

PMs 45796

**THE WENTWORTH LECTURE: 1988**

Venue: Ian Wark Theatre  
Australian Academy of Science, Canberra

Date: Wednesday, 18 May 1988  
8.00p.m.

Title of paper: "Not Land Rights, But Land Rites"

By Ken Colbung, MBE, JP

Pres. A.I.A.S.

## **Foreword from Ronald M. Berndt**

A Wentworth Lecture is a prestigious event, not only for the person who is to deliver it but also for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. On this particular occasion, the recipient of this honour is Ken Colbung, who has chosen a title that is certainly provocative. The subject matter he provides concerns some issues of considerable complexity.

If I understand correctly the drift of his theme, he is taking as a base-line the well-known assumption that traditionally-oriented Aborigines have a close and intimate spiritual affinity to their land; and that that assumption may be applied more generally to encourage attitudes relating to the protection and conservation of the natural environment; in turn, he suggests, the general adoption of that view could conceivably lead to a greater understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and other (for example. European) cultures. Perhaps I am putting the thrust of his argument too simply - but I have not yet had the advantage of reading or hearing his lecture.

In this short paper I propose to examine the theme, or themes, in a preliminary way, recognizing that most of what I have to say would really require considerable elaboration. Before I can do this, we need to look at Mr Colbung's Lecture title. As it stands it is rather ambiguous. In view of the Aboriginal Land Rights platform, we can suppose that he does not intend to deny that aspiration. Rather, the title reminds us that religious rites concern the land, and are in themselves substantiation of specific socio-personal ties with the land - as well as being direct and indirect statements about land 'ownership' and use. One point here is that the emphasis on 'land rites' invites us to espouse a religious approach to the land in order to nurture that land. How far this is possible for the majority of us, in practical terms, is open to question. So is the assumption that the more we know of a culture other than our own, the less tension will exist between members of those cultures, and the greater the likelihood of a better understanding between them. Nevertheless, there are ingredients in all cultures that could conceivably be drawn upon, to lead to a more general rapprochement between the cultures concerned.

One of the problems in discussing a theme of this kind, involving traditional-Aboriginal societies and cultures on one side, and non Aboriginal societies and cultures, mostly of European-origin on the other, is that the differences between them are quite obtrusive, in almost all respects - not least in politico-economic and technological frames of reference, including, among other things, such fields of thought and action as the physical and social sciences. Beyond the dimension of social relations, and basic physiological concerns, there is, or has been, little in the way of common ground. Where there is commonality of intention, this is often wrapped up in such differing cultural packages, in relation to practices and values, that it is not always easily identified.

The issue, however, is really much more difficult, As you will appreciate, I am making artificial contrasts, using a generalized concept of traditional Aboriginal society, and coalescing a range of cultural and sub-cultural patterns that are often arbitrarily categorized as 'European'. That is social-anthropologically indefensible. The reality, in regard to Aboriginal Australia, is that while modified traditional socio-cultural frames of reference continue to exist in some parts of Australia, the range of persons and groups identified as Aboriginal is now wide and varying, embracing many who are only partially Aboriginal in socio-cultural terms and are indeed very closely involved in what is called 'the wider Australian society'. While many Aborigines at the latter end of this continuum emphasize their Aboriginal heritage, that heritage has assumed the perspective of being a kind of Aboriginal 'Golden Age', that is far removed from the reality of what is categorized as being a near-traditional Aboriginal heritage. I don't want to labour this point, but it is one which should be thoughtfully recognized.

## 1. Introduction

My theme in this historic lecture, and historic year, will be "Not, Land Rights, But Land Rites". This theme is both controversial and idealistic. The controversial aspects are bound up in the way I will be using the words "Rights" and "Rites". My use of the word "Rights" will be obvious to most people, and it relates to the political and legal rights in our everyday lives. My use of the word "Rites" is not so simple because it has something to do with "ritual" or "spiritual" actions of a customary or cultural nature. The idealistic aspects of this paper are not something I want to evade. Nor do I want to run away from this problem because I happen to be looking into the unknown. Making predictions about the next two centuries might present, to some, an impossible task, however, I do have a bias, which encourages me to go ahead and give the message contained within the theme of this lecture. My lecture tonight does have a message both for Aboriginal, and other, Australians. In giving it, while I have a debt of gratitude to the A.I.A.S. staff and the many inspiring comments received from people to whom I wrote, I accept full responsibility for the ideas I am about to present.

### 1.1 Setting the Aboriginal Agenda: the next two centuries

The task I have of encouraging Aboriginal people to set their own social and cultural agenda for the next two centuries is an important exercise for two reasons. The first reason is that Aboriginal people are too often led up political blind alleys. Although it may appear to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal supporters of "Land Rights" that I am arguing in direct opposition to what they believe, or think they believe, that is not the case. What I am doing is clearing some of the dead wood away in order for us all to see more clearly into the future. The second reason is that there are many Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians who hold little or no concern for protection of the environment, and for its enjoyment by others. What I am doing is, on the one hand, talking about two great themes of the past and, on the other hand, two groups of people living in the one society. And I am going to talk about Aboriginal society first. A discussion about Australian society will follow, and this discussion will focus upon customs and beliefs about our society. It is impossible to talk about the next two hundred years without making some reference to the past. While the references will

be brief they are important lessons, of which, some Australian's have, in my view, failed totally to take account. It is my hope and, from those I know here tonight it is their hope, that a change will take place in human consciousness about our habitat.

## 2. Lessons of the Past. The Aboriginal Case

Current knowledge shows clearly that human beings have been living on this continent, for forty thousand years and, a recent report indicates, perhaps even eighty thousand years.<sup>1</sup> Those human beings we now appreciate, had an extremely good record of living in a very harsh natural environment without wreaking havoc, either upon the human beings with whom they lived or upon nature. Furthermore, those same peoples, we now know, co-operated with groups at great distances from the areas in which they, themselves lived.<sup>2</sup> Today we look back in wonder at such an achievement, that people were able to solve, what is to us, such insolvable problems in a seemingly simple way. It is true that just two hundred years ago the two greatest obstacles to European occupation were their incapacity to communicate with Aboriginals, and the environment. Likewise, when we look back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, it was a simple matter to talk about 'Land Rights', and to think in terms of either a solution to the need for resources (and this means money capital) or the ownership (and this means possessing large areas of property) of land. It may appear to some here (and I know it has a reality to many shortsighted Aboriginal political and moral activists in Australian society) that we had discovered something new about what Aboriginal people had been thinking about, or the way they acted, over the past two hundred years, and that the solutions would rest on money and property. This was an illusion, because if we look briefly at how the issues of land management and land distribution affected other countries we might see some similarities with ourselves.

## 3. European & American dilemmas: Land management & distribution.

I want to suggest that the reform movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were to face very similar questions to the kinds of problems faced by

Aboriginal society, such as, poverty, dispossession and environmental mismanagement.<sup>5</sup>

### 3.1 Poverty & Land Reform in England

If we look at England in the mid-nineteenth century we can see that poverty and land shortages were closely related, For example, the growth of industry and the movement of populations into towns, and the cities, meant growing health problems. When town populations and the areas of land they lived on expanded, more food was needed and, in turn, more land was needed by the farmers to feed these populations, This process began earlier but showed up in the 1830s, By the 1840s, the conditions were created which gave almost everyone a better standard of living. The point to be made here, in my argument, is that human problems have always centred around space, well-being and cooperation: here was a victory for conservation.<sup>6</sup>

### 3.2 National Parks: the American Case

America is not noted, especially if we take a guide from the last two or so decades, for human-social management, but in the 1930s, (however), it was the leader of the world.<sup>7</sup> In that period the emergence of huge areas of common land, together with huge resources for both indigenous peoples, and other Americans, had been set aside as a heritage for use by today's society. This type of action, and earlier human activity in England, can be seen as humanitarian acts, by past societies, for the concern of present day peoples. The actions of those idealists were sufficiently realistic to make some lasting impact for the common good. I want to ask the question: what has been the Australian experience?

## 4. The Australian Experience: space, well-being & co-operation

If we look closely at Australian history in this century we can see that 'reserves' (that is, land set aside for use and benefit of Aboriginals by governments or even Church lands used as Missions) have been the history of my own, and many other, Aboriginal people, a Welfare throw-back from old colonial times.<sup>8</sup> It should not be

forgotten that huge areas of land have been set aside for common use by Federal and State Governments since the First World War.<sup>9</sup> By this I am saying that providing land to certain groups in society, for one reason or another is not unique, because for land to be set aside for use by Aboriginals has been part of our history since about the 1820s. Aboriginals, like anyone with a legitimate or proven case of need and entitlement, may require government to provide for their needs. Aboriginal political, social, economic and cultural needs are, for the most part, common to those needs of the general society: in other words Aboriginal needs are both common and special, but they all fall into the area of space well-being and co-operation.

#### 4.1 The need for 'Space: Land Rights

On the issue of the need for space or land, I want it clearly understood what I am saying. Now Justice Woodward stated what the Land Rights debate, and the concept, was all about. That issue, as we know, arose out of the Gove Case. But the two issues are, in one sense separate, because one was concerned with sacred sites and "Rites" associated with traditional understanding of caring for land; the other was concerned with political "Rights" to land. In part, the issue has been clouded by the misconceptions of these two words. In part also, the issue has become confused by what modern political action, and the interpretation of those actions, represent. I am not against Land "Rights" but I am against turning Land "Rights" into material gain by a few.

#### 4.2 Well-being: "Rites" and not "Rights"

Recently Professor Blaney has objected to the recognition of Aboriginal heritage being enshrined in the constitution.<sup>11</sup> This is no simple question and involves dividing what is political from what is democratic. As a member of a minority of which all Aboriginal issues are intrinsically involved, Australian politics has neither protected our Land "Rights" nor our land "Rites". Democracy, on the other hand, can guarantee what Aboriginals are entitled to for their well-being.

To enshrine Aboriginal heritage within the constitutional document protects us from the "mob" and the "mob" from our own extreme political demands.<sup>12</sup> Our well-being is legitimately based upon provable "Pre-existing" Rights.

On this point of "Pre-existing" Rights, I concur with Henry Reynolds, the Australian historian, when he argues that history has shown that the whole of the Aboriginal peoples possessed "Pre-existing title to the land", and other property rights, which were part and parcel of the Australian Aboriginal peoples' prior occupation. When the British unjustly, and wrongfully, claimed the continent for itself, those "Pre-existing" Rights had never been recognised nor has the question of compensation been seriously confronted,<sup>13</sup> If for example, this issue was taken seriously, the preservation, and perpetuation of Aboriginal democratic Rights could also be preserved by the creation of an institution which could be modelled around the kinds of democratic bodies which already exist, such as independent political bodies of the Trade Unions and other democratic bodies. We could, therefore, be free of governments and this would allow us to care for our own political and democratic self-determination. As it currently stands, Aboriginal organisations cannot be free of well-known Australian bureaucratization. One could talk for some time on this issue alone, but I want to move on and talk about co-operation.

#### 4.3 Co-operation or Destruction: Land "Rites" or Land Blight

Historically, and in Pre Contact History, Aborigines have been most efficient land managers.<sup>14</sup> In modern times Aboriginal people have deep, within their culture, an obligation to protect the land upon which they have lived. Intrinsic to that obligation was the right to occupy land and that right was recognised by all who lived near and far.<sup>15</sup> If the land was not cared for or managed to the satisfaction of all then it was taken over by people who could do so. Co-operation, therefore, by land managers was an essential humanness of my people. It is important for us here today, and in particular for those political conservatives like Professor Blaney and Aboriginal political extremists, to understand this most important concept of co-operation. It involved co-operation between land managers with their traditional obligations and with other human beings.



In the 1920s, a great deal of land was provided for reserves. At this time Aboriginal people were thought to be a 'dying race', and the mentality was one of "Welfare".<sup>16</sup> Likewise, other Australians have sought land for common use, and it was not long ago when National Parks were something used only for respites on picnic days. In other words, there was a social, political, economic and spiritual consciousness based more on the political expediencies of the day, rather than upon any consciousness which saw something of value in the preservation of the balance between humans and nature.

#### 4.3.1 The welfare Mentality & Aborigines: 1920 to 1976

The long view of Aboriginal social, economic, political and spiritual relationships to the land has only emerged in the past two or so decades.<sup>17</sup> Since the 1920s the thinking was that land upon which Aboriginal people lived would ultimately return to the wealth-stock of the dominant society. Thanks to democracy and not politics we are able to share in the long term possessions of Australia rather than simply be a short term social problem. By the 1940s, which was a time when it became widely accepted by the authorities that Aboriginal populations were increasing, forests and pastoral properties were seen as a way in which lands were purchased for habitat and employment reasons. For those who have this long view, 1972 to 1976 was not new, it was the old story with a new slant: Land rights had become property rights and not customary Rites.

#### 4.3.2 Changes Come and Changes Go

It is not a cynical thing to say that, 'the more things change the more they remain the same'. Looking back to the 1960s, 'Land Rights' ideology, particularly as portrayed by young Aboriginal people in New South Wales, was to become a political slogan which captured the imagination of many short sighted Aboriginal activists all over Australia.<sup>18</sup> It became a political and moral strategy for a great many present-day Aboriginal groupings to monopolise areas of land for material gain. The result will be, particularly in N.S.W., that a terrible price will be paid in the next couple of years as the dismantling of the legislation takes place. The idea that the heritage of Aboriginal society is the preserve of a few short sighted and self-seeking Aboriginal power-

brokers is a most disturbing thought, and in my view, exposes the fallacy of "Land Rights".

Moreover, there is the idea that the ownership of land is one where a few powerful family groups are able to reside, in an attempt to be like those rural farmers, around whom they had grown up, and this has been the reward of only those few people supporting "Land Rights". What was taken to be a legitimate political strategy for cultural self-correction became a utopian strategy for self-destruction. Also, we can say that many of the real strengths of Australian political supporters were damaged. The perspective that self-correction would come from a deeper understanding of what our immediate ancestors were trying to tell us was lost in the rush for material gain and possession of property, not heritage. The real workers who built that support, in a painstaking and methodical way, are today the most disappointed among those still living. Let me give an example to show you who those workers were.

#### 4.3.3 The Real Workers: the individuals & the institutions

Certain scholars, along with a small number of politicians, on both sides of politics of the conservative mould, can take the credit for any gains that were won in the years since the late 1930s. Two of the founding fathers of this Institute are representative of the kind of supporters I am talking about, W.C. Wentworth, and W.E.H. Stanner, in particular. These individuals strove to raise the status, in the minds of Australians generally, of traditions seen by most as exotic. The de-exoticisation of Aboriginal traditions was a co-operative task by scholars and politicians in all parts of Australia.<sup>19</sup> Some Aboriginal people were able to help, and they did so wherever possible.<sup>20</sup>

#### 4.3.4 The Formation of the A.I.A.S.

The formation of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in the early 1960s epitomised the co-operative nature of scholarship and politics. The A.I.A.S. began at the forefront of the hardest problem, that is, the self-correction of Australian Society's

ignorance. In this task these workers were able to show the immense strengths of Aboriginal traditions and culture. Furthermore, these workers were able to show to the whole world (and not just to a few nationalistic Aboriginal chauvinists or local Aboriginal monopolists) the antiquity, humanity and strength of that culture.<sup>21</sup> These efforts of political diplomacy and scholarship have been some of the most monumental in world history. For example, archaeology in New South Wales was followed by the establishment of the Willandra Lakes as an area of World Heritage.<sup>22</sup> Without that status as a site of significance there would have been nothing of value for Aboriginals or other people in which they could feel some pride. Other scholarship in and around Australia on Aboriginal culture, in particular the Northern Territory, has profoundly changed Australian's perception about Aboriginal people (and it has profoundly changed Aboriginal perceptions of themselves for the better in some areas). Disciplines like Anthropology, Ethnology, Linguistics, photography to mention a few, have contributed in many ways. Arts and culture can be included in the kinds of concerns that the A.I.A.S. membership has been responsible for protecting and promoting.<sup>23</sup> The A.I.A.S. membership has been at the forefront, some may say blindly, of political controversy for which no apology is given. Nevertheless, it is the area of "Rites" which I think that we have been most successful, and it is to this concept I will now turn; as a means of carrying some ideas I have into the future.

##### 5. What do I Mean by the word "Rites"?

Let me say immediately what I mean by "Rites" to Land. When I use the word "Rites" I mean it to be understood as a formal procedure carried out in Aboriginal communities, or in a religious, or solemn observance of other human beings, living or dead. What I mean is the customary practices which people develop among themselves, but yet, not practices which are offensive to themselves or to others. In short, customary practices which are deemed an important conserving factor of Aboriginal people's community customs and manners for which they want to be able to continue to practice. Let me say also that I am not advocating the reintroduction of practices which certain groups may believe were once part of ceremonies that are no longer used. For example, it is as unnatural for people to revert to the production of stone tools as a means of replacing steel hammers, as it is for Christian groups to

introduce certain rituals which are outside either the spirit for which they were originally used or the spirit upon which such custom is based. In the same way, I am not in favour, nor am I advocating, the importation of other Aboriginal people's culture from inside Australia, where we are not willing to put the time and effort into the research on what those customs and manners really meant, or to research our own culture from our own areas. In other words, I am against the importation of customs that would offend the sensibilities of those from whom such practices are taken, thereby destroying and distorting other peoples' real meaning.

Every living tradition is profoundly shaped by its own history. Through that history even those features which it considers to be non-historical are strongly affected. Attempts to describe the 'essence' of Aboriginal spiritualism in terms of absolute doctrinal formulations must fail simply because they neglect the historical dimension and the development that has led to those.

It is impossible to give a precise definition of 'Spirit' or to point out the exact place and time of its origin.

#### Contemporary:

Contemporary spiritualism preserves many elements from various sources, differently emphasised in various parts of the country and by individual groups of people. Roughly speaking we may identify four main streams of tradition that have coalesced to form spiritually the traditions of the original inhabitants of Australia, whose cultures have been traced back about forty thousand years and some of whose practices and beliefs may still be alive among the numerous tribes of this country, thus implying a minimum of common beliefs and practices and freedom to follow individual traditions in all other matters.

#### Aboriginal:

Most Aboriginals prefer even now to define their religion, lore, culture, by more restricted names and call themselves Nyoongah, Yamaiji, Wongais or whatever group they belong to. But there are others who feel the need to define the unity underlying the nationhood of Aboriginal Australia in terms which allow Nyoongahs to

transcend sectarian boundaries within Australia and at the same time distinguish them from the followers of other traditions. To define such a people is impossible, just as we cannot express or define Reality because words came into existence after Reality. Similar is the case with Nyoongah people. They existed when there was no necessity for any name. They were the good, the enlightened people. They were the people who know about the laws of nature and the laws of the spirit. They built a great civilisation, a great culture and a unique social order.

## 5.1 "Rites" to Land not land rights: the next two hundred years

Aboriginal society has literally come back from the grave since the 1920s.<sup>24</sup> In part, this survival is due to Aboriginal society's incredible capacity, as human beings, to withstand internal violence, apathy and ignorance, together with the tremendous pressures placed upon us from the wider Australian society. In part also, it has been the basic strength of our deep understanding of the belief in our heritage. Although we are, in reality, not the same type of people who were here when the Europeans first came, it has been the "Rites" in customs and manners which has enabled our own survival. Other individuals and institutions both good and bad, (religious and secular) helped, but for the most part we, and our close friends, were the history makers.<sup>25</sup> The big question for the future, which I have to confront, however, is: will Aboriginal people be able to maintain this pattern of doing things into the next two centuries, and what are some of the things that might threaten some of the traditions we see as important?

### 5.1.1 Population Increases. Public Health & Industry

A number of things will most certainly take place. Aboriginal populations will continue to increase, and this has implications for Aboriginal people in the same way as it does for government. Aboriginal populations are moving both away from their own institutions into areas that require a totally different pattern of habitation and into urban areas (towns and cities). Like other times and parts of the world, (Europe in the nineteenth century perhaps) mining industries are affecting those who remain in rural areas and large industry is affecting those who move to the cities. In both instances, further cultural decay will occur if some form of self-strengthening

knowledge and strategy is not mounted right away. The emergence of health patterns (caused by concentrated living, with poor hygiene and access problems to health knowledge and treatment) will not abate for some time. Nor will other diseases such as alcoholism and heart problems. These are some of the material effects; what about the cultural effects?

### 5.1.2 Cultural Effects: Prospects & Possibilities

Arts and Culture have gone through what some might describe as a "Cultural Revolution", and whether this adequately describes the upsurge in interest in the 1970s and 1980s I am not sure. Nevertheless, I can say with some certainty that Aboriginal Art is flourishing, and will continue to do so, due in no small measure to the A.I.A.S.'s long interest. Aboriginal dance is expanding, not only within traditional society but as a means of communicating information to others. These are powerful mediums and they should be protected, from within a self-conscious and self-strengthening intellectual strategy. One real problem is the great urban drift: the Aboriginal populations are shifting we know, the question is: what cultural baggage are they taking and what is the rate of change? Now I do not know what the answer to that question is because I am not a social scientist, but historical archaeology or ethnographic and social anthropological accounts might be able to (do so). The A.I.A.S. might, in the future, tackle such important and necessary questions and, in this way, we can be our own research fox and not the government hound. Aboriginal Arts and culture will change, as it is currently doing: we must learn to record the Arts and culture we are creating today as being a record of ourselves as culture makers in whatever we do. Material gain has diverted contemporary Aboriginal society away from its basic goals of culturally and customarily self-strengthening its own knowledge, in the face of a tremendous threat from ideas which compete, and undermine, our own intellectual strengths, This will disguise and cloud our differences, and uniqueness, in that, as a cultural group we will be indistinguishable from other Australians: perhaps this is what Blainey wants.

External threats are many but in the same way, we must be mindful of internal threats to Aboriginal culture. For example, I am acutely aware of Aboriginal political nationalism, and extremism. In relation to Aboriginal knowledge, I want to say that,

like everything else, knowledge changes and grows, but only if we can share it with other human beings. Some of that knowledge will begin, and continue for an unknown length of time, as something only a few will, or can, know, that is the nature of things. In the fullness of time it must become common or public knowledge: that is also the nature of things. Many Aboriginal groups have the mistaken belief that, because they have a racial and cultural link with people who once lived, for example at Cow swamp or Lake Mungo, they have a monopoly over both the knowledge itself and the material gains from that knowledge. This is the kind of materialism I was hinting at: an extreme Dominance over other people who are in need of that knowledge in order to be able to understand about the humanness of those civilisations who preceded contemporary Aboriginal people. It was not long ago that Aboriginal people were believed to be a sub-human species, but recent archaeology, ethnology and anthropology has demolished that falsehood. One final point will bring together all the things I have been talking about. Essentially, they concern our similarities and, most importantly, our differences with people with whom we occupy this continent, or the people who live close to our own communities. This is an important question because underlying the points mentioned above is the question: who are the people that are most likely to be our friends, and how will we be able to identify them, over the next two centuries?

## 6. The Conservation Movement: a case for Aboriginal survival

Conservation movements have tended to be people with concern for other human beings and for nature. Although the A.I.A.S. has its share of conservationists it is not (necessarily) an organisation which is part of any political arm of the conservation movement. Nevertheless, the scholarship produced by the A.I.A.S. does have that wider concern for the conservation of the environment, and the way Aboriginal people fit into that picture. The workers that I have previously mentioned, the real workers of Aboriginal survival, have that kind of concern for both the preservation of a national minority and the environment as a central feature. These people had a mix of the ideas, and practical solutions, in which Aboriginal peoples could make a positive contribution towards others, and themselves, in the next twenty or so

decades. A special characteristic which gives Aboriginal people their special quality is what I will call 'Aboriginal conservatism' and it stands in direct contrast to 'Aboriginal chauvanism'. It is the 'Aboriginal conservatism' which gives our people that special humanity.

All the issues mentioned before need to be addressed with an understanding of Aboriginal Political Processes.

### Aboriginal Political Processes:

Aboriginal processes of decision making and Aboriginal attitudes towards elected representatives are markedly different from those of European Australians. Aborigines follow processes which are, I believe, basically democratic but the concept of representative government seems alien to their culture. The basic unit of Aboriginal decision making (where the means to decision are not clearly established by tradition or where decision lies within the authority of individuals by inherited right) seems to be the local 'community or group meeting' open to all. Issues are discussed but, decisions are rarely made at once if the matters are important. Discussions are often interrupted and may be spread over several meetings to allow time for discussions within families or other smaller groups or for consultation with other people of authority and influence. During these intervals, respected members of the community often move around to ensure that issues are understood, to identify the lines of emerging consensus and perhaps to support particular ones. Even when the community has an elected Council its meetings are generally open and discussion is not confined to Councillors. If persons are chosen to take part in discussions with other communities or with Government and other agencies, it is my understanding that their nomination is not an authority to decide or in other ways to act for the community without reference back to it, but rather to act as two-way 'messengers' on its behalf between it and the other parties.

Another important aspect of Aboriginal decision making processes is the complementary division of ritual responsibility between separate but related groups. For example, the reciprocal relationship between 'owners' of land and ceremonies and the guardians' - those with responsibility to see that traditional duties are



properly performed - is now increasingly understood. It is the same expectation of reciprocity and fulfilment of mutual obligations that serves as the basis of authority and leadership in many Aboriginal societies. In particular, if individual leaders or 'bosses' are given deference or respect, then it is as a person who 'looks after' and 'works for' others and who will transmit to subordinates valued knowledge and experience. Authority to command or to effect decisions continues to be accorded only to those who observe reciprocal obligations, and is given within an ideology of egalitarianism - and traditionally, within the context of the 'law'. Thus conceptualised, 'legitimate authority is without despotic or personal overtones, taken on as a responsibility to ensure the security and benefit of its objects' (Myers, 1980a; 206).

## 7. Conclusion

In this 1988 Wentworth Lecture, I have attempted to bring some kind of reality to Aboriginal Politics by exposing the contradictions in the symbolism of Land Rights and Land Rites. If Aboriginal people as we recognise ourselves today, overlook the necessity for our own needs, and those of others, of space, well-being and co-operation, they will also overlook the underlying message I have been trying to get across here tonight. As a minority within the Australian political framework, one of the important elements of (both) our own survival since the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, has been the kinds of friends we were able to cultivate in that time. In the next two hundred years I do not believe that the political situation will change. The conservation movement, and those scholars, citizens and politicians will have to play the kind of role earlier friends had to carry out. In these circumstances Aboriginal self-correction in the way they perceive the important concepts of Rights and Rites will be of the utmost importance, I hope that I have been able to throw some light on a debate which has been clouded. If I have been able to do that then the way ahead in the next two centuries will be, I am certain, a much more productive one than the preceding two centuries.

**Ken Colbung, Wentworth Lecture 1988**

AIATSIS Library, S06.1/AIAS/10 1988no2,p.103-110.

PMS 4193

“Not Land Rights: But Land Rites”, paper presented at the Wentworth Lecture.

(m0004811\_a.pdf)

To cite this file use :

[http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/lbry/dig\\_prgm/wentworth/m0004811\\_a.pdf](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/lbry/dig_prgm/wentworth/m0004811_a.pdf)

© Ken Colbung