

Reflections on a Failed Crusade

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Introduction

Between 1963, when I first began fieldwork at a remote mission settlement on the edge of the Gibson Desert in Western Australia, and today, there have been major shifts in the ways in which the research enterprise in anthropology is viewed and depicted.¹ The new wave of reflexive studies looks closely at the nature of anthropological discourse and at how its authority is constituted (*cf.* Clifford and Marcus 1986). This trend was long preceded by attacks on notions of the anthropologist as an unbiased, objective and non-intrusive presence in the field. Both kinds of corrective demand the same thing: critical self-examination by the researcher, the acknowledgement of bias, and analyses of the relationship between bias, behaviour, recording, and presentation of data.

Questions of bias, recognised and submerged, loom large in assessments of any particular 'portrait of a culture', which is what an ethnography purports to be. As part of a general Western scientific stance favouring rational objectivity and sympathetic to notions of the researcher as a faithful and balanced recorder of 'facts', the anthropologist has long been expected to avoid overt interference and side-taking in the field situation and, at a broader level, not to assume the role of an agent of revolution or change. Nevertheless, it is generally assumed that anthropologists are in sympathy with those among whom they work and, if that group is an ethnic minority subject to discrimination and oppression, that the fieldworker's actions as well as sympathies will be supportive of ameliorative strategies and critical of perceived injustices.

According to Burridge (1973:35), it was left to individuals, mainly Christian missionaries, to alert anthropologists to the political implications of being in the field and asking questions. This consciousness-raising may have revealed to them the naive and ultimately conservative nature of their apolitical 'scientific' stand. In fact, one frequently cited contrast between anthropologists and missionaries dwells on the passive role of the former and the self-proclaimed 'mission to change' of the latter. Of this, Burridge (*op. cit.*) has written that anthropologists too are imbued with a missionary and moral outlook, bent on encountering the human 'other' and rendering it accessible to Western society; in his view, they 'represent a specialized

differentiating out of some aspects of the missionary role' (p. 18). Another important parallel that links anthropologists and missionaries is their equally heavy reliance on 'the natives' as the subjects and objects of their endeavours, as 'commodities' without whom neither fieldwork nor evangelising activity is possible.²

As Beidelman (1982) has noted, the study of missionaries in interaction with 'tribal' peoples has been a surprisingly neglected facet of the anthropology of colonialism, since of all its agents, missionaries were the most directly and forcefully involved in processes aimed at changing the beliefs and actions of those among whom they laboured, 'at colonization of the heart and mind as well as body' (p. 6). Beidelman speaks mainly of Africa, but little has been written by anthropologists concerning the impact of Christian missionaries on Aboriginal societies — perhaps in part because Aborigines in the main proved resistant to conversion, and there were none of the spectacular successes that Christianity achieved in the island Pacific.

Jigalong in the Mission Era

When I first went to work at Jigalong, my primary aim, directed by my mentors Ronald and Catherine Berndt, was to engage in a form of 'vacuum cleaner' ethnography; i.e. gather all the data I could on all aspects of the 'traditional' culture of the then decidedly tradition-oriented desert immigrants gathered at the mission. It was also my intention to study Jigalong as a community, in an attempt to understand the nature and extent of social transformation that was occurring there. I realised that this task would obviously involve close attention to the attitudes, values and behaviours of the white members of the community, namely the missionaries, who were there to minister to the needs of the Aborigines and also to convert them to Christianity. I presumed that my grounding in the anthropology and sociology of community studies, plus my knowledge of the general anthropological literature on Aborigines, would enable me to grasp enough of the dynamics of the community to write an M.A. thesis — which I did in 1964-5, and which formed the basis of a subsequent monograph.

What of the biases of the budding anthropologist at that time? I had experienced great difficulty in establishing adequate rapport with the mixed-race Aborigines among whom I had done my first anthropological field research in 1962. Assimilationist pressures and a long history of oppression and racial prejudice rendered those people embarrassed and ashamed of their Aboriginal heritage, and initially unwilling to talk about it. I was not mature enough to appreciate all this at the time, and so I decided that if I were to continue in anthropology, I would work somewhere in remote Australia, among tradition-oriented Aborigines for whom the Law was a satisfying given, a source of identity and strength and not yet subjected to the full force of a totally alien invasion. As a self-confessed theist, not yet confident enough to proclaim the full heresy of atheism, I was anti-missionary — but not anti-Christian. I saw no contradiction in my great interest in Aboriginal religion, or in my ability to understand it, since my cultural relativism was unimpaired by any maturity of judgment, and I was certain (correctly so) that I would find the Aboriginal religion much more exciting and intellectually satisfying than that of my own society.

In good anthropological fashion, my objection to missionary activity was based on its imposition of an alien system of beliefs and behaviours on another culture, especially a relatively defenceless one — or so I conceptualised it at the time. Once it had been decided that I would do my research at Jigalong, anthropologically almost virgin ground, I began hearing rumours that the missionaries were extremely fundamentalist and likely to resent the presence of an unsympathetic outsider. As it happened, the welcome I received was not unfriendly, and my stereotyping of the missionaries was modified to exclude those with whom I became close friends (and remain so, 25 years later). My presence and activities were a source of disquiet to the missionaries, as I soon found out, but relations remained for the most part cordial, and the lines of communication never closed — though admittedly there were some difficult tangles at times.³

Burridge (1973:216) has expressed the view that anthropologists, like missionaries, identify themselves with indigenous peoples against administrators and commercial interests, and that anthropologists also place missionaries in the ranks of the opposition. In my case, by virtue of training and personal convictions, I was certainly antipathetic to the missionaries' major cause: the spiritual 'rescue' of the Aborigines from the great darkness of heathenism and evil, and their delivery into the hands of Christ the redeemer (the settlement was called the 'Rescue Mission'). Needless to say, I was not opposed to the general welfare aspects of the missionary role. The circumstances and experiences that led me to depict them negatively in my M.A. thesis, and in a later monograph, arose essentially from my perceptions of their attitudes and behaviours towards and concerning the Aborigines, and my adoption of what I took to be the dominant Aboriginal view of the missionaries. This view was expressed less in everyday interaction with them than in discourse concerning them, among Aborigines but also between them and me. I no doubt failed to appreciate the extent to which I was being told what Aborigines thought would please me — once my role had been contrasted with that of missionaries and my sympathies towards the Aboriginal cause were generally known. It takes time and reflection for the fieldworker to become sensitised to the nuances and implications of his or her status as an agent in the dynamics of the research situation.

The process of fieldwork at Jigalong, then, involved giving substance to antipathies that existed prior to that time, but only in a general, philosophical way, and certainly not of such intensity as to prevent my establishment of overtly cordial relationships with the missionaries. Another factor, of course, was my dependence on them for some aspects of my work: the initial permission to work at the mission, access to goods and services, and sometimes lifts to and from the Meekatharra railhead on leaving or entering the field.

My 'case' against the missionaries accreted steadily in the process of doing fieldwork and was based on a variety of quite concrete data: missionary statements about the Aborigines and their culture; certain missionary behaviours towards the Aborigines, both the camp-dwelling adults and the dormitory-dwelling schoolchildren and teenage girls; Aboriginal statements about the missionaries; missionary writings in their church publications; statements about the missionaries from neighbouring station owners and other whites who had contact with the mission (truck drivers, government officials, and a handful of others who visited occasionally during the fieldwork). In retrospect, I believe that I was mindful not to

treat all these data as essentially of the same order of fact or veracity. Yet, in analysing the written pronouncements of the missionaries in their national newsmagazine I took their negative statements concerning the Jigalong Aborigines as truly representative of their biases but rejected their positive statements concerning their 'progress' at the mission as plain lies. These I felt were designed only to convince those on whose spiritual and financial support they relied heavily that the mission was succeeding in at least some of its goals. That they blamed the evils inherent in Aboriginal culture for inhibiting the prayed-for 'deluge of the Holy Spirit' could equally have been of the same order of fact; i.e. not really believed by the missionaries at Jigalong, but essential to account to their constituency for the lack of Aboriginal converts to the faith. Beidelman (1982:xviii), in a work much more recent than mine, addresses this issue:

Missionary writing, even the archival material meant for confidential use within the mission, has its own bias. Missionaries seek to confirm the purpose and sincerity of their efforts, yet need to present a sufficiently grim picture of heathen conditions and the struggle of evangelization to promote more support from home — but always with enough glimmers of success to encourage enthusiasm.

This quotation accurately conveys the biases inherent in the writing of the Jigalong missionaries in their church publications, but from what I saw and heard of their behaviour and discourse concerning 'their' Aborigines, the missionaries sincerely believed that the sinfulness of the Law was at the core of their failure.

Once having settled in the field and become familiar with the dimensions of settlement life and the personalities of those among whom I was studying, it struck me that the missionaries were in many respects as alien to my experience as the desert Aborigines. In fact, they were more so, because I had as part of my anthropological training assimilated a lot of information; i.e. I already 'knew' them, intellectually, but I had no direct experience of fundamentalist Christians and had not read about them with a similar aim in mind as I had in gaining knowledge of the Aborigines. In spite of obvious cultural differences, I found I had more in common with the Aborigines than with most of the missionaries, especially when I became better acquainted with the dynamics and politics of the missionary group. I was angered by the huge disjunction between what I understood to be 'Christian' values and behaviours and what I observed and heard of these as exemplified by the Jigalong missionaries. This disjunction existed in relation to Aborigines and was understandable in terms of their view of the desert people as 'children of the devil' and hence 'steeped in evil'. But, much more surprisingly, it also existed in some of their dealings with one another.

It was not until much later, when I returned to do fieldwork in a post-mission Jigalong, that I was able to understand better the dynamics of small remote settlements, where the characteristic tensions, conflicts, clique formation, intense in-group solidarities, crisis-orientation, culture shock, gossip and rumour-mongering are functions of the situation, and have little evident relationship to the religious beliefs of the white staff involved. Even more importantly, the literature on colonialism shows that such settlements, involving small numbers of whites and large numbers of indigenous people, produce sets of behaviours and attitudes about and towards

the indigenes on the part of the white administrators that, in their paternalism, condescension, ethnocentrism and prejudice, if not downright racism, have a depressingly similar ring, regardless of colonial setting or motivations of the whites. In other words, antipathetic attitudes towards colonised others are better explained as aspects of the European cultural heritage than as manifestations of fundamentalist Christianity.⁴

I had included in my monograph a long quotation from Goodenough (1963) on the characteristics of what he termed the 'station community'. In retrospect, I was aware of the salient characteristics of such isolated European enclaves, but at that stage had not fully grasped the significance for my own work of Goodenough's generalisations. Later, when I worked at Jigalong in a phase of its existence when it was not under missionary control, I came to realise that fundamentalist Christianity was *not* 'a difference which makes a difference', as Gregory Bateson (1973:242) has neatly put it. Among many other parallels between mission Jigalong and Jigalong the incorporated Aboriginal community was the statement made to me in 1974 by the community manager. It was virtually identical to one that had been made to me by the mission superintendent a decade earlier: 'You know, my biggest problem isn't the Aborigines — it's the white staff'.

The monograph which appeared in 1974 was entitled *The Jigalong Mob: Victors of the Desert Crusade*. That title was not my invention, but I approved of it when it was suggested (it should have been 'a' rather than 'the' desert crusade), because it followed the spirit of a common missionary trope (cf. Young 1980): the battle enjoined by the followers of Christ against the 'forces of evil'. Also, it accorded very well with my assessment of the perceptions of the fundamentalist Christians as to the nature of their mission at Jigalong.

As I wrote the book, I began to gain fresh perspectives into what was going on at Jigalong between the Aborigines, intent on retaining their Law, and the missionaries, intent on destroying it. The realisation which came to me, and which became a major theme of the work, was that both protagonist groups at the mission had important motives in maintaining a very low level of effective communication and in keeping the cultural divide as pronounced as possible. The lack of will to understand better each other's culture and motivations became explicable in terms of each group's perceptions of survival. For the Aborigines, submission to an extremely paternalistic and strongly antipathetic administration was the price they were willing to pay for access to subsistence resources and for the continuation of what they perceived as autonomy in their internal social and religious affairs. The missionaries steadfastly refused to bridge that gap despite my frequent urgings. Yes, I did hold forth from time to time, telling the missionaries that unless steps were taken to learn the Aboriginal language, and spend time in the camps in relaxed conversation with and observation of Aborigines, they would never get anywhere. Invariably, such preaching (which it really was) would evoke strong agreement, together with a set of excuses which made it abundantly clear that such strategies could not be adopted, mainly because of the constraints on available time. In those unreflective days of youthful zeal and naivete, I was evenhanded: on occasions I also preached to the Aborigines, about the vital need to keep the Law strong, to resist its undermining via cardplaying and other evils, and so on.

The missionaries' strategy was a familiar one: to gain full control of ownership of the means of social reproduction (cf. Young 1980:103) by concentrating their

evangelising and civilising efforts on the school-age children and teenage girls. The aim was to 'rescue' them from the 'sin and degradation' of their parents, who were too 'lost in darkness' and 'steeped in evil' to be redeemed, save by a huge and sudden deluge of the Holy Spirit, if enough prayer power could be generated. The more general question of why Christianity had made such small inroads into Aboriginal cultures, especially in comparison to the rest of the Pacific, was not addressed comparatively, but the monograph offered answers in terms of the specific Jigalong situation. The factors I identified included: the strength and pervasiveness of the indigenous religious system; an unquestioning Aboriginal commitment to its maintenance within an arena of belief, action and physical space (symbolised as *nqurra*, the camp) that was contrasted massively with the opposed alien domain (*maya*, the house or settlement); a further dichotomisation — of 'whitefellas' and a negatively defined 'Christians' category — which was a result of historical circumstances; and a level of intercultural communication that was so low that only fragmentary notions about Christianity crossed the gulf. By negatively evaluating the mission agents, first as individuals and then as a special category, the Aborigines were thus disposed to regard what little they understood of the Christian message equally negatively. Regardless of the personalities involved, however, the aims of the protagonists at Jigalong were so opposed that no mutually acceptable rapprochement would have been possible.

My conclusion in the monograph was that the Christian message was not getting through, even to the Aborigines who had been targeted by the missionaries for special effort. This conclusion was based largely on the fact that when the sanctions underlying conformity to alien behavioural norms were removed, as when the children were in camp, these behaviours were abandoned in favour of what was Law-ful, in Aboriginal culture terms. But behaviour is not belief, and it was entirely possible that Christian beliefs could have been acquired by the Aboriginal children during the dormitory years, and then retained, along with 'traditional' beliefs, but not manifested in overt 'Christian' behaviours (discussed below). The wise words of caution offered by Worsley (1968:xxiv) concerning the difficulties of studying religion, especially in cross-cultural perspective, should have alerted me to the need to examine more closely the nature and content of belief among the differently situated groups in the society — most particularly the dormitory boys and girls — before generalising about the society as a whole.

Jigalong: Incorporated Aboriginal Community

Following adverse publicity, continuing staff problems and the cessation of the dormitory system, the mission withdrew formally from Jigalong at the end of 1969, and the settlement was put under government control. This change did not spell the end of Christian influences there. One of the missionaries stayed on to superintend the settlement, while his wife ran the clinic, for two years. In the late 1960s, an SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) linguist began working at Jigalong, became very closely involved with the Aborigines, and has continued his association through regular visits. In his approach and intense interest in all aspects of Aboriginal culture, this man contrasted markedly with the missionaries, and as a result the Aborigines had difficulty in pigeon-holing him; he was clearly 'Christian' but also fitted the less pejorative category of 'whitefella' in key aspects of behaviour. He and

a second SIL linguist, who began work at Jigalong in the late 1970s, adopted a low-keyed approach, concentrating on language work and on assisting with the production of secular Aboriginal language teaching materials for use in the settlement school. Rather than engage in active evangelising, their policy was to wait for the Aborigines to come to them. Those Aborigines who responded by attending the prayer meetings and small services they ran no doubt did so out of a genuine regard for the concern and friendship being shown them by the SIL workers.

In addition, the mission retained a house in the settlement and from time to time there was a missionary in residence there until the mid-70s. The missionary I met during field research at Jigalong in 1974 differed from his predecessors in his level of education (much higher), outlook and stated attitudes, which were indicative of a more patient and less aggressive stance towards the Aborigines. There was also a coastal based missionary of the same sect, who made periodic visits, accompanied by Aboriginal Christians, to hold prayer meetings, show films, and distribute taped Christian materials (sermons, songs, etc). These visits were brief, and no attempts were made to engage the community at large in dialogue concerning the relationship between Christianity and the Aboriginal Law. Visits by this group, from the Pilbara Aboriginal Church, have continued into the 1980s, and undoubtedly have helped keep alive the interest of a small number of Aborigines in Christianity. According to the Jigalong people, these coastal Aborigines continue to 'hold onto the Law' as well as professing Christianity, and continue to initiate their youths according to Aboriginal Law.

Equally important has been the influence of white staff members and teachers who are committed Christians, and whose presence at Jigalong was at least partly motivated by their faith and their desire to do what they could to bring the Aborigines to an awareness of Christianity. In fact, a common basis for schism among white residents at Jigalong has been the divergent views of Christians and non-Christians. Aboriginal awareness of these tensions and, occasionally, open conflicts, has kept alive in many minds the old 'whitefella-Christian' dichotomy that characterised the situation in mission times, since whites of both persuasions have at times attempted to involve Aborigines in their conflicts.

Probably the most important change from the mission to the post-mission era was the disappearance of the old 'all or nothing' attitude of the fundamentalists; i.e., that conversion to Christianity entailed a complete repudiation of Aboriginal Law. There was now a less dogmatic approach, less conflict oriented and more intent on conveying the essence of Christian faith in an understandable fashion, using media, such as Country and Western style music, that were familiar to and widely accepted by most of the Aborigines, but especially the young people and the use of the Aboriginal vernacular to convey the Christian message. Such concessions to cultural difference would never have been made in the mission era. This new strategy did not entail an active attempt at syncretising Christian and 'traditional' Aboriginal beliefs, but rather a reluctance to brand the latter as all bad, or as needing to be renounced as a prerequisite for admission to the Christian Church. The former mission strategy of concentrating on the schoolchildren as the most likely candidates for conversion was abandoned in favour of working primarily among adults. In a sense this was forced upon the Christians, because the dormitory system no longer existed, and the school, being a State Government institution, could not be used as a locus for evangelical activity.

Once Jigalong had become an incorporated Aboriginal community, with its own all-Aboriginal Council, in a new, avowedly post-paternalist era of Aboriginal self-management, the situation called for radically different strategies in the struggle to Christianise the community. Before, the missionaries used their total control of government moneys, rations etc., plus the threat of police and Native Welfare intervention, to keep the older adults and mothers on the mission, and to keep the dormitory system intact. These powers enabled them to maintain their 'captive' audience of school-age children and teenage girls as the major targets for conversion — despite frequent conflicts with the Aboriginal adults over such things as corporal punishment and aiding and abetting teenage girls in their refusal to cohabit with the much older men to whom most were betrothed. In the post-mission era, these powerful means of coercion were no longer available to Christians wishing to work among the Aborigines, and with Aborigines being forced into a major reassessment of their role and powers *vis-à-vis* whites and the whole domain of 'whitefella business', the social field in which the Christians were operating was being markedly and continually transformed.⁵

With the departure of the mission, the strong anti-mission sentiment subsided. However, as I have described elsewhere (Tonkinson 1982), by about the mid-1970s the new government policies concerning Aboriginal self-management were being felt at the community level, and the weight of 'whitefella-become-Aboriginal business' was beginning to oppress the Jigalong Aborigines. At this difficult time, a certain nostalgia for the mission era was becoming evident among some of the people. This had nothing to do with Christianity *per se*, and derived largely from missionary paternalism in the management of non-traditional situations requiring authoritarian intervention. For example, the Aborigines were faced with an unprecedented number of children, running increasingly out of control, and with white staff members refusing to intervene because to do so would contravene self-management policy. The community, and particularly those members who were charged with the onerous duties of Councillor, would have welcomed the presence of missionaries to deal with this and other 'too hard' problems, such as the bringing of alcohol to the settlement. At a more abstract level, most Aborigines still regarded Christianity as antithetical to the Law, and particularly to its core of 'traditional' religious activities, but by now their hostility had been replaced by a degree of nostalgia for the missionary presence. Thus, by the mid 1970s, the Christians at Jigalong had this much going for them, at the very least.

The year 1979 saw the birth of a new phenomenon in Aboriginal Australia that was eventually to reach Jigalong and bring Christianity more forcefully into the consciousness of the Aborigines there: the rise and spread of an Aboriginal Christian evangelical movement from Elcho Island to the north coast of Arnhem Land, on into the central and southern areas, and right around the Western Desert region (*cf.* Rose and Bos, this volume; Bos 1981; White 1981; and Rudder 1981, who examine the Arnhem Land Christian 'revival'). Although white Christians undoubtedly played a part, indirectly (e.g., via the influence of U.S. evangelists) and directly, through their advice and assistance, a notable feature of this movement was its 'Aboriginality'. The leaders and travelling 'teams' were Aborigines, and they mixed their preaching with Country and Western style gospel songs, sung to guitar accompaniments — a medium very much liked by younger Aboriginal people.

In Western Australia the movement apparently spread west and north from the Warburton Ranges settlement, and in August 1982 a gathering at Mount Margaret community attracted an estimated 2000 Aborigines, including some who had travelled there from the southwest of the state.⁶ About twenty Aboriginal men and women, most of whom were already at least nominally Christians, went forward to witness for Christ and to be blessed. The event was judged a great success by the participants, and the evangelical team later visited other Aboriginal communities around the state. When I was at Jigalong later the same month, investigating the influence of both Aboriginal 'new Law' and Christian evangelical movements on the community, there was considerable talk of the 'team's' visit to Wiluna community (principally about many Wiluna mob members 'giving up the grog' as a result), and the arrival of the evangelists at Jigalong was being anticipated.

The white Christians at Jigalong at that time numbered a few families, who held prayer meetings and fellowships every Sunday. Aborigines were welcome to attend, but usually only a couple of older people and a few children did so. The attitude of the Christians at that time, according to one of them, was to be patient, anticipating the same thing that the former missionaries had awaited in vain: the 'entrance of the Holy Spirit'. They believed that the Lord would decide the right time for this to happen, and would guide the Aborigines at Jigalong as to what could not be retained in their culture. In a sense, this view fitted perfectly with the prevailing government policy of self-management, since it removes from Christians the onus of eliminating the un-Christian components of the culture, leaving this to the Aborigines themselves, guided by the Lord rather than earthly Christians.

From the same person I heard the news that one of Jigalong's most prominent male elders and leaders had been in Wiluna during the visit of the evangelists and had been baptised in a full immersion ceremony. This man, a pillar of Aboriginal Law and a major figure in the community's 'traditional' religious life, confirmed this report, saying that he had given up alcohol. In his view, and that of most other Jigalong people who talked about the evangelicals and the Wiluna visit, the major impact of the movement was its effect on people's drinking habits: they 'gave up the grog' — though there was much talk of subsequent 'backsliding' by some members of the Wiluna mob. Despite his baptism and his possession of a Bible and some Christian tracts, he was adamant that he remained a follower of the Law. I heard later from this man's sister's son that, prior to a severe heart attack the previous year, he had dreamed about angels descending to earth; his interest in Christianity may have stemmed from this vision. A few Jigalong women who were also in Wiluna at the time of the evangelists' visit said that they had joined the movement, but were not yet baptised.

From discussions in 1982 with several young men at Jigalong who professed a belief in Christianity, it was clear that they were thinking of the Law and Christianity in symbiotic terms, identifying God as the creator of both the earth and *juqurdani* (Dreaming) Law. One young man, who went straight from the desert into the dormitory in 1963 said: 'I can't help it — when I was in the dormitory I read the Bible and listened to the missionaries and learned that law. Then I got put through the *mardu* (Aboriginal) Law. I've got to hold onto both; I believe the two of them.' These men see no problem in such a stance, and from an older man, one of about eight men and women who regularly attended the prayer meetings of the visiting Pilbara Aboriginal Church men (together with some others described as 'not drinkin' (*wama*)), I heard the view that 'both laws are under the one head, God'.

I was not at the settlement when the 'evangelist mob' finally visited, shortly before Christmas in 1982. The 'team' was all-Aboriginal, led by the Warburton Ranges man who had been the leader earlier in the year. It was said that 'lots' of local people went forward to receive the blessing of the Lord, and the visit was hailed as a success. During my next visit, in mid-1983, I heard that regular meetings for prayer and gospel singing had been held in the camp area and that about eight adults (mostly men in their late 20s) were actively involved. The two SIL linguists attended some of the meetings, together with a few of the Aboriginal elders, all of whom were prominent in the Law. Most of the younger activists had been part of the dormitory system in the mission period, and those I talked to had indeed absorbed some of the Christian teachings at that time — contrary to my impression at the time I wrote *The Jigalong Mob*. All of them, however, stated their continuing strong commitment to the Law and their determination to 'hold onto both laws'.

In the period since 1983, the interest of a small minority of Jigalong Aborigines in Christianity appears not to have flagged, but nor have their numbers swollen to embrace many more community members. Problems with alcohol, and concomitant violence, have continued to plague Jigalong, and these have been a significant factor in the establishment of a major outstation in the Rudall River area, the original desert homeland of some of the Jigalong mob. Intensive mineral exploration activity in this area is another potent factor in the establishment of the outstation, as the Aborigines seek — not always successfully — to protect their ancestral lands from desecration. The ritual life continues, with 'big meetings' held every year at venues throughout the Western Desert cultural bloc and beyond, and large groups of Aborigines continue to travel long distances so as to attend them. There has been no diminution in the importance of the major initiatory rituals, but until further research is undertaken, it is difficult to assess the nature and degree of difference in religious activity, and the question of commitment, between 1963 and the situation today.

Conclusion

In reflecting on the fundamentalist 'crusade' at Jigalong, I have examined questions of observer bias and of the enrichment of analysis through long-term field research. In retrospect, the major shortcoming of the 1974 work was my inadequate appreciation of the extent to which outcomes transformative of the Aborigines' culture would have been much the same, regardless of the status of the resident whites, as fundamentalists, atheists or whatever. Poor communication, mutual distrust, inadequate understanding of each side by the other, and soon, are best comprehended in terms of the conjunction of indigenous peoples and carriers of a powerful alien culture. I also paid insufficient attention to the systemic nature of the colonising culture for, as Beidelman (1928:214) makes clear, the colonial world, in terms of its thought, values and mode of organisation, was a system. An adequate analysis therefore requires a perspective which sees the colonisers as acted upon by those they attempt to rule; and on this score, apart from observing that many of the missionaries seemed to be in a state of protracted culture shock, and proposing reasons for the missionaries' negative stereotyping of the Aborigines (most particularly the adult males), I did not look closely enough at this dimension of the contact situation.

In this paper I have also sketched an outline of major changes in the period since the mission relinquished control of Jigalong, as a basis for an assessment of the relationship between the two eras, with particular reference to the status of Christianity. The 'crusade' to Jigalong in the 1940s may have failed, in the sense that some 25 years of missionary endeavour produced only one firmly committed convert — a woman who has since played an active role in the Law, but has retained her Christian beliefs. But from what has emerged in the past decade or so, it appears that the dormitory system was not the complete failure I had presumed it to be. The boys and girls, and young women, who put up with close supervision and often harsh discipline — the threat and use of physical punishment were frequent — assimilated some of the Christian message, and carried this knowledge with them into adulthood and immersion in the Law. In the radically altered circumstances of the post-mission era, dating particularly from the inception of Aboriginal self-management policies in the early 1970s, and with exposure to a different body of Christians employing a more tolerant set of strategies, some of these Aborigines became interested in Christianity and professed their belief. Unlike before, there was now no compulsion to renounce 'traditional' beliefs in order to take on Christianity, and this has eroded the old 'whitefella-Christian' dichotomy.

Christianity is now poised to fill the gap that is being created by an apparent lessening in tempo of the old ritual life, and the on-going transformation of Aboriginal culture in the face of relentless Westernising pressures. Jigalong is now in the video-age, with versions of our culture invading the Aborigines' houses nightly. It is much easier to watch the 'box' at home than to organise other people. This is particularly so with ritual activity, demanding as it often does considerable preparation, many actors, and an audience. The will and the energy are still there for the annual 'big meetings', but what of the eleven months in between? Clearly, Christianity, especially if in part delivered via the television tube, may be able to help fill this gap, but without demanding the same level of effort that being a good 'Law-person' entails.

Our attempts, as anthropologists, to explain the apparent success of charismatic Christian evangelist movements around Aboriginal Australia, appear to have centered on two major dimensions of the phenomenon: to view it positively, as have Christian anthropologists such as Bos (this volume) and Rudder (n.d.), as the outcome of a growing Aboriginal confidence, fed by the progress made in Aboriginal self-management and leading to a sense of greater control over their lives in the post-paternalist era. In this view, once Aborigines assumed leadership roles in church structures, they were able to introduce appropriate and effective ritual forms into their cultural domain. This view actively contests the other major dimension: phrased in more negative terms, it sees the phenomenon as an Aboriginal reaction against pressing social problems that have in many communities assumed major proportions (e.g. alcohol abuse, violence, petrol sniffing, 'lifestyle' diseases, vandalism, youth delinquency). In this view, acceptance of Christianity enables the person to don the mantle of a greater power, which forbids — most particularly — the drinking of alcohol, engaging in violence, and other antisocial behaviours dubbed 'un-Christian'.

The two views are in fact more complementary than opposed, so the situation is perhaps best assessed as a varying mix of both elements: positive changes in Aborigines' perceptions of their power to influence contact outcomes may in many

cases be a major ingredient in the success of charismatic Christian movements, whereas in others (and here I would place Jigalong) the attraction of this kind of Christianity to Aborigines beset with seemingly intractable problems, most particularly those relating to 'grog', lies in its power to save them from themselves. Here the submission to an external and higher, more powerful authority could be seen as paralleling Aboriginal subservience to the Law — a Law which, however, offers no strategies for dealing with social problems that were non-existent in the pre-contact culture. In the discourse of the Aborigines at Jigalong, discussion of the charismatic movement centres on people 'giving up the grog' as a result of their membership, although some people volunteer comments as to the enjoyable aspects of the fellowship involved in the singing sessions. Theology seems notably absent.

Among the Jigalong Aborigines who profess Christian beliefs, there is no doubt of the genuineness of their attestation, and of their conviction that adherence to both Christianity and the Law is tenable. This evidence of the merging and reconciliation of two contrasting kinds of power relates to a theme that I have been exploring for some time. Elsewhere I have argued that the Aborigines of Jigalong were for a long time intent on preserving a clear conceptual dichotomy between Aboriginal and 'whitefella' domains. As I endeavoured to show in *The Jigalong Mob*, this dichotomisation had a quite positive valence during the mission era; it conceded the superior coercive power of the missionaries in the arena of 'whitefella business' while providing an autonomous Aboriginal domain, which to them was still the most important dimension of their lives and the locus of fundamental values, sentiments and orientations.

Events since the early 1970s have revealed the impossibility of maintaining this strict dichotomy: much of what had been 'whitefella business' is now, in an era of Aboriginal self-management, essentially Aboriginal business, and major social problems demand new solutions which must come from both domains to be successful. Hence the unprecedented blurring of the boundary between the two domains in recent years, and the suggestion of a new consciousness, which attempts to tap into both Aboriginal and European-derived sources of power. The emergence of Christian, Law-abiding Aborigines is thus to be expected, since they epitomise these new attempts to bridge the old dichotomy, in an empowering symbiosis which they hope will yield the solutions they feel are desperately needed.

Notes

- 1 For their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper, I thank Myrna Tonkinson, David Trigger and Deborah Bird Rose.
- 2 I am grateful to Patrick Sullivan for pointing out the significance of this parallel, and for his reminder that the anthropologist engaged in the romantic 'search for the other' is part of the colonial scene and frequently identified with a powerful and coercive culture — which must affect the nature of interaction between the anthropologist and those who are being studied.
- 3 Missionary disquiet seemed to centre on my intense interest in, and sympathy for, Aboriginal culture, and the possible subversive effect of this on their attempts to devalue and destroy that culture. A Christian familiar with Jigalong, in his review of my 1974 monograph (which painted an unflattering portrait of the missionaries), alleged that I had not made my intentions concerning the topics of study clear to the missionaries, i.e., that I had in effect studied the missionaries by stealth. In fact, the missionaries were well

aware that I was writing a thesis, and that it would include some discussion of them. I later found out that what I would write was a matter for considerable concern on the part of the missionaries. At one of their staff meetings there was a protracted discussion about it, during which someone announced that part of the requirements for the Master's degree was that a certain minimum number of copies of the 'book' would have to be sold!

- 4 Obviously, this generalisation begs the question of whether *any* similar colonial situation, regardless of the identity of the conquerors, engenders similar situations, or whether there are elements specific to the *European* cultural heritage that can be identified as generating these outcomes. An adequate answer would require a great deal of comparative research.
- 5 These changes have been examined in detail elsewhere; see Tonkinson 1977, 1978a, 1978b, 1979, 1981, 1982, 1983.
- 6 This gathering was reported on the ABCs 'Sunday Supplement', August 5, 1982; the programme brought out the connection between religion and anti-Aboriginal land rights politics. It appears that beside the white missionaries at Warburton who supported the evangelical movement, conservative political parties were also involved. One of the songs sung at the meeting (by a white) says:

There's a new day breaking in the Goldfields
The Wanggais are all singing a new song
They're no longer singing about land rights
They are all praising the Lord.
The people that walked in the Darkness
Have seen the great light...

Also, an Aboriginal Liberal Party activist who was interviewed predicted that the new Christian movement would 'burst the land rights issue the way a pin bursts a showground balloon — it will disintegrate'. Another Aboriginal, the Crusade chairman, said in answer to a query about land rights, "I believe this is God's land; we should use it the way God allows us to use it" and refused to be drawn further on the subject.

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