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Cultural politics: two case studies of Australian Aboriginal social movements


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The rise of Australian Aboriginal movements aiming at social change is certainly not a new phenomenon. What is of relatively recent date, however, is the Australia-wide support of these movements among Aborigines, as well as their explicit political nature. 

R. M. Berndt (1971) has made a distinction between what he calls “inward-oriented” movements of a conventional nativistic nature and movements of “modern socio-political protest”. His terminology implies a non-political nature of early Aboriginal social movements, as the communal action shown in these generally did not interfere with the life chances of European Australians and as a rule was not exerted in the face of the latter's resistance. With this formulation we are referring, of course, to Weber’s definition of power — a central aspect of political systems — as “the probability that an actor will be able to realize his own objectives even against opposition from others with whom he is in relationship” (Giddens 1974:156). Also, one is

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reminded of Turner's (1974:127) definition of a political field as "the totality of relationships between actors oriented to the same prices or values". But the borderline between what is political and what is not is blurred, which is certainly the case in the phenomenon of social movements. Many of the movements studied by anthropologists are described as religious because they involve the supernatural. But, as Nicholas (1973:66) argues, "for most societies . . . what we call religion . . . is the domain of authority", and therefore is difficult to distinguish from that other field involving authority and power: politics. In this sense early Aboriginal nativistic movements were proper political movements, involving the authoritative allocation of values.1

Berndt's qualification of early Aboriginal movements as inward-oriented primarily draws attention to the fact that, although such movements were the result of outside pressure on Aboriginal groups, they pursued a strategy of counteraction that only brought changes to Aboriginal society itself (cf. Kolig 1973:6). In contrast with this, contemporary Aboriginal movements are characterized by an element of more direct competition with European Australians. Such movements are venturing into what were formerly considered exclusively white domains of control of, for instance, land, labour and wealth, and are increasingly using the political institutions of European Australian society.

It is interesting to see that in a period in which Aboriginal and European Australian society are becoming more closely integrated, there is a continuing, and at times even a growing, emphasis on Aboriginal ethnicity. Traditional Aboriginal concepts and values are being increasingly used as rallying-points in the political confrontation with European Australians.

This phenomenon of the manipulation of cultural symbols in inter-ethnic competition can be fruitfully approached from the perspective of Weber's theory of community.2 According to Neuwirth's (1969) summary of Weber's ideas, community formation is the product of a process of social closure in which groups competing for resources and opportunities attempt to exclude others and may use as a criterion for exclusion almost any identifiable social or physical characteristic. The successful denial of economic and political opportunities and its accompanying denial of social esteem to a group will give it the attributes of a negatively privileged status group, "unable to resort to [its] own community formation and closure" (Neuwirth 1969:151). Contemporary Aboriginal movements can be analyzed in terms of their attempts to fight social exclusion through a strategy of solidarism — social mobilization and cooperation (cf. Parkin 1974:9) — in which the use of cultural symbols plays a vital role. More specifically, as Neuwirth (1969:155) illustrates for the American Negroes, it is the
re-establishment of a sense of “ethnic honour”, a belief in the superiority of one’s own customs, which is a vital element in the success of Aboriginal social movements.

But the combination of traditional Aboriginal culture and open political competition with European Australians that is so characteristic of modern movements also presents Aborigines with a big dilemma. As C.H. Berndt (1977) points out, in order to choose an intelligent course of action in their competition with European Australians, Aborigines must have knowledge of European culture. In this process, however, attachments to Aboriginal concepts and values undergo fundamental changes, “consciously selecting traits for retention or rejection is not the same as participating in that culture as a living reality” (Berndt 1977:408).

This dilemma, in all its facets, is a key issue for Aboriginal movements, as well as for the study of Aboriginal cultural politics.

Some highlights in the history of Aboriginal movements

Since the middle of the last century, when European colonization had changed many Aborigines from independent to oppressed people, movements of all kinds have arisen in various parts of Australia. Although different in character and manifestation, all early movements had in common that they were efforts to cope with “conquest and expropriation, while retaining black culture” (Maddock 1972:5).

Some of these movements have been hostile towards Europeans, others looked like an effort to come to terms with them. Eliade (1973:180) gives some examples of the more hostile types, such as Mulunga, a millenarian cult that was stimulated directly by contact with western culture. This movement originated at the turn of the century in east central Australia and Queensland, but soon spread through the whole of central and southern Australia. It was based entirely on nativistic beliefs and thus was embedded in traditional religious forms and ways of expression. Many of its connected dances portrayed a future war against the white settlers, who, at the end of the rites, were swallowed by the Spirit of the “Great Mother from the Water”.

More recently, in the early 1960’s, another movement of this type arose in Western Australia, but its ideological foundation was syncretic in character: the movement taught that Jesus had appeared among the Aborigines and that he had announced that the entire country would soon belong to them. They would become strong and powerful enough to conquer the whites, provided the “Old Law” was faithfully respected. In this movement Jesus took the form of a revivalist prophet of the traditional culture. The syncretic character of this movement was especially emphasized by the physical appearance of Jesus, who had both a black and a white skin (Eliade 1973:180-1).
An example of a movement seeking a satisfying symbiosis with European society is given by R. M. Berndt (1962) in his analysis of what he calls “An Adjustment Movement in Arnhem Land”. In the 1950’s Aborigines at Elcho Island Mission, off the north coast of Arnhem Land, erected a kind of memorial on which some of their most secret cult objects were publicly displayed. Up till then these sacred objects, rangga, had only been shown to initiated men, with the older men revealing some of their secret meaning. By displaying the objects publicly, the leaders of the movement were trying to create an atmosphere in which an exchange might take place: by offering Europeans the sight of their most precious objects, the Aborigines expected the Europeans to give away some of their secrets in return, such as the art of acquiring material wealth, education, and control over their own affairs. As Maddock points out (1972:1-2), this principle of exchange is based on traditional religious economy. Ranggas of the one clan may be shown to the men of other clans, but such favours must be reciprocated with payments of goods and return favours. This traditional practice was now extended to Europeans as well. In this way the Aborigines hoped to establish a society in which “Aboriginal and European features would be joined in harmony. The Memorial was a tangible means to this end” (Maddock 1972:2).

Until the 1960’s most of the movements were of the types described above; the actions taken by them were basically religious in character, drawing their language and modes of expression from traditional Aboriginal mythology and rituals. They were not successful in achieving the aims more or less explicitly formulated by them. After a certain time they disappeared again, most probably leaving their participants behind in despair, disappointment or in a state of apathy. The invaders were neither eaten by spirits nor conquered, nor did they show any understanding of the principles of exchange and reciprocity on equal terms. In fact, most of the movements remained unknown to larger sections of the European population, for whom until recently Aborigines were almost a nonentity. The few Europeans who knew of the existence of Aboriginal movements generally failed to grasp their meaning, as the traditional religious symbols used to conceptualize the ideas behind the movements and determine the actions performed in them (rituals, dances and magical activities) did not make sense to them. Therefore, our conclusion must be that these types of movements, however much they may have restored temporary confidence in the world of their participants, did not result in any improvement of Aboriginal conditions. They have not helped Aborigines to regain control over their own affairs, and, perhaps most importantly, they have not succeeded in changing the attitudes of the dominant European society towards the Aboriginal minority.

Movements of a different, and this time more effective type, sprang
up in the sixties and continued through the seventies up to the present day. The new movements addressed themselves more directly to the outside world, which was facilitated by the fact that some of the objectives they pursued were now more in line with European culture. In conformity with this, the participants of these movements expressed their goals not so much by means of mythological concepts as in a language that was comprehensible to Europeans, demanding better housing and health care, higher wages, the abolition of all forms of discrimination, and land rights or compensation for lost land. Consequently, the activities in support of the newly formulated ends changed from rituals, dances and magical practices to protest meetings, political rallies and strikes.

Changes like these did not necessarily imply the disappearance of traditional elements, which still constituted a common platform for many of the people involved. The demands for land rights, put forward in political jargon understandable to Europeans, were based mainly on traditional ancestral and religious concepts. In many communities the social structure had certainly changed, but still retained a firm traditional core, being determined by moieties, subsections and clan affiliations, all firmly rooted in traditional Aboriginal Law. In some parts of Australia the role of traditional elements was greater than in others. But even where Aborigines had lost most of their cultural tradition, they "tried to find self-respect in reverting to a broader, non-tribal, Aboriginal identification, consciously reusing those elements in their past which could serve to build up cohesion and to express difference or defiance" (Biskup 1973:268).

A movement which was marked by the above-mentioned changes arose in 1966/67. Aborigines on several cattle stations in the Northern Territory went on strike for better wages and were supported in Darwin by demonstrators, both Aborigines and sympathizing Europeans. One of the groups, the Gurindji at Wave Hill, took a significant new step in 1967 by expressing their wish for retrocession of ancestral land, which at that time was leased to a large British company. To press their demand, the Gurindji camped on the land of which they had been dispossessed in the colonization process, but which they still considered theirs. In his analysis of this movement, Maddock (1972:12-13) draws attention to its special significance in the history of reaction to conquest. The Gurindji claim, which was officially treated as industrial action, was, of course, something more, because "on the one hand their demand that certain European interests be dispossessed calls into question existing property relationships; on the other hand their stand asserts a distinctive way of life. Were the Gurindji to accept assimilation they could be bought off, for land would be then only a commodity to them. But at present they see land as a base for an economically cooperative society characterized by the
persistence of many elements of Aboriginal culture." From now on other Aboriginal movements arose which emphasized the same two points. To press their demands effectively, Aboriginal spokesmen and leaders learned another skill which the participants of previous movements lacked, namely, how to use the mass media. Rowley (1972:340-1) points out that, like the leaders of anti-colonial movements, the Aborigines knew that they could find strong support in the heart of white man's society. With respect to this point, too, the Gurindji were the first to exploit these possibilities fully. The leaders of their movements went to the southern cities for support and received nationwide attention via the mass media. Others followed their example and organized speaking tours and protest marches, and demonstrations took place with growing frequency. Many Aboriginal communities became politically active in the cities and on cattle-stations, but also in the Reserves in the far north where Aboriginal culture had remained strong.

A notable example of the last-mentioned group are the Aborigines at Yirrkalla (Arnhem Land), who with growing concern saw the mining companies and other Europeans entering and destroying the land which they considered theirs. In 1971 they put a case before the Supreme Court in Darwin, where they challenged a mining company (Nabalco) and the Commonwealth government over the loss of their land. The anthropologist Ronald Berndt spoke on behalf of the Aborigines and gave evidence on the spiritual relationship between the people and their land. The Court accepted this relationship but decided that this did not give the Aborigines ownership rights under the present Australian Law. But, as Lippmann remarks (1979:175), far from acting as a dampener on the growing land rights movement, the judgement nourished its growth. Indeed, the Yirrkalla Aborigines lost this particular case, but in the end won the cause for land rights. The case triggered off a series of new activities, both in Arnhem Land and in the big cities. In Arnhem Land Aboriginal communities living on mission and government settlements made plans to return to live in their own tribal areas to prevent western economic exploitation and to escape European domination of their lives. In the big cities in the south, urban Aborigines, civil rights movements and students demonstrated against the decision of the Court in Darwin. This and other demonstrations finally ended in the erection of a tent in front of Parliament House in Canberra. Aborigines styled it "The Aboriginal Embassy", as a symbol of the fact that they did not consider themselves represented by the Australian government. The attention paid to the Aboriginal cause by the media and the growing sympathy for Aboriginal demands among certain sections of the population forced the main Australian political parties at least to consider the "Aboriginal problem", and the situation of the Aborigines became an "issue"
during the 1972 election campaign. The Australian Labour Party, which had been in opposition for almost 23 years, went much further on this point than the ruling Liberal and Country Party Coalition. When Labour won the election, the new Prime Minister and former opposition leader, Whitlam, moved fast in the matter of Aboriginal policy (see Lippmann 1979:175-81). Some of the main achievements during his first year in office were the appointment of a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the establishment of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee (an advisory body comprising forty-one elected Aborigines from all over Australia), the introduction of a housing program, and proposals for the improvement of Aboriginal education and working conditions. Perhaps the most significant measure for Aborigines was the establishment of the Aboriginal Land Rights Commission, which had to investigate how (not if!!) land rights should be granted. Although the enquiry only related to the Northern Territory (which fell under the direct jurisdiction of the Federal Government in Canberra), it was the first time that a government acknowledged the fact that Aborigines had been dispossessed of their land and that the granting of land rights therefore was only just. At the same time the government also adopted "self-determination" as its official Aboriginal policy, replacing the concept of assimilation. The inquiries into the land rights claims resulted in the Aboriginal Land Rights (N.T.) Act (1976), giving Aborigines freehold title to the Aboriginal Reserves in the Northern Territory and granting the right for Aborigines outside these areas to claim unalienated Crown Land if they were able to prove traditional ownership. In 1974 an Aboriginal Land Fund Commission (ALFC) was established to assist the Aborigines with the purchase of land beyond the reserves. In 1980 the ALFC was superseded by the Aboriginal Development Commission, which also provides grants to Aborigines to encourage economic activities besides land purchase.

These are some of the major achievements of modern Aboriginal movements. It is far beyond the scope of this paper to give a complete picture, let alone an evaluation, of the developments, successes and frustrations of Aboriginal movements in recent times. As Lippmann (1979) shows, government policies between 1972 and 1974 caused a leap in Aboriginal expectations which was followed by disappointment and frustration once policy had to be translated into practice. The change from assimilation to self-determination also implied a change in the attitude and mentality of the bureaucracy, as well as a re-assessment of its role, and it appeared to be difficult for many officials to adjust to this new situation. Besides, European opposition to Aboriginal control over land was bound to come, especially in those areas where Aboriginal and European interests over land clashed (see Meehan and Jones 1978).
Two Case Studies

Maningrida, Arnhem Land

By the early seventies, groups of Aborigines were leaving missions, pastoral stations and government settlements in remote areas of Australia to establish small communities on their traditional lands. These communities are generally known as "outstations" or "home-lands", and today number some 200, with an estimated population of 6000. About 180 of them are in the Northern Territory, but they are also found in South Australia, Queensland and Western Australia (Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt 1980:1). Despite regional differences in style and size, the motives underlying this "outstation movement" were basically the same everywhere: recovery of self-determination. A brief account of developments at Maningrida, in north-central Arnhem Land, will give an example of the origin of such an outstation and show how it changed the lifestyle of Aborigines.

Maningrida settlement, some 500 kilometers east of Darwin, was established in 1957. Its aim was to attract not only Aborigines from the surrounding areas, but, more importantly, also the large number of Aborigines from this region who had moved to towns like Darwin and Katherine and to cattle stations since the Second World War. Because of the war and the fear of Japanese attacks, existing missions along the northern coast had been closed and both Aborigines and Europeans had been evacuated to Darwin. During the first years of their stay outside Arnhem Land most Aborigines had found jobs in the army, on cattle stations, or in European Australian households, but after the war the demand for unskilled labour had sharply fallen. This resulted in poverty, abominable housing conditions, poor health, discrimination and a process of rapid social disintegration. With the establishment of a settlement like Maningrida, the government hoped to encourage Aborigines to return to Arnhem Land, which would enable the authorities to control the speed and intensity of the apparently inevitable breakdown of Aboriginal social structure (cf. Welfare Branch Report 1965:22-23).

The centralization of groups of Aborigines took place fairly rapidly, and soon there were eight different Aboriginal communities from eastern and western Arnhem Land living at Maningrida (Hiatt 1965: 10-12). From 1957 till 1970 the Aboriginal population here increased from about 300 to 1100. At the same time, however, the non-Aboriginal population also increased considerably, and where initially there was only a small white staff, ten years after its establishment already some 150 Europeans were living at Maningrida. As the settlement was set up as a European type of community, Europeans gained complete control of it. The housing program, economic projects, the school, the store, the administration and public services were run by
Europeans, and in a short time the Aborigines became completely dependent upon them. The result was a system of dominance and patronage in which Europeans did the planning, took the decisions and gave instructions, while Aborigines, for whom the settlement was set up in the first place, were unable to exercise any influence on its development.

The co-residence of so many different Aboriginal groups in a small place like Maningrida posed a special problem. As Coombs (1973:18-20) points out, Aboriginal communities traditionally were very small, and social discipline was readily maintained without formal institutions, but by tradition and through the power of personal loyalties and affections. These kinds of controls were inadequate for communities such as Maningrida, composed as it was of different and possibly mutually hostile and suspicious groups. In this kind of situation social institutions are required for which Aboriginal tradition provides no basis and to which the Aborigines feel no loyalty, especially when such institutions are imposed by an alien group.

These two factors, the complete dependence on Europeans and Aboriginal society’s limited capacity for social control in larger communities, were largely responsible for growing dissatisfaction with life at the settlement.

But the wish to return to the traditional lands and to establish small communities there cannot be interpreted solely in terms of aversion to developments imposed by others. Another essential element must be taken into account as well: a renewed interest of Aborigines in their own cultural tradition. After all the many years of disintegration, Aboriginal culture appeared to be stronger than many had expected. Officials, missionaries and anthropologists alike have under-valued the vitality of Aboriginal tradition in Arnhem Land and its ability to adjust to change on its own terms. Maningrida offers a striking example of this.

Having lived under deteriorating social conditions on the fringes of Darwin and other towns for more than two decades — often separated from fellow-tribesmen — Aborigines reunited with their families at Maningrida to form “residential clusters” (Hiatt 1965:33), being a number of dwellings separated from others by tall grass. Such clusters were composed of people who spoke the same language, so that, for example, Burera speakers lived together, the Gunavidji formed a group, the Djinang did so, and so on. Another important point was the relative location of these residential clusters. Thus in the first years of the settlement’s existence, new arrivals settled next to their traditional neighbours, with the result that on a reduced scale the residential pattern at Maningrida roughly corresponds with the spatial relationships among language groups in northern-central Arnhem Land as a whole. Thus, on a micro level, Maningrida represented a blue-
print of the traditional demographic macro-situation of the entire region. In this situation Aborigines were able not only to speak their own language again, but also to restore the former social relations among themselves on the basis of the familiar moiety and kinship system and of the traditional relations among clans. This, in turn, facilitated a renewal of the interest in traditional religious matters and the performance of complex rituals. Such rituals, as Huntington and Metcalf (1979:30-1) summarize Durkheim's ideas on the subject, have the unique function of "a certain renewal of communal values, a firming up of communal conceptions, and a strengthening of social bonds...." The disappearance of these elements in past decades had given rise to chaos in Aboriginal culture. What the Aborigines wanted to achieve in this new situation was what Van Baal (1981:101) had described in another context as "to restore confidence in their own world". Aborigines began to perform initiation and mortuary rituals again, but also revitalized almost forgotten rituals, many of which placed explicit emphasis on the land, the seasons and the creative acts of mythological heroes. These rites assumed new forms and contained a new symbolism relevant to the current situation of the people involved (see Borsboom 1978). The rituals confirmed the strong and intimate religious ties which exist between Aboriginal communities and their traditional territories. In the dry season the people of Maningrida made short camping trips to their homelands, some of which were as far as 100 kilometers away from the settlement. During such trips the Aborigines would revert to hunting and gathering and visit their sacred sites. Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt (1980:4) correctly assume that the movement which finally led to the establishment of permanent outstations in the traditional lands derived much of its strength from the beliefs in immortals who created particular parts of the natural landscape and took up residence there. "In recent years there has been an extensive reaffirmation of traditional religion in northern Australia, especially on outstations, as witnessed by increased ceremonial activity and custodianship of sacred sites" (Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt 1980:4).

So it appears that the prime motives prompting the outstation movement are a combination of two factors: on the one hand growing dissatisfaction with life at Maningrida, where Europeans controlled the pace and style of life, and on the other hand a strong Aboriginal desire to return to the traditional lands and remodel their society according to their own ideas.

All over Arnhem Land the above-described events at Yirkala gave the general wish to return to home territories a sense of urgency, but it was the new Labour government's support to decentralization and self-determination which gave a great boost to this movement in 1973. The government initiated a system of establishment grants of up to
10,000 Austr. Dollars for Aboriginal communities at settlements in the Northern Territory with a demonstrated commitment to decentralization (Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt 1980:2). Aborigines also began to receive social service benefit payments, while at the same time more provisions were made for wages for Aboriginal labour. Although the emphasis in most outstations was on hunting and gathering, there still remained a strong need for certain European commodities which had become an intrinsic part of Aboriginal life. This necessitated a cash income in addition to traditional means of support. All outstations wanted to retain access to Maningrida so as to be able to provide themselves with certain European products (sugar; tea, flour, tools, cars, building materials, tents) and services (medical, educational, and social services). Clearly, the new communities represented not so much a return to the past as an "attempt to select and integrate elements of both Aboriginal and European traditions in a context free from white domination" (Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt 1980:4).

At the end of 1974 there were seven outstations around Maningrida, while by 1980 already thirty outstations had been established. The same thing happened around other settlements and former missions in the Northern Territory. At present the outstations number an average 30 residents, but fluctuations in size frequently occur during the year. This demographical flexibility is firmly based on Aboriginal tradition, whereby people always tended to be very mobile within a certain range. At present, fluctuations are due mainly to climatic conditions (dry and wet season), ceremonial activities, and frequent travels between the settlement and the outstations and between the outstations themselves. The character of Maningrida has also changed. Instead of being a place where Aborigines lived and worked under European supervision, Maningrida now is mainly a service center for the outstations. Only during the wet season do many Aborigines from isolated areas temporarily move back to the settlement. An Aboriginal Council has replaced the former Superintendent, a European officer with far-reaching powers. The number of whites at the settlement is smaller than before, approximately 75, including children. Most of them are government employees, such as teachers, hospital personnel, policemen, community advisers, or officials with Aboriginal development organizations such as the Maningrida Progress Association. Some of them have not given up their reservations concerning the present-day situation and are just doing their jobs; others have played, or still continue to play, "vital supportive roles, often out of a sense of personal commitment to the concept of Aboriginal self-determination. The outstation movement will continue to depend very much on their dedication for some time to come" (Coombs, Dexter and Hiatt 1980:3).

So far, observers have reported some very positive effects of the
outstation movement. The health situation of both adults and children has improved as a result of a more balanced diet, and particularly a decreasing use of sweets and alcohol. Also positive psychosocial effects of outstation life have been reported (Morice 1976). The growing difference between the "cultural framework of meaning" and the "pattern of social action" (Geertz 1973:144-69) which existed at the settlement is being brought back to acceptable proportions at the outstations, where Aborigines are much more in control of their physical, social and spiritual environment (see Borsboom 1982). But there are some serious dilemmas, too. One is the remaining tension between the attainment of self-control and the desire for European goods and services which will keep Aborigines dependent on the wider Australian society. A solution for this that has been suggested is self-management by the Aborigines of the settlement of Maningrida. This, in fact, has been an object of official policy in recent years. But here immediately another problem arises. Management of a settlement like Maningrida is only possible if the Aborigines are given a European-style education and training to enable them to take over the functions of European mechanics, teachers, nurses, doctors, managers and so on. The question is whether this is possible in the present-day situation in Arnhem Land, in which Aboriginal groups have opted for a life in the bush in their own territories. In order to receive an education, children would have to go to school in the settlement or even in towns and cities outside Arnhem Land, which would seriously conflict with Aboriginal ideas of life in an independent outstation community. On the other hand, keeping children away from school, as now happens in the dry season, when absenteeism is almost 75 per cent, implies illiteracy for future generations, and consequently serious difficulties for this group in coping with the contemporary socio-economic conditions of even such a remote place as Arnhem Land.

As yet, no one knows the answers to the above-mentioned problems. Certainly not white officials who propagandize self-management but are introducing a new variant of assimilation instead, nor the white advocates of the movement (including anthropologists), who tend to minimize dependency on Australian society as a whole. It seems as if the Aborigines themselves are most keenly aware of these dilemmas. Some outstations have established small bush schools in an attempt to combine a semi-nomadic way of life with a type of education that is adjusted to this situation. Lessons are given by a visiting European teacher or a resident Aboriginal teaching-assistant (at one outstation there was a resident European teacher, but this was exceptional). It is too early yet to know if these attempts will be successful, but much seems to depend on the visiting teachers' ability to cope with living conditions at the outstation and on the willingness of the main school at Maningrida to support these experiments with personnel, material
and advice. Another experiment has been a joint attempt by an Aboriginal community and a resident linguist of the settlement to evolve a bilingual curriculum adapted to the specific situation of the children involved. At the time of writing it is unknown how these attempts have worked out in practice.

The Gascoyne district

The Aboriginal people of the Gascoyne district have had relatively intensive contact with Europeans, resulting in a considerable loss of Aboriginal traditions. Soon after the settlement of the district by European pastoralists, in the 1870's, Aborigines became attached to the sheep stations established by these colonists, and in this process lost many of their characteristics of an independent, semi-nomadic hunting and gathering people. But, in spite of its profound influence on Aboriginal life, the pastoral industry still allowed Aborigines a certain leeway for maintaining part of their own cultural identity. The way of life of Aborigines who, for whatever reason, moved from the sheep and cattle stations to an urban environment changed much more fundamentally.

Until the late 1950's the Aborigines of the Gascoyne district lived and worked mainly on the sheep stations. Since then they have increasingly moved into the town of Carnarvon, where at present more than 90 per cent of the Aboriginal population of the Gascoyne district live more or less permanently.

Within the scope of the present article it is impossible to do justice to the intricacies of the processes of social change occurring in this community and to explain the shifting lines of demarcation between its subgroups. It is therefore with a certain disregard for these details that we will distinguish here between those who still have a rural or pastoral orientation and those who have become rather more firmly integrated into the town life. Adult members of the former group have grown up on the sheep stations in “the bush” and the majority of the adult males still have jobs in the pastoral industry. In conjunction with their rural background, “pastoral station Aborigines” are still familiar with the traditional Aboriginal culture, even if in a number of cases only a rather fragmentary knowledge is involved. This group is furthermore characterized by a high incidence of unemployment, low standards of education, low level of income, bad housing, and poor health — in short, all the familiar features of what are aptly described in the Australian literature as Aboriginal fringe dwellers. The term refers to the geographic location of these people on the fringes of country towns as well as to their peripheral position in Australian society. In Carnarvon the people who may be placed in this category lived in two separate residential areas, namely on the Aboriginal reserve, an area of land falling under the authority
of the Department for Community Welfare, and in a shanty town situated on both privately owned land and land belonging to the local or state government. Aborigines with a strong urban orientation lived in conventional houses scattered amongst the European population of the town.\textsuperscript{5}

The story of the development of Aboriginal movements in the Gascoyne district begins in the late 1960's. Nothing is known of earlier movements, neither in written nor in oral history. The first collective attempt of Aborigines aimed at improving their living conditions occurred in the framework of a voluntary association called the Carnarvon Aboriginal Advancement Association (CAAA). This organization was formed in 1969 at the instigation of some Europeans working in the field of Aboriginal health care and welfare provisions. The CAAA had a mixed Aboriginal-European membership, but its operation and continuity depended largely on the activities of the non-Aboriginal members, in spite of efforts by the latter to effect complete Aboriginal control of the association. Europeans acted as president, secretary and treasurer of the association and generally convoked its meetings. Aboriginal members were more or less recruited by the European members either on a personal basis or because they were considered to be representative of some sociocultural sub-group. Clearly the association had no deep roots in the Aboriginal community, and seemed primarily to meet the need of Europeans involved in the implementation of Aboriginal policies to come to grips with a group of people whose behavioural patterns they found difficult to understand and control! In this respect the CAAA was indicative of a new attitude on the part of officials and the Australian public at large: a recognition of the impossibility of forcing Aborigines into a social mould designed for them by outsiders. But whatever its background, the CAAA gave some Aborigines an opportunity to reflect on and voice their wishes and ideas with regard to the improvement of Aboriginal living conditions. Specific projects designed as a result of discussions at CAAA meetings were a housing scheme, credit facilities for Aborigines who wanted to set up their own business, a reception home for teenagers and young unmarried mothers, a home for single young adults, and a "village" in the hills outside the town for Aborigines who did not want to live like "Whitefellas". It is interesting to see how this list reflects the membership of different subgroups of the Aboriginal community: on the one hand the urban Aborigines, who tried to become more firmly established in European Australian society, on the other hand the reserve residents who wanted to withdraw and set up an independent community.

Something else to be inferred from the list of suggested projects is an awareness of social disorder in the Aboriginal community, manifested by, among other things, a lack of control of teenagers and of
the number of young unmarried mothers. All in all the CAAA led a precarious existence. Its activities were virtually restricted to discussions of the more acute and structural problems of the Aboriginal community, resulting in the plans outlined above, which were well meant but difficult to realize at short notice as they made a heavy demand on bureaucratic procedures. Soon after the formation of a new Aboriginal interest association on the reserve in 1971, the CAAA was dissolved.

The stimulus for the new organization again was provided by Europeans. This time, however, they were two people who took a private interest in Aboriginal welfare and were not attached to any government department. The new organization was based on the reserve and drew its membership almost exclusively from among its residents. The name of the association was "Koorda Club", the word Koorda meaning brother. The Koorda Club's objective was to achieve self-help of the reserve people, for which purpose it tried to stimulate certain economic activities, such as carting firewood and fence posts, removing garbage mowing lawns, and so on. In order to be able to carry out these tasks, the Koorda Club raised funds for the purchase of a second hand truck. The necessary money was obtained through gifts by wage earners and old-age pensioners, and partly also from gambling activities, while a small remaining sum was borrowed from European sympathizers.

The core of the club was made up by a number of men and women forming the "Committee". All committee members were "family heads", all of whom shared a sense of responsibility for the life at the reserve. It was this strong involvement in the fate of the reserve people which made the Koorda Club different in character from the CAAA. More than in the case of the CAAA, the Koorda Club tried to promote the welfare of a small, closely knit and relatively homogeneous community. Consequently, the Aboriginal element in the club was stronger and more outspoken than in the CAAA. This was clearly apparent from the club's activities during the early seventies, when schemes aimed at greater economic independence took second place to attempts to control the effects of social disorganization on the reserve, chiefly by means of a strengthening of Aboriginal cultural traditions, or what the Aborigines call "the Law". In this respect the Koorda Club assumed the character of what Berndt has called an "inward oriented movement" with a millenarian tinge.

It will never be known if the same developments would not have taken place without the Koorda Club's establishment. It is certain, however, that the organizational form of the Club created a forum for the exchange of ideas and stimulated regular consideration and discussion of problems facing the reserve people. In order to explain the inward orientation of the Koorda Club it is necessary to say
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a few words here about the reserve people's definition of their social situation. One of the most striking features of this definition was the relative absence of feelings of resentment against European Australians. Examples as well as an explanation of these attitudes have been given in detail elsewhere (Dagmar 1978). May it suffice here to note that, although the leaders of the Koorda Club were certainly aware of the problems of unemployment, poverty, bad housing, and the like, they emphasized the serious dislocation they perceived in their own community. Drunkenness, violent quarrelling and fighting between husbands and wives, neglect and lack of control of children, unruly behaviour on the part of young adults, and other problems, were regarded as being consequences not of the socio-economic subordination of Aborigines by Europeans, but of a discontinuity in Aboriginal cultural traditions. Consequently the need for internal reorganization was stressed: once the prevailing “anarchy” in the Aboriginal community was checked, the position of Aborigines in the wider Australian society might be improved. This way of reasoning of the reserve community was certainly influenced by feelings of inferiority. Europeans had apparently succeeded in impressing the idea upon the Aborigines that they themselves were to blame for the difficulties they were experiencing. The leaders of the Koorda Club believed that their community had to become “strong” and well organized in order to “earn” the respect and help of the Europeans.

One of the more spectacular results achieved by the new movement was the introduction of initiation by circumcision of young men belonging to Aboriginal groups of the lower Gascoyne area, which had never practised this form of initiation before. The initiation of the young men concerned did not take place in the Gascoyne district, however. The “Carnarvon mob” travelled to the Ashburton district, were they took part in the ceremonies held by Aborigines who had settled in the town of Onslow and who had “opened up a Law ground” on a sheep station close to the town. Later on initiates from Carnarvon were also sent to places like Jigalong and Strelley Station. The men who decided to participate in these ceremonies by the Carnarvon people were all members of the Koorda committee, and therefore many of the activities of the Club were geared to the renewal of Aboriginal cultural traditions. The proceeds of the commercial activities of the Koorda Club’s truck were used to build up funds for travel to and stays at the initiation camps. Many of the meetings of the “Committee” discussed traditional rules in the fields of kinship, punishment, reciprocity, and so on.

But the leaders of the Club had to fight a great deal of apathy and reluctance to become actively involved, particularly on the part of the younger generation. This apathy not only concerned the Koorda Club’s efforts to strengthen the Law, but also its attempts to introduce
commercial and more socially oriented community projects. A full discussion of the backgrounds of this is not possible here. However, one major cause must be mentioned: the schizoid character of the reserve community. We are referring hereby to the fact that the adult men of working age of this community were not really settled in the town, in contrast to the old people, women, and children. These men spent a considerable part of their time in the bush, on the sheep stations where they worked, and only came to town for holidays. Psychologically life in town meant an interlude to them, a period during which they were set upon having a good time, and not on directing their energies to serious matters. The leaders of the Koorda Club were aware of this duality of Aboriginal life, and not just the negative aspects mentioned above, but also the positive attractions offered by life on the sheep stations, allowing Aborigines to be close to the land which plays such a big role in their myths and rituals, and away from the disorders facing them in town. This insight was one of the driving forces behind the attempts of the Koorda Club leaders to get a sheep station of their own where they could live together in relative independence from European Australians and work on the re-establishment of Aboriginal cultural traditions. It was this endeavour that forged a new unity among the reserve people. The pastoral workers who had shown little interest in the Koorda Club strongly supported the Club's efforts to gain control of land of their own. These focal points: a restoration of the social order by means of the Law, and, related to this, the return of Aborigines to a life on their own land, dominated the activities of the Koorda Club in the early seventies and gave the Koorda Club the character of a relatively autonomous Aboriginal movement.

After 1973 things took a different turn. The Koorda Club had been unsuccessful in two attempts to acquire a sheep station for the reserve people (see Dagmar, in press), and other projects took predominance. This was not due in the first place to a change of interest on the part of the reserve people, but rather more to outside influences on the Koorda Club. Applications of the club for government funds to buy a new truck and a small bus had been approved. Both vehicles were primarily seen by the reserve people as instruments for facilitating greater ceremonical activity, and as means of giving them greater freedom to travel to places in the bush and to other Aboriginal groups more generally. The bus was also seen as a means of helping pastoral workers travel to and from the sheep stations, reducing the high expenses incurred by them when travelling by other means of transport (cf. Dagmar 1982). Through these subsidies, government representatives acquired a larger say in the Koorda Club, and in 1974 the club was changed into a more general local organization aimed at the promotion of the welfare of all people of Aboriginal descent. Un-
doubtedly government officials encouraged this development (cf. Gray 1978). Since then the Koorda Club has been given more subsidies for various projects, all of them town-based and all of them relatively unsuccessful, or even complete failures. The interest of the reserve people in the Koorda Club has waned. But at the same time the Koorda Club appears to be relatively unimportant to many of the town dwellers also, as is partly shown by the lack of success of its projects. The shallow roots of the Koorda Club in the town have much to do with the way in which the town dwellers perceive their position in Australian society, that is, with their ambitions for the future. Many of the townspeople felt that they had achieved a reasonably good socio-economic position, and did not feel the need for a concerted effort to improve their situation. Besides, those who were dissatisfied generally did not see an emphasis on Aboriginality or collective projects as a solution for their socio-economic problems. In spite of the lack of widespread support of the Koorda Club among the town group, a number of town dwellers joined the club and even came to dominate the Club’s committee. But these people, who — both as regards physical appearance and from their own point of view — constituted a kind of Aboriginal socio-economic elite, consciously or unconsciously adopted the attitude that the club was really for the benefit of the less fortunate members of the Aboriginal community. This attitude cannot be more aptly illustrated than by the words of a committee member, who said to one of the authors: “You see, the Koorda Club that we’ve got going . . . well . . . most of them are not Aborigines at all, but we like to help them. That’s what we told X [a leading old man from the reserve group] and the way he spoke was as if he didn’t like that. But we try to tell them that we’re trying to help them, to give them something to take the lead, to lead them and show them, and eventually they get under way . . .”.

The problems of the Koorda Club after 1974 can be seen in the light of issues raised by Neuwirth (1969). As a minority organization, the new Koorda Club could not aid the process of community closure because of the mixed nature of its membership. Clearly, the members did not live under similar conditions and had widely differing ideas with regard to preferred life-styles (sub-cultures). Even if members of the town group did not renounce the ties with Aborigines from the reserve — as is shown by their willingness to take part in Koorda Club activities — they were unable, or unwilling, to understand the latter’s roots in their own mental world, their attachment to things and spiritual values that did not fit in with European Australian culture. But at the same time the reserve people — or, more broadly, the fringe dweller group — lived in great cultural uncertainty. Where life on the sheep stations had not left traditional
Aboriginal patterns of meaning and behaviour unscathed, the move into town was even more disruptive to Aboriginal traditions, having cast serious doubts upon their usefulness and tenability. The young generation — who as a result of school education had grown up under especially strong assimilative pressure — no longer spoke any Aboriginal language and had little or no knowledge of Aboriginal myths, rites, and kinship structures. Under these conditions, the revival of the Law by the old Koorda Club committee was no revitalization of a living culture complex that had been temporarily suppressed. Bringing back the Law was a conscious effort on the part of Aboriginal elders, who, in the process, were following a path beset with obstacles and frustrations.

Attempts by the old leaders of the reserve committee to obtain their own Aboriginal sheep station formed an essential part of their strategy to gain more self-control through a revival of "the Law", and to this day these attempts have not had any success (cf. Dagmar, in press). It cannot be emphasized strongly enough how much damage this has done to the budding autonomous Aboriginal movement in Carnarvon and to its leaders' morale. In the often depressive and chaotic living conditions of a fringe-dwelling group, it took extraordinary vision and conviction to map out a course of action that would restore a sense of purpose in Aboriginal life. From the point of view of a government that professed to stimulate self-management, it is unforgivable that the men and women who showed such vision and who worked on its realization were not given any noticeable support. However, it must be repeated that the lack of unity in the wider Carnarvon Aboriginal community created a climate in which it was possible for government representatives to get away with less than half-hearted support of the reserve people's plans. Even the local Aboriginal representative of the Aboriginal Lands Trust, a corporate body empowered to acquire land for Aboriginal groups, admitted that he had serious doubts as to the practicability of the reserve group's endeavour to set up a relatively independent sheep-station community.

Looking back on a decade of personal acquaintance with this Aboriginal group, one's dominant impression is of an atmosphere of great uncertainty with regard to Aboriginal identity and the future way of life of Aborigines.

**Conclusion**

The most salient characteristic of contemporary Aboriginal movements is their insistence upon the legitimacy of distinctive Aboriginal cultural traditions. In itself this is not a fundamentally new phenomenon in the history of Aboriginal reactions to political domination by European settlers. Its novelty lies rather in its combination with increasing Aboriginal sophistication with respect to European political skills and
actual participation in the Australian political process, together with a growing pan-Aboriginal identity, which, on a national scale, is raising traditional Aboriginal culture to totally new levels of consciousness (cf. R. M. Berndt 1977).

From our description of two regional manifestations of socio-political movements it should be clear that this sweeping characterization does not adequately cover what is going on at the local level; but certainly these broader national developments are leaving their marks locally, even if the exact lines of influence cannot always be traced.

Over the past twenty years Aborigines have succeeded in expanding the scale of Aboriginal problems, taking them out of their local confinement and turning them into national political issues (cf. Berndt 1977:8). As we have noted earlier, they were able to do so by presenting their problems in terms that were understandable to the European section of Australian society and by evolving strategies that enabled them to draw attention to — and gain support for — their ideas and aims from at least a number of representatives of this dominant group. Aboriginal leaders realized that changes in their situation would only be possible through "some prior enabling action or consent from a powerful majority" (O'Toole 1973:122). An important factor influencing this strategy undoubtedly has been the growing international concern for the plight of third world populations. Aboriginal movements embarrassed Australian political leaders by drawing attention to the conditions of dire poverty right on the doorstep of the Australian nation. In view of the above, it is not surprising to see that in the first instance it was urban Aboriginal movements led by people who had acquired a European style of life which gave Aborigines a foothold in the Australian political arena.

But the growing Aboriginal political involvement also had certain internal aspects. Only if the Aborigines could present themselves as a unified group would they have any chance of making an impression on the political scene. Here we come to the vital symbolic and strategic value of the land rights issue. Only with the new emphasis, in the second half of the sixties, on the right to choose for a distinctive Aboriginal style of life in their own clan territories did the Aboriginal political movement reach maturity. Aborigines who up till then had mainly demanded socio-economic equality now used the newly won support of Europeans to press for much more fundamental cultural equality. Urban movements joined forces with traditionally oriented groups in "outback" Australia and supported the latter's claims for territorial and cultural autonomy. In the land rights issue the ideology of the Aboriginal movement as a whole gained a powerful symbol whereby to rally widespread support. As Nicholas (1973:79) notes, "in any culture there are only a few values or goals that can be
endowed with the ultimate significance necessary to engage commitment". In Aboriginal culture land undoubtedly is such a value. Land rights constituted a new symbolic formulation of long-standing dissatisfactions, symbolizing Aboriginal "ethnic honour" and the growing conviction that Aborigines should not contest European dominance by completely absorbing European meanings and values. The demand for land rights expressed Aboriginal strength and independence and solved the dilemma — raised by the pursuit of socio-economic equality — of the Aborigines' political opponents actually serving as their group of reference. By accentuating differences with the Europeans, Aborigines achieved a greater degree of social closure.

But this analysis is still very much one from the political strategist's point of view, depicting Aboriginal culture as a rather artificial complex. The other side of the coin, however, is that by joining forces with traditionally oriented Aborigines the larger Aboriginal movement became imbued with a very strong and vital concern for distinctive Aboriginal meanings and values. These groups, in fact, became the fulcrum of the national Aboriginal movement, the solid and tangible representatives of Aboriginal identity! At the 1980 Land Rights Symposium of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies one could sense this new mood. Representatives of traditional northern Aboriginal groups were listened to with respectful attention, and one could not escape the idea that these were the new "high priests" of the Aboriginal movement. The men concerned indeed radiated a silent and powerful self-confidence; some of them addressed the audience in their own language, and their composure conveyed that whatever problems they may have had, the question of their Aboriginality certainly was not one of them.

Returning to the local level, it must be noted that Aborigines at Maningrida also showed self-confidence and a solid conviction of the desirability of a distinctive Aboriginal way of life with a strong traditional element. As a group they were able to profit immediately from the new spirit of the times, and could actually give guidance to Europeans who, officially or privately, were working on the betterment of the Aboriginal situation. Unlike the Gascoyne people, whose land had been wholly occupied by European settlers, they were able to act quickly in the matter of Aboriginal land. The Gascoyne region, on the other hand, shows that the unity between urban and "outback" Aborigines which is dominating contemporary Aboriginal ideology is not easy to achieve in the daily practice of a local social movement. No matter how prominent Aboriginal traditional culture has become in the symbolic sphere of the national political arena, there is no substitute for the unity of purpose given by a culture which still forms an integral part of the daily life of the members of a closely knit community.
NOTES

1 See Easton's (1965:21) definition of a political system: "those interactions through which values are authoritatively allocated for a society".

2 See Wild (1978:117-131) for more extensive comments on the relevance of Weber's conceptual framework for the study of Aboriginal-White relations.

3 Two movements which anticipated the movements described here arose in Western Australia in the 1920's and 1940's. The first was inspired by the ideas of William Harris, a part-Aborigine from the Morawa district. He became the spokesman of a group of part-Aborigines who decided to form a union and to fight for the improvement of the situation of Aborigines in Western Australia (cf. Biskup, 1973:158-61). The second was started in the Pilbara district, in the northwest of Western Australia, in 1946, when hundreds of Aboriginal pastoral workers went on strike to press their demands for higher wages and better living conditions. They became known as the "Pindan mob", who showed, as Rowley (1972:168) points out, "...the enterprise and ingenuity of people who had not lost all social cohesion, and formed in this operation a means of adapting to new ways in accordance with their own traditions" (see also Wilson 1961 and Biskup 1973:passim). Because of geographical isolation, the absence of large-scale urban Aboriginal movements and lack of interest in Aboriginal issues on the part of the mass media (and of the public at large) at that time, neither movement managed to trigger off the chain of events which finally brought about the changes described in this section. In this respect they differ from the movements which sprang up in the late sixties.

4 Chaos in the meaning assigned to the word by Geertz (1969:14).

5 At present, in 1982, the reserve is no longer inhabited. After the Gascoyne river had inundated the reserve in 1980, it was declared unfit for human habitation and its inhabitants were temporarily accommodated in tents provided by the Community Welfare Department. In 1981 a new housing development scheme for Aborigines was started, of which the first houses were occupied by residents of the reserve and families living in other fringe camps at the beginning of 1982.

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