seniority, and for years to come the initiates will be inhibited and unassertive in the presence of their male elders. But, according to Myers, through the laying on of hands and the gift of the spirit, it also provides a foundation for

the development of personal autonomy and self-respect.

As it is only a year since we celebrated the 500th anniversary of the birth of Luther, there is no need for me to remind you that the mediation of man's relation to God by religious hierarchies has a long and complex history. Much as I am impressed by Myers' empathy with Pintupi culture, I am not convinced that Aboriginal egalitarianism depends on paternalism and graded access to the transcendental. If personal autonomy means independence, as I should suppose it does, it is hard to understand how it is promoted by cultivating in grown men a spirit of dependence upon authority. Unless, of course, authoritarianism has a tendency to create its opposite. Perhaps this is the clue. After the indulgence of a mother-focussed infancy followed by a permissive boyhood, Aboriginal youths are suddenly confronted by father figures in whom threat is dramatically magnified at the same time as benevolent paternalism is proffered in return for obedience. Within the context of the cult, the only option consistent with survival is submission. Outside the cult, however--back in the general community--a compensatory anti-authoritarianism takes hold. Egalitarianism becomes "intense" (Meggitt 1964), the notion of a chief "intolerable" (Sharp 1958).

I place no great weight on this speculation. The essential point is that the indigenous Australian polity was neither wholly authoritarian nor wholly egalitarian. Rather, both elements coexisted in strong measure. It may be (and here I offer a further speculation) that the tension between them helps to explain some of the characteristic adaptations of Aboriginal society to European hegemony. On the one hand, traditional egalitarianism militates against the emergence of black political leaders. According to Myers, rank-and-file Pintupi regard decisions by the village council not only as having no authority but as lacking respect for the autonomy of others: as one man said after the announcement of a no-liquor law, "It's only their idea; they are just men like me" (Myers 1982, 7; compare Sackett 1978). On the other hand, traditional religious authoritarianism may perhaps pave the way for a ready acceptance of paternalism emanating from an external source. A white "boss" is conceived as a person who "looks after" Aborigines in return for deference and obedience. As Chris Anderson notes, "Aboriginal people today in south-eastern Cape York Peninsula speak of 'my old boss', often with a great deal of humour and affection, sometimes even when he had been 'hard' or 'cheeky'". One man said sorrowfully of another, "Poor old fella, he got no boss" (Anderson 1984, 228).

\* \* \* \*

Let us move from the corporate power of senior males to the question of individual "bigmanship". At the outset I should make it clear that, when I refer to egalitarianism in Aboriginal society, I do not in any sense imply that individuals are endowed with a natural disinclination to excel or to be admired or to gain ascendancy over others; nor do I imply that Aborigines are by nature unselfish when

I draw attention to the importance they attach to generosity. It would be more accurate to say that in both instances we are dealing with cultural values directed *against* natural tendencies. Traditionally, public disapproval of selfishness and self-importance reinforced the distributive effects of the laws governing land tenure and marriage and inhibited the emergence of marked differences in wealth, status, and power. To inhibit ambition is not, however, to remove it and, as Eyre acknowledged when he spoke of "powerful families", the status profile of an Aboriginal community is not entirely flat. Probably everywhere, through a combination of genealogical good luck, enterprise, and energy, some men acquired more wives than others and raised more children. Ian Keen has recently argued that, on this basis, certain kinship systems may generate a higher degree of social inequality than others (Keen 1982). Some Yolngu men, for instance, are able to acquire unusually large harems (Berndt and Berndt 1964, 172). Such achievements tend to produce fast-growing clans through positive feedback (that is, success tends to breed success), and flourishing clans may acquire the estates of dying clans through a process, well described by Howard Morphy (1977), of ritual custodianship and accretion. The senior men of such clans, with their ample resources in land, wives, and warriors, are well placed to become citizens of note and, not uncommonly, they embellish their reputations by becoming patrons and practitioners of the religious arts.

A long-standing problem in the study of Aboriginal religion is why certain totems become more important than others. For example, in their great work of 1899, Spencer and Gillen described the Engwura ceremony, the final and most important of the four rituals constituting the male initiation complex among the Aranda. It lasts about four months and consists of a long series of totemic rituals culminating in the revelation of a particularly sacred icon symbolizing female generative powers. The totems represented vary from one Engwura ceremony to another, depending on which local groups happen to be present. But one totem, the ancestral Wild Cat, is always pre-eminent. According to Aranda mythology, all totems and totemic sites were created in the Dreamtime by a supreme superhuman ancestor called Numbakulla. Numbakulla's first creation was Wild Cat. Before disappearing forever, Numbakulla gave the sacred icon to the first Wild Cat man, and the Engwura ceremony as performed today is said to reproduce in all essentials the Engwura ceremony performed by the Wild Cat ancestors in the Dreamtime.

Spencer and Gillen describe the Engwura as the "great central ceremony of the whole tribe". When Durkheim wrote *The elementary forms of the religious life* not long afterwards, he viewed rituals like the Engwura as constituting an evolutionary step towards a higher level of social integration: initially, so the argument goes, there were totems symbolizing the unity of the individual clans; subsequently, one of these totems came to symbolize the unity of the whole tribe (Durkheim 1961, 320-21). What is unexplained, however, is why it was this one

rather than that one (that is, why Wild Cat rather than Kangaroo, or Eaglehawk, and so on?). Spencer and Gillen indicate that the Engwura, though performed by all initiated Aranda men, belongs primarily to the people of the Wild Cat totemic group, who officially control the ceremony (Spencer and Gillen 1899, 233). Although the authors give the mythological ratification for Wild Cat supremacy, they are unable to provide any sociological clues as to how this may have come about historically. No doubt any such clues are lost forever in the case of the Aranda. But the trend of recent research suggests that, whatever integrative function Aboriginal religion may have, it also constitutes a major domain in which men compete for prestige. It is a reasonable speculation that, within this arena, the pre-eminence of particular rituals and supernatural conceptions may represent the success of particular mortal aspirations and energies.

Although a man may try to become a "big name" through the deployment of artistic, administrative, and political talents in the religious life, we should note that the religious and artistic forms as such do not glorify individual human achievement or reputation. Men may become great singers, but singers do not sing the praises of great men. Furthermore, the extent to which individual achievement in ceremonial matters confers authority over other mature men in non-ceremonial contexts remains a vexed and unresolved issue. Von Sturmer says that "the 'big man' is not only the major decision-maker and instructor in matters of ceremony, he is also the arbiter of what constitutes correct or incorrect knowledge. While every individual has the right to air his or her views on all issues of moment, the 'big man' speaks only after all others have spoken. His is literally the final word. While others speak, he is heard" (von Sturmer 1978, 450). But, having heard, do people obey? Or, to recall Eyre's words, do they "form their own judgments, and . . . act as they think proper" (Eyre 1845, 318)? And if actions regularly conform to the "big man's" prescriptions, is it because of his position and power, or is it because, having listened to everyone, he articulates a consensus that has already been reached? Or is it a combination of both? Unfortunately, we know little more about the forms and effects of traditional oratory and debate than did Eyre (compare Thomson 1956, 91), and I sincerely hope that this aspect of Aboriginal political life will attract the attention it deserves as a matter of urgency.

Years ago my colleague Frank Gurrmanamana explained to me how, in northern Arnhem Land in pre-European times, an assembly of men might reach a decision to execute an individual whose violence had become a matter of deep public concern. Gurrmanamana invented a scenario in which a man he described as "the oldest brother, an old man, a really important man" opens a meeting with these words (I translate from the Gidjingali): "You who are assembled here, I speak to you all. Perhaps you will agree with me." Someone replies, "Tell us what you have to say. Then we will tell you whether we agree with you." The senior man speaks of two killers whose violence has terrorized the whole com-

munity, and he suggests that they should be assassinated. "Talk it over among yourselves", he says, "and if you decide to do it, we must not say a word about it." Two men volunteer and, with the moral backing of the meeting, carry out a surprise night attack, and the deed is done.

Although I realise that such a slender piece of evidence proves nothing, I offer it as an example of a style of "big man" oratory more in keeping with a secular polity structured around consensus than with a system geared to a hierarchy of command. It may well be that in western Cape York the style is more authoritarian and consensus less important. In a recent paper, Athol Chase states that at Lockhart River in eastern Cape York, "There can be a 'big man' for ceremonies, and a 'boss' for sites and country, but rarely a 'boss' for people . . . The ethos is that to set oneself up as a spokesperson or a leader of people against others is an act of foolhardiness, and one which will lead to public humiliation . . . Leadership, if it occurs, is covert" (Chase 1984, 117).

Chase suggests that the uniform spread of natural resources along the east coast inhibits the emergence of economic and political inequality, whereas the special importance of estuarine sites on the west coast facilitates it. This close-grained analysis of the role of ecological factors in determining cultural variation is obviously important and deserves to be pursued further. But a similar point also needs to be made about historical factors: some of the forces emanating from white Australia may inhibit "big man" tendencies, while others may strengthen them. As Rolf Gerritson has argued in two recent papers, a combination of white patronage, ceremonial prominence, and "traditional owner" status under the Northern Territory *Land Rights Act 1976* is producing a category of, to use his words, "dominant men" in Aboriginal communities who are able to magnify their importance by controlling the distribution of new wealth. It would appear that in some instances such individuals have consolidated their positions to the extent that they are no longer susceptible to constraining or levelling forces inherent in the traditional polity (Smith 1984).

In this review of perceptions of Aboriginal political life, I have spent my allotted time talking about issues of egalitarianism, authoritarianism, and careerism among men. I regret that I have said nothing about women, apart from alluding to their alleged subordination. Although individual women display leadership and initiative in the organization and performance of women's secret ceremonies (see, for example, Kaberry 1939, 253-68), no one yet has spoken of ceremonial "big womanship". Nor has anyone reported that induction into women's cults is accompanied by disciplines of the sort that characterize male initiation. In many parts of Australia, women are expected to act as junior partners to their menfolk (White 1970, 26), and often their labour and ideologically-cultivated nurturing responsibilities are exploited for the purpose of sustaining male cults (Hamilton 1975, 170). The reverse seems not to occur. Indeed, from the viewpoint of gerontocratic polygynists, women's so-called love magic rituals may seem



more like hotbeds of subversion than adjuncts to orthodox religion, in so far as they glamorize inclinations towards sexual infidelity (Kaberry 1939, 267; C. Berndt 1965, 245; Reay 1970). For the most part, women are not in the business of domination but of resistance (Cowlshaw 1978; 1979), through which in favourable circumstances they may achieve the kind of collective autonomy so well described in the recent work of Annette Hamilton (1980) and Diane Bell (1983). I see women, therefore, as contributing more to the egalitarian and anarchistic tendencies in Aboriginal society than to its authoritarian components, though it should be acknowledged that they may also feel obliged to support the ambitions of their menfolk.

As John Bern (1979) has remarked, Meggitt's paper for a time was regarded as the definitive statement on traditional Aboriginal political life. Its publication coincided with the formal establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. Practically all the work I have surveyed in the second part of my paper has been carried out under the Institute's auspices and, if I have done nothing else, I hope I have demonstrated that our understanding of Aboriginal political life has been considerably advanced as a result of it. Far from being settled, the topic is in a state of ferment. That in itself must be a source of satisfaction to the man in whose honour this lecture is named, since intellectual ferment is the state he probably relishes most.

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