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## COLOUR, CULTURE AND THE ABORIGINALISTS

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'Aboriginalist' anthropologists in Australia employ the concept of 'traditional Aborigines' in a way which has not changed since the study of the Australian race became the study of Aboriginal culture. The focus on tradition and on cultural continuities denies by implication the authenticity of many Aborigines. It also denies the history of those conceived of as still traditional. The analytic and political consequences of such conceptualisations are discussed. An alternative approach which begins with different questions is suggested.

### *Australian anthropology*

Australian Aborigines have long been famous among European intellectuals for their place as the central characters in a number of important origin myths developed within anthropology. The 'lowest level' of Morgan's kinship system was illustrated by Fison and Howitt's *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* (1880). Frazer used Baldwin Spencer's evidence of the most 'primitive' form of religion in Central Australia. Darwin referred to the Australian female as evidence that the difference between man and ape was one of degree, not of kind (Darwin 1871: 62). Freud's *Totem and taboo* had the primal horde exemplified in Australia (Freud 1950). Durkheim found the elementary forms of religion in the work of Spencer and Gillen and Strehlow (Durkheim 1954). More recently Lévi-Strauss (1969) found elementary structures of kinship there. Aborigines' existence in Australia has not been directly influenced by such writings and of course few Aborigines are aware of their renown in academic circles. However, the work of intellectuals, especially anthropologists, has, I will argue, been significant in determining how the category of Aboriginal Australians has been defined and reproduced for most of this century.

Few anthropologists who work in the field of Aboriginal studies have been troubled by the conceptual confusions involved in categories of ethnicity and race although such concerns have occupied the attention of those engaged in analysing the position of immigrant groups in Australia (e.g. de Lepervanche 1980). It appears that anthropologists have assumed that we all know who the Aborigines are. Recent discussions of the concept of Aboriginality (Thiele 1984; Anderson *et al.* 1985) show a growing awareness of a problem. If we look closely at our conceptual tools it becomes apparent that they have not been polished for some time and retain some relics from before the days when the study of the Australian race became the study of the Aboriginal culture. I will

illustrate this with a brief account which is intended to highlight particular features of the history of anthropological studies of Australian Aborigines.

The concept of race as a way of dividing the human species into discrete groups was fundamental to the practice of anthropology during the nineteenth century. Aborigines were seen as a race, and the defining characteristics were to be discovered by measuring their bodies and bones as well as by describing their customs. It was only in the mid-twentieth century that biologists resoundingly rejected racial categories by showing that variation within such groups is greater than variation between them.<sup>1</sup> While it may be possible to divide a population according to variation in one genetically given characteristic, as soon as two are used there will be problems of categorisation (Livingstone 1962). Throughout human history continuous migration has precluded the development of sub-species (Gould 1981: 323).

Only a part of this message was taken up by anthropologists, and that part was less to do with rejection of racial categories *per se*, than with rejection of racism. Montagu's *Man's most dangerous myth* (1974, f.p. 1942) was important to anthropology in stating clearly that biologically defined racial categories were of no significance in explaining other aspects of social life. The younger social anthropologists in Australia in the 1950's seem to have responded complacently perhaps because they had not used the concept anyway.<sup>2</sup> All right-thinking people, but especially anthropologists, appeared to be in favour of racial equality. The assertion that race was not a determinant of social position, despite the apparent widespread correlation between dark skins and inferior status, became a truism in the social sciences. Fox's comment (1975: 56) that 'The anthropologist certainly feels weary at the prospect of repeating over and over again the known truths that should have been assimilated generally years ago', sums up what I take to be the common response. But, while race as an explanatory concept was no longer regarded as valid, it is my contention that precisely the same kind of categorisation survived in a disguised form, in Australia at least. The boundaries of the racial categories were not redrawn.

Anthropology in the nineteenth century was the study of primitive peoples by those who lived in the more developed societies. There was then no shame attached to European claims of superiority. The search for the definitive qualities of the various races and their position on the evolutionary ladder was the main object of investigation. Great thinkers with a wide range of interests considered information about the Australians (as Aborigines were then known) as evidence of the human past.

By the turn of the century anthropologists had begun to divide themselves into physical and social anthropologists, each in their different ways examining the nature of Aborigines. Increasingly in the twentieth century the work of social anthropologists emphasised that it was the culture of Aborigines which made them distinct and unique. School text books described the nomadic hunter-gatherers, the cleverness of their artefacts and the exotic nature of their religious beliefs. Some of these descriptions were disparaging and some admiring. Intellectuals delivered papers on totemism and moieties at learned societies. But the people whose culture was being studied were the same people as those whose physical distinctiveness had been measured

earlier as a part of the same enterprise. The change was due to theoretical developments in anthropology, not to the changes that were taking place among Aborigines.

Another aspect of history should be recalled. Interest in the differences between human groups developed when, with the invention of large sailing ships, Europeans began to travel the world. Naturally, when they developed systems of hierarchical classification of human beings, they placed others who seemed to show markedly different characteristics lower in the hierarchy than themselves. At the same time, however, these same sailing ships were breaking down the geographical barriers that had created the particular populations whose racial characteristics were being delineated. In a few cases social barriers almost entirely replaced the geographical barriers, but in most colonial situations there was extensive and continuous miscegenation. Thus while a dedicated band of anthropologists were collecting bones, measuring heads and trying to find the definitive characteristics of the Australian race, the brave pioneers and Aboriginal women were rearranging the categories.

How was it that anthropologists, previously the experts on the subject of race, ignored the whole subject of miscegenation when it was having such a dramatic effect on the lives of the people they studied? How was it that academics allowed their studies to be dominated by the popular notions of full-bloods and part-Aborigines thus giving unintentional legitimacy to the notion that the latter were somehow less important and certainly of less scientific interest? Why were the dramatic social processes of change of no interest to those whose speciality was the study of different societies?<sup>3</sup>

Before answering these questions I want to specify more precisely the epistemological problem which is the focus of this article. The widespread rejection of the notion of biological race led social anthropology rather than physical anthropology to accepting the responsibility of defining who Aborigines were and how their special characteristics were to be described and explained. As these characteristics were taken to be those of the traditional culture, it followed that Aborigines were in the northern and central parts of Australia. There, because the invading Europeans had not yet wanted the land, Aborigines comprised the majority of the rural population (Stevens 1974: 46), and had continued to live largely as they had previously. That is, they had 'retained their culture'. The anthropologists sought them out there and provided an exhaustive account of the complexities and subtleties of Aboriginal kinship, religion and other aspects of traditional Aboriginal society that commanded international interest.

I wish to argue that such anthropology was based on a submerged or implied definition of Aborigines as a race, the identification of that race with an unsullied tradition and the protection of this ever narrowing category of Aboriginal studies from any systematic concern with the nature of the wider society or with changes in the object of investigation. In other words, though direct references to race were dropped, the concept of discrete *a priori* categories of human beings has remained central to the anthropological endeavour in Australia. This concept is, I would argue, isometric with the concept of race. Thus one answer to the questions posed above is that anthropologists defined their task as the

study only of traditional Aborigines, that is, of Aborigines as they were before colonisation caused them to change.

*Parts of races and elements of cultures: the pitfalls of metaphor*

Anthropologists' definitions of Aborigines were always dependent on notions of their cultural integrity and homogeneity. No concepts or theories were developed in Australian anthropology which could deal with either relationships between the indigenous population and the invaders or with changes in either. When anthropologists did conduct research with non-traditional groups the very vocabulary of 'caste' and 'blood' with which such groups were described relied on biological notions of race (Elkin 1935; Reay 1945). Most contemporary anthropologists would reject the old dichotomy of traditional full-blood Aborigines and acculturated half-castes, but few have confronted the pervasive conceptual problems which are still embedded in conventional terminology and in the propensity of most anthropologists in Australia to work in remote areas of the continent.<sup>4</sup>

There have been a number of critical accounts of anthropological theory and practice in recent years which are relevant to my argument. Asad, after commenting on the contrast between anthropologists' treatment of the role of ideology in their own and their informants' social worlds, attributes the failure of anthropologists to produce a viable theory of social change to the way the object of change, that is society, is conceptualised (1979: 609). He accuses anthropologists of not 'making any attempt to explore the systematic social connections between historical forces and relations on the one hand, and the characteristic forms of discourse sustained or undermined by them on the other' (1979: 616). He wants us to seek 'the specific political economic conditions which make certain rhetorical forms objectively possible, and *authoritative*' (1979: 616, Asad's emphasis). The 'anthropological tendencies which accord a critical priority to systems of human meaning . . . leave unposed the question of how different forms of discourse come to be materially produced and maintained as authoritative systems' (1979: 619).

Wolf also makes a plea for attention to history and the interconnectedness of processes in the world. He points out that 'even anthropology . . . divides its subject matter into distinctive cases: each society with its characteristic culture, conceived as an integrated and bounded system, set off against other equally bounded systems' (Wolf 1982: 4). He shows how misleading is the attempt to separate cultural wholes and distinct boundaries in situations where shifting relationships are the consequence of European expansion.

The concept of the autonomous, self-regulating and self-justifying society and culture has trapped anthropology inside the bounds of its own definitions. Within the halls of science, the compass of observation and thought has narrowed, while outside the inhabitants of the world are increasingly caught up in continent wide and global change . . . anthropologists look for pristine replicas of the precapitalist, preindustrial past in the sinks and margins of the capitalist industrial world . . . The tacit anthropological supposition that people like these are people without history amounts to the erasure of 500 years of confrontation, killing, resurrection and accommodation (Wolf 1982: 18).

Both Wolf and Asad could have illustrated their views with evidence from Australia. The establishment of a British penal colony in 1788 and the subsequent colonisation of the continent of Australia led to the virtual wiping out of the Aboriginal population in some areas, the confinement of others on reserves which shrank in size over the years, the employment of many on pastoral properties in serf-like conditions, and, in the more remote areas, the surveillance by missionaries and government welfare agencies (Rowley 1972a; *b*; *c*). The extent of exploitation and intermingling with whites has varied greatly, but in most of south-east Australia, as well as in the country towns everywhere, there emerged a population commonly known as half-caste or mixed-race, who were descended from both indigenous and invading individuals. While such populations in many parts of the continent regard themselves and are regarded as the Aboriginal population,<sup>5</sup> anthropologists take a different view.

The loss of interest by social anthropologists in the biological characteristics of race and in comparative questions conveniently allowed anthropologists to avoid examining the consequences of miscegenation for the definition of race. The very term was avoided as politically dangerous.<sup>6</sup> Because scientific interest was directed towards a particular kind of culture, that which was traditional and which defined Aborigines, and because miscegenation was less common in the remoter parts of the continent where this traditional culture was studied, there was no need for these studies to concern themselves with cultural or biological change. Thus while in most parts of the continent the Aborigines had learned a great deal (though not of course scientifically) about the anthropologists' culture, the anthropologists' interest was only in those who had escaped, through geographical fortune, the direct invasion of their territory. In the closely settled areas where often large Aboriginal minorities were to be found, there was little interest expressed by anthropologists except for some studies in the 1940's and '50s in which Aborigines were described as mixed-bloods, half-castes or as what was then a euphemism, part-Aborigines. There were attempts to find other terms; Elkin used 'civilised Aborigines' (1935).

The approach taken in these studies was somewhat piecemeal with accounts of kinship systems and other traditional features interspersed with observations of the contemporary situation (e.g. Reay 1945). The usual anthropological practice of studying a small community as if it were a stable and bounded entity was difficult, given the nature of these groups. However, the historical, political and economic forces that had created the community being studied received little systematic or analytic attention except in the work of Beckett (e.g. 1958a; *b*).

The dominant theory saw culture as exotic and unchanging so that there was virtually no interest in the active part Aborigines were taking in adjusting (or adapting) to the situation they found themselves in. Most anthropologists would have rejected the view that Aboriginal culture was being reworked into a different pattern. These NSW Aborigines had 'lost' their culture. Elements of the traditional culture were sought as if they were gems in a mess of broken remnants (Kelly 1935). While there is more subtlety in the presentation today, the quest for cultural continuities is still the conceptual basis for a good deal of anthropology in Australia.

The relationship between 'race' and 'culture' remained confusing in the literature. The use of the terms half-caste, mixed bloods and part-Aborigine without the relevance of 'caste' and 'blood' to what were supposedly studies of culture being spelt out, imply a causal connexion between the dilution of the blood and the loss of Aboriginal, that is, traditional practices. In some cases there were references to these matters but no systematic analysis was attempted. These studies did not continue and little of the research was published (cf. Reay 1964). One reason was that studies of such groups had low status in the academic world. Beckett has said that those who worked with half-castes were considered to be doing apprentice anthropology (personal communication).

Such judgements were due to two factors. First, anthropologists attach a great deal of importance to fieldwork, which consists of working for at least a year with people who are very isolated from one's homeland, in a foreign language and where nothing of day-to-day life is initially understood. The experience is clearly, usually, an intense and deeply involving one, both intellectually and emotionally. The intellectual challenge of analysing such foreign situations is assumed to be as unique as the fieldwork experience, and has become a necessary initiation for serious anthropologists. This goes some way to explaining why anthropology in 'settled Australia' among 'mixed bloods' or 'detribalised remnants' who spoke English, was treated as of no great moment.

But it is detracting not a whit from the significance of fieldwork to point out that at least a few ethnographies resulting from these baptisms of fire are rather pedestrian descriptive works.<sup>7</sup> This would seem to indicate that the fieldwork experience does not automatically produce the analytic goods. On the other hand some studies where the ethnographer is familiar through prior socialisation with the language and institutions of the group which is the object of analysis have provided important insights into aspects of social life (e.g. Willis 1977; Wild 1974). Thus the foreignness or familiarity of one's hosts, or informants, is hardly the crucial variable which determines the worth of the work. Further, whether a group is exotic or mundane is clearly an ideologically loaded judgement, and it would be hard to argue that the intimate involvement with a particular group of people leads to illuminating insights about the human condition *because* they are different from one's own society. Some anthropologists become fascinated by the intricacies of a ritual or kinship system which may have little significance for any wider understanding of a particular human society or society in general. Thus it is not true that research among people whose lives appear familiar on the surface can be automatically judged of lesser worth or importance.

The second reason for studies of Aboriginal groups in settled Australia being considered unworthy of serious anthropological consideration is that the content of the culture, that is the nature of the social lives of these groups, was judged uninteresting. Few 'traditional elements' remained and the people lived in ways that appeared depressing and deprived. Why this should be so was not a question anthropologists felt either interested or competent to study. I suspect that they felt that it was well understood anyway and documenting the depressing tale of racism and domination did not have any appeal. For these reasons the work of those who did research in this unpopular field is the more to

be valued (Kelly 1935; 1944; Reay 1945; 1949; Reay & Sitlington 1948; Calley 1956; 1957; Bell 1956; Fink 1957; Beckett 1958a; 1958b; 1964).

A more general understanding of the theoretical climate that placed 'mixed-bloods' beyond the anthropological pale can be gained from an examination of the theory of culture used by anthropologists. The common view that after what was called 'culture contact' Aborigines began to 'lose' their culture can be directly related to the predominant view of what culture was. As mentioned above, culture was seen as unchanging and exotic. While the remote Aborigines were still speaking their languages and performing ceremonies they could reside on government reserves receiving welfare payments and using four-wheel-drive vehicles without compromising their status as anthropological informants on authentic Aboriginality. Those without these particular cultural characteristics were a different kettle of fish, as we shall see below.

Talal Asad has argued that 'the main trouble with much colonial anthropology . . . and with much contemporary anthropology too . . . has been, not its ideological service in the cause of imperialism, but its ideological conception of social structure and of culture' (1979: 624). He asserts that the difficulties that anthropologists have encountered in conceptualising social change stem from their preoccupation with essential human meanings. These 'authoritative meanings' tend to be for anthropologists the *a priori* totality which defines and reproduces the essential integrity of a given social order.

Those Aborigines commonly known as 'fringe dwellers' on the outskirts of country towns appear to have little in the way of 'authoritative meanings' which are independent of the dominant society in which they are encapsulated. It is difficult to recognise a systematic and consistent ideology among subordinate groups who lack the power to give authoritative expression to their ideas. And anthropology, in Australia at least, has not conceived of those who bear the traditional culture as adapting or as making strategic or rational judgements, much less striving to create a world of meaning under the judging gaze and physical intrusions of those with superior power.

Wolf's conception of culture is radically different from those which depend on some notion of authentic tradition:

In the rough and tumble of social interaction, groups are known to exploit the ambiguities of inherited forms, to impart new evaluations or valences to them, to borrow forms more expressive of their interests, or to create wholly new forms to answer to changed circumstances. Furthermore if we think of such interaction not as causative in its own terms but as responsive to larger economic and political forces, the explanation of cultural forms must take account of that larger context, that wider field of force. 'A culture' is thus better seen as a series of processes that construct, reconstruct and dismantle cultural materials, in response to identifiable determinants (Wolf 1982: 387).

Before discussing the way Aborigines 'construct, reconstruct and dismantle cultural materials' I want to consider briefly another aspect of the confusion surrounding the process whereby cultural groups are classified.

### *Cultural classification, and the classification of culture*

To say that race is a culturally constructed category is different from saying that racial categories are really based on cultural differences. While such a comment

may be reminiscent of the tedious assertions of the 1950's referred to by Fox above, there is widespread confusion in the literature on this matter. The former proposition refers to the process of categorisation and the latter to the criteria used to construct the category. As Pierre van den Berghe put it, 'a race is a group that is *socially* defined but on the basis of *physical* criteria' (1967: 9). He is referring to two parts of the process of differentiation.

The process of categorisation whereby people of a society are allocated to one or another group which is called a race, or to any other category, is a part of the wider process of construction of ideology. The categories created are not a direct consequence of a certain genetic or cultural heritage, but are part of a cultural process of evaluation and bestowing meaning on certain phenomena such as biological or cultural characteristics. The major characteristics which will influence (but not determine) who will be considered to belong to the category and who is refused membership, may indeed be genetically given ones, but the fact that such characteristics are taken to be important is a matter of ideology: a dynamic cultural construction which is part of wider political and economic processes (Cowlshaw 1986).

For those categorising Australian Aborigines (including, of course, Aborigines themselves), skin colour is a major signifier. In towns all over the country those who identify as Aboriginal and have light skins will often explain and stress, to outsiders at least, that they are Aboriginal. Those who have dark skins and reject their identity of interest with other Aborigines are applauded by some and reviled by others, and again will be conscious of how their skin colour is related to their identity. Comment on the legitimacy of claims to be Aboriginal<sup>8</sup> are frequently made on the basis of pigmentation. That is, everyone recognises that there is a process of classification going on which takes skin colour as a major sign and demands that one identify oneself with one or another category. It is not the nature of the particular sign which makes this process of classification curious but the intensity of feeling surrounding it. With significant and continuing struggles over wealth, status and power associated with the racial divide, it is important to everyone to know where each person's loyalty lies.

The assertion that race is really a matter of culture is a claim that the categorisation of people into groups is often made on the basis of distinctive cultural characteristics which have become identified as an inherent property of a particular group. Stevens's (1974) collection of essays on racism in Australia deals with a range of minority groups including Italian, Greek and South African migrants, all of whom are seen as racial groups. In popular discourse, and in some academic works, there is a confusion about the nature of these two kinds of characteristics. Racial, meaning biological, characteristics, are often assumed to be more real than cultural ones and it is implied that if the differences between so-called races are cultural then there is less of a problem than if they are biological. In this view, ethnocentrism is less undesirable than racism (McConnochie 1973: 30). It seems clear, however, that hostility and inequality between human groups is not made a greater or lesser problem by changing the theory about differences associated with that hostility. Nor can the hostility be explained by the theory which may be used to justify it. Rather it is the process

which constructs these groupings and the conditions under which such categories become meaningful that require examination.

It is important to be clear about these issues because much discussion about the position of Aborigines in Australia today makes an implicit assumption about the importance of racial, meaning biological, differences as contributing to the social problems experienced by Aboriginal groups. For instance the authors of a recent work on the history of race relations in Australia congratulate themselves on a new broad view of race relations as relations which involve 'significant physical differences, marked typically by skin colour' (Yarwood & Knowling 1982: 7). McConnochie's (1973) 'analysis of the concepts of race and racism' had an early section on population genetics and Aborigines are treated as a biologically distinct group throughout. Nowhere is there a consideration of why certain physical differences are the focus of conflict. Nor is miscegenation discussed. Stevens, in the introduction to *Racism: the Australian experience*, says that the problems (of analysis) were most difficult where biological differences were least (vol. 1, 1974: 3), and that the contributors deal with racism in its most patent form—'discrimination between people, based on biological grounds' (vol. 2, 1972: 2). Despite some useful analyses in Stevens's three volumes, these references to the biological element of any racial situation are not taken up in any of the discussions<sup>9</sup> and there is virtually no reference to miscegenation. It appears that the whole subject is too embarrassing to be put on the agenda. Skin colour is still in popular terms, and often in academic writings, a major, though not essential, part of defining who belongs to the category 'Aboriginal'. What I am arguing is that a first step in clarifying issues concerning Aborigines in Australia today is to clarify the concept of race. If race is a social construct surely social analysis must begin with the question: who constructs it and why? I want to explore further the part anthropologists have played in the construction of Aborigines as a race in Australia.

### *The texts*

The anthropological endeavour in Australia was spelt out by Radcliffe-Brown in the first volume of *Oceania* in 1930. 'A systematic study of these rapidly disappearing or changing peoples' was to be carried out 'by scientists who have been especially trained for the purpose' (Radcliffe-Brown 1930: 1). Anthropology was also to be of service in supplying the knowledge, especially of the function of beliefs and customs, which is necessary for 'the satisfactory control, in administration and education, of what are called backward peoples' (1930: 2). But he added: 'These investigations are perhaps not of any immediate practical use, for the Australian aborigines, even if not doomed to extinction as a race, seem at any rate doomed to have their cultures destroyed' (1930: 3). Firth, who was Professor of Anthropology and editor of *Oceania* for one year after Radcliffe-Brown left, indicated the kind of theory of culture which underlay the usefulness of anthropology when he commended the principle of substitution: the principle 'of replacing an item of culture which is ill-adapted to a new situation by one which is better fitted to stand the strain, is advocated by modern

anthropology' (Firth 1931: 1). Such comments, intended as they were for funding bodies and governments,<sup>10</sup> do not of course represent these men's more serious and lasting theoretical contributions. While anthropologists would no longer, however, recommend the juggling of bits of culture, there is one feature of Radcliffe-Brown's and Firth's ideas which has retained a central place in modern Australian anthropology and which is overdue for critical reassessment: the traditional culture which is still the primary object of anthropological concern.

The central place of the concept of traditional culture for Australian anthropology can be seen most clearly through an examination of the three major general texts on Aborigines by A. P. Elkin (1938), R. & C. Berndt (1964) and K. Maddock (1972). The bulk of each work describes the intricacies of traditional Aboriginal kinship systems and religious ritual and belief. While markedly different in many respects, each shows the confusion of culture with racial categories, a confusion stemming from the static and mentalist notion of culture that drew the same kind of boundaries that the concept of race had previously justified. As these have been the influential general texts it is important to see how the authors defined Aborigines. I can illustrate these definitions and the concepts they draw on only briefly, and would emphasise that I am not mounting a general critique of these authors' important contributions to Australian anthropology.

Elkin above all other anthropologists wanted to help the Aborigines and was convinced he knew how to do so (Wise 1985). His text book *The Australian Aborigines; how to understand them* (1938: 2nd edn 1943; 3rd edn 1954; 4th edn 1964; 5th edn 1974), reveals his desire to explain the Aborigines' social organisation to other Australians. His static concept of culture is revealed in the preface to the 1974 edition when he says that 'Unfortunately, apart from the full-bloods in some regions, and even here there are significant exceptions, they have lost the essential elements of that heritage, that living link with their cultural past'. In a final section on 'A cultural hiatus' he says of those outside the central and northern regions, those who are mainly of 'mixed descent',

Their knowledge of Aboriginal language, customs, beliefs and sacred places is, with a few exceptions, fragmentary, though they often retain a feeling of belonging to certain tribal areas. . . . Aboriginal culture for them . . . is no longer a steady flowing stream of knowledge, law and faith . . . And no other culture has taken its place (1974: 379, my emphasis).

Elkin's intense and sustained efforts to improve the position of Aborigines in Australian society did not include an analysis of the institutions which were most directly oppressing them, particularly the Aborigines' Protection Board (APB). Elkin tried to improve the policies of the APB, but his efforts on behalf of Aborigines did not involve any analysis of the APB's function and cultural context, and he certainly did not believe that Aborigines knew what was best for themselves (Wise 1985: 142, 181 sqq.). European institutions were not usually considered to have relevance for anthropologists' analysis of Aboriginal society, let alone any interest as the subject of research.<sup>11</sup>

Catherine and Ronald Berndt's *The world of the first Australians* (1964, 1977) was the next major general text. The bulk of the work covers, in great and discursive detail, the social organisation, material culture, life cycle and religion

of Aborigines, that is, of Aborigines who live in the north and centre of the continent. As for the others 'Wherever Europeans settled in any numbers, the trend was the same. The Aborigines began to die out' (1977: 506). They explain that

The survivors were beginning to adopt some European ways, at least superficially. And there was a growing number of half-castes, offspring of European or other alien fathers and Aboriginal mothers. This dual process has continued all through the southern part of the Continent diminishing Aboriginality in physical as well as in cultural traits; and on both these scores a growing resemblance to Europeans (1977: 506).

Thus these authors are asserting a link between miscegenation and culture change, but this link is not the subject of further investigation.

The authors claim that 'the rapid disorganisation and relatively easy collapse' of the 'integrity and independence' of Aboriginal society was partly due to its 'heavy emphasis on non-change' and the fact that Aborigines on all counts 'were a conservative people' (1977: 492).<sup>12</sup> As for the 'traditionally oriented', the Berndts say they are harder to find than a few years ago but 'This is not to say that traditional elements will cease to survive in some form or other, but that Aboriginal life, as a way of life, will have ceased to exist' (1977: 514). Thus these authors define an Aboriginal way of life only according to a fixed tradition. There is no discussion of the issue and it is implied that the process is a natural consequence of the presence of Europeans.<sup>13</sup>

Maddock's text *The Australian Aborigines* (1982, 1st ed. 1972) is probably the most widely read today. He confines himself to 'what was living in Aboriginal tradition' though 'reference has been made to what is dead where that seems necessary for the explication of what survives' (1982: viii). Apparently 'what is dead' comes from anthropological texts rather than the memories of informants, because such memories are, in Maddock's terms, evidence of what is living.

Maddock makes no reference to race. The object of writing the book was to 'state some of the general features of Aboriginal society', but the author clearly believes that that society only exists in the north and centre of Australia. It is identified with a particular tradition, even though that tradition may be changed to some degree. There is also a recognition that there are other Aborigines for 'in some regions of Australia there is scarcely any difference between Aborigines and other Australians' (1982: 6). This superficial judgement is not supported by any discussion of how degrees of difference from 'other Australians' are assessed.

Although 'indigenous symbols and ways of thought continued to be vital even when mixed with new ingredients' (Maddock 1982: 9), the cults which Aborigines developed to try to better their relations with whites were not vital enough. Indeed Maddock asserts that such an enterprise 'must be seen as deluded in each case: either it appealed to powers that are not of this world or it proposed a most unlikely exchange' (1982: 9). While the exchange of ritual secrets for a share in European control was certainly unlikely to succeed, the same indigenous symbols are presented in quite other terms elsewhere in the book.<sup>14</sup> The fact that the powers are not of this world does not seem to make them part of a deluded enterprise when they are part of traditional culture.

Speaking of new ingredients being added to indigenous symbols and ways of thought is, I believe, creating a recipe for confusion. Aborigines are not passive recipients of new cultural practices but are responding purposively and systematically to their situation. I would argue that Maddock's formulations are not harmless metaphor, but anthropological mythology which contains the indigenous, vital and mystifying symbol of the 'Traditional Culture'.

It may seem unfair to attack Maddock for what appear to be passing remarks in the preface which are intended simply to provide the frame for his 'portrait of their society'. The positioning of that frame, however, determines how Aboriginal society is to be depicted. What is excluded has considerable significance, especially for the large proportion of Aborigines who do not appear in this work which claims to be definitive and is certainly authoritative. Further, the curious view that the unhappy situation of Aborigines has changed decisively because 'Aboriginal responses were becoming more realistic and Europeans were coming to have a broader vision of relations between settler and native' (1982: 10) should be recognised as a lay opinion, and not one based on a sophisticated theory of the relationship between the wider society in Australia and the Aboriginal minority. While successive Australian Commonwealth governments have for nearly twenty years been passing legislation intended to favour Aborigines, it can be argued that these have only succeeded in creating a welfare dependent minority (Morris 1985; Peterson 1985).

#### *Aboriginal identity in Australia*

Among white Australians, Aborigines are better known for breaking the dominant taboos and not understanding the totems than for having totems or taboos of their own. In the more remote areas where Aboriginal languages are spoken, kinship rules observed or traditional ceremonies practised, the legitimacy of Aboriginal identity is more readily recognised, although there is no general acceptance of the legitimacy of these practices today. Virtually everywhere Aborigines are a minority. In the uranium mining areas (Berndt 1982), in the country towns of the pastoral inland (Stevens 1974), and in larger towns and cities (Morris 1985; Cowlishaw 1986) Aboriginal communities have remained separate from the white population. The varied histories have created great variation in the nature and position of these communities, but I want to discuss briefly one feature which is common; that is, the process of racial categorisation and the implications for Aboriginal cultural dynamics.

A binary system of racial classification operates everywhere in Australia according to which an individual is either Aboriginal or white. This is as true where all Aborigines have a biological inheritance from Europeans as it is in the areas where most Aborigines are 'full-bloods'. In all areas there are individuals whose position is ambiguous. For a substantial minority of people, identity within this system is a consequence of their personal history, not of their biological and cultural characteristics. Such characteristics may not correspond to the dominant ideas about what the categories are made up of. Skin colour remains a powerful sign. I have mentioned already that some people are forced

to explain the relationship between their skin colour and their identity. Ambivalence is a consequence of the divergence of different signs, and of the obvious fact that there are not simply two categories of people in a racially divided community.

In many country towns for example a person who is identified with regular work, a stable nuclear family or participation in clubs and associations in the town will, whatever the skin colour, culturally have more in common with the majority of whites than with the most distinguishable sector of the Aboriginal population. On the other hand those who are part of a large family network many of whom are unemployed and some of whom are familiar with the lock-up, who have trouble keeping up the rent payments and who are to be seen sometimes joining the crowd of drinkers in the front bar of the central hotel, these people may be fair-skinned and still be Aborigines. Many people have some of both sets of characteristics. The ubiquitous process of categorisation gives meaning to physical and cultural characteristics but as these characteristics vary on several dimensions the categories Aboriginal and European, black and white are very imprecise. The concept of race and the associated stereotypes retain their force in the face of complex and contradictory phenomena because they are embedded in practices that operate to exclude one whole category of people from competition for status and material resources.

### *An alternative approach*

Having been so free with criticisms of others it remains for me to give a brief indication of how I would proceed to analyse contemporary Aboriginal society and such racially divided communities. In recent years the range of works about Aborigines has highlighted three themes. First the theme of Aborigines as victims of racism (Lippmann 1973; Tatz 1979). Second the theme of Aborigines as victims of capitalism, exploited or dependent (Hartwig 1972; Robinson & York 1977). It is the third theme of Aboriginal resistance to invasion and hegemony (Reynolds 1981; Morris 1985) that invites anthropologists to develop a more useful conception of culture and of the changes in Aboriginal society. Instead of the depiction of Aborigines as having lost their culture, or as clinging passively and pathetically to its remains, it is possible to present the process in the active voice. Europeans were wreaking havoc among the natives, but Aborigines were taking an active part in the retention, resurgence or even rejection of cultural forms as strategies in a political struggle (cf. Gilroy 1981; Wolf 1982).

Such a view begins with an active conception of culture. If culture is a creation, an expression of a human group's responses to their social existence, then the changing conditions of that existence do not mean a loss of culture. One could as well lose one's biology. Rather it means a cultural response to a different situation. That is, the Aboriginal response to change is cultural by definition. While Aborigines have not chosen the weapons or the arena on which the struggle is played out, nonetheless they have, consciously or unconsciously, continually responded to and resisted the hegemony of white society.

In Australian country towns there is an Aboriginal culture. There is an ongoing recreation of a distinct cultural heritage which has its own vocabulary, its family form, pattern of interpersonal interaction and even its own economy (Cowlishaw 1986). One source of this culture has been the specific everyday experiences in the past and now, which have given rise to common-sense (in Gramscian terms) ideas which conflict with the whites' common sense concerning normality, propriety and the sanctity of private property. One of the major conditions creating this culture has been the intrusion and hostility of whites. One of its manifestations is the highly developed humour which reinterprets events which threaten to engulf Aborigines' lives. Another aspect is exemplified by direct attacks on property. It is also manifest in the black power vocabulary which has been adopted by some of the young people and in defiant public emphasis on values that are known to upset the dominant whites (cf. Beckett 1958b).<sup>15</sup> Thus an analysis of Aboriginal culture today must include an analysis of the historical and structural context in which it has developed. A dynamic cultural analysis of the position of Aboriginal groups in Australia is long overdue.

Anthropologists have written of Australian Aborigines in a specific manner without being asked to justify their narrow focus or to consider the consequence of their definitions. The importance of such questions and more recent interest in the concept of Aboriginality (Thiele 1984; Anderson *et al.* 1985), stem from the dynamics of a racially divided society where a particular category of people has been subject to formal and informal sanctions since the arrival of Europeans. Neither biological nor cultural criteria can be used to demarcate once and for all a category of people called Aborigines, any more than set characteristics can continue to identify Greeks, Asians or the British. Such groupings of people are made according to historically changing criteria and they gain social and political importance for historically specific reasons. Thus 'Aboriginality' has become an important issue for Aborigines today because their varied historically created circumstances are a threat to political unity.

Aborigines throughout Australia are themselves attempting to define what Aborigines are (e.g. Langton 1981; Gilbert 1987). Aboriginal culture is being changed, developed and extended in embattled situations. There has not simply been an attempt to cling to a past tradition but, wittingly or not, the creation of new ones. While anthropologists would often prefer to avoid the crude political arena where the niceties of academic argument are ignored, they cannot avoid becoming implicated in the control of knowledge which is part of the ideological process whereby Aborigines are defined, delineated and controlled. It is as well therefore that we are careful not to fall into the kind of conceptual traps that make some of the work of our predecessors such an embarrassment today.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Fox points out that it was also in the 1950's that developments in genetics allowed the science of the evolution of animal behaviour to develop, but, he says, by that time anthropology had ditched Darwin (1975: 7). The connexions between biology and anthropology were in this view severed prematurely leading to somewhat farcical pro and anti biology arguments today and to the excesses of socio-biology.

<sup>2</sup> This assessment is based on personal observation, and lack of discussion of the issue in the

literature. Stocking gives a detailed account of the development of the culture concept in American anthropology and the 'cultural lag' in its acceptance (1982: 200).

<sup>3</sup> My attempt to analyse the history and current practices of anthropology is not intended as a rejection of the work of traditional anthropologists. Rather it is an attempt to define the nature of their enterprise and its limits more precisely than has been done previously.

<sup>4</sup> There does seem to be increased interest recently among young anthropologists in what are unfortunately described as 'urban Aborigines'.

<sup>5</sup> There is tremendous variation across the continent, partly due to government policies such as removing 'half-caste' children from their parents in some areas, but I think it would be true to say that in most cases 'mixed race' children joined the Aboriginal community.

<sup>6</sup> The term miscegenation was invented as a hoax in a pamphlet published anonymously in New York in 1864 in order to raise the issue of race in an aggravated form during an election campaign. The anti-slavery movement was accused of advocating racial intermarriage, and miscegenation became the subject of intense and widespread acrimonious debate (Bloch 1958).

<sup>7</sup> I am sure I will be forgiven for not citing references to illustrate this point.

<sup>8</sup> Since 1970 there have been many government initiatives directed towards providing resources for Aboriginal groups which require identification.

<sup>9</sup> Encel is the only contributor who points out that physical differences are not necessary for racism to occur (Stevens 1974: 30).

<sup>10</sup> I assume that such statements were made to cater to the funding bodies as neither Radcliffe-Brown nor Firth took much interest in practical matters such as administration and education.

<sup>11</sup> Elkin did encourage sociological research in European society but it was guided by empiricist rather than analytic concerns (Wise 1985: 148 sqq.).

<sup>12</sup> It is ironic that this depiction of Aboriginal society as unable to cope with change because of an essential conservatism, a depiction which is echoed in many other works (e.g. Stanner 1960), is at least partly a consequence of anthropologists' methods of analysis. It can only have meaning as a comparative statement, yet no comparison is spelt out.

<sup>13</sup> In another work Berndt (1962) has provided one of the few accounts of remote Aborigines' active attempts to determine the nature of their relationship with the wider society. Such work has not, however, been incorporated into the mainstream of the analysis of Aboriginal society.

<sup>14</sup> The string of anthropologists who have shown intense interest in such symbols might indeed have created the illusion among Aborigines that whites did value such things.

<sup>15</sup> Willis and Corrigan (1983) have discussed such 'oppositional culture' in Britain and the work of Genovese (e.g. 1975) discusses equivalent cultural creations of the oppressed.

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## CURL ESSAY PRIZE 1987

The Curl Essay Prize 1987 of £500 (us\$805 at current rates of exchange) will be awarded to the writer of the best essay, of not more than 10,000 words, relating to the results or analysis of anthropological work, submitted to the Royal Anthropological Institute by 30 September 1987. The prize is open to competition among all nationalities. Judges are appointed by the Council of the Institute. It is customary for the prize winning essay to be published by the Institute; hence essays already accepted or submitted for publication elsewhere are not eligible. Entries should be sent in triplicate by 30 September 1987 to the Director's Secretary, RAI, 56 Queen Anne Street, London W1M 9LA. Entries will not be returned to authors.

The Curl Essay Prize for 1986 was awarded to Dr C. J. Fuller (London School of Economics) for his essay 'The Hindu Pantheon and the Legitimation of Hierarchy', which will be published in *Man* shortly.