Kinship, Mobility and Community among Part-Aborigines in Rural Australia

JEREMY R. BECKETT

Monash University

Introduction

The setting of this study is the "Far West" of New South Wales, a region of semi-arid plains, mainly given over to sheep grazing and supporting only a sparse population. The region's only large town is Broken Hill, a mining centre of about 30,000 inhabitants; the rest are small commercial and servicing centres for the pastoral hinterland: only Bourke, Cobar and Condobolin exceed 2,000, while the three townships of the "Corner" (the extreme north-west of the State), together boast no more than 250. East of the Bogan and South of the Lachlan, sheep grazing gradually gives way to wheat farming, while at Mildura and Griffith there is fruit growing. The population of these areas is less sparse and the towns are larger; however, they figure only marginally in the present account.

In or around most Far Western townships one finds a number of people who are known, locally and officially, as Aborigines. In fact, few of them are "full bloods", the remainder having European ancestry; however, in most situations the important distinction lies between those who have some Aboriginal ancestry and those who have none. The latter are "White People"; the former are "Dark People" (the polite euphemism), "Abos." or "Darkies". The stress on colour is not altogether misplaced. Most Aborigines are physically distinct from White People, ranging from the near-black of the "full blood", to the swarthiness of the "quarter-caste" which might in other places indicate Mediterranean origin; however, there are some who are physically indistinguishable but retain Aboriginal identity because of their known kinship with darker people or their adherence to Aboriginal ways.

Although one may speak of an Aboriginal way of life, this implies little that is tribal. The old tribal groups are dispersed, while local populations are of mixed origin; no boys or girls have been initiated for 50 years or more; the old rules of kinship behaviour, including prescribed marriage, are not merely disregarded but forgotten; tribal languages are scarcely spoken, even at home, and are not being learned by the rising generation. The eating of wild foods, such as kangaroo, is perhaps the only conscious carry-over from tribal times. Loss of their
indigenous culture has not, however, made them any more ready to adopt the White ‘Australian way of life’, as some advocates of “assimilation” seem to think it should. Instead of emulating the industry, thrift and regard for property and comfort, of middle class Europeans – with whom they had little contact – they took as their model the nineteenth century pastoral workers, whose way of life presented many parallels to their own. This white “Nomad Tribe” took little account of property or thrift, preferring to squander their earnings in prodigality and drunkenness; they changed their jobs frequently, affecting a sturdy independence, and took what was almost a pride in enduring rough food and conditions; generosity to friends was perhaps their cardinal virtue. Few Europeans live this way today, and those who do are not highly regarded by the more settled section of the population; however, it has been carried on by Aborigines for several generations, with the difference that they are more or less settled in one place and have large families. The White citizens of outback townships expect from their neighbours a minimum standard of material possession and comfort, cleanliness and sobriety. Not all Europeans conform to this standard, but almost all Aborigines fall short of it. Dirtiness, fecklessness, drunkenness and sexual immorality form a central part of the “no-hoper Abo” stereotype commonly held by White country people. The camps of scrap iron “humpies” and ill-kempt government cottages, which fringe so many country towns, are said to “give the place a bad name” and endanger public health; no White person would go there except on business or for some nefarious purpose. The entry of an Aboriginal family into the body of the town is regarded with misgiving, unless its respectability is firmly established.

Racial antagonism is perhaps strongest in a place like Wilcannia, where the Aboriginal-European ratio is of the order of 300:600 and where the Aboriginal population is a largely post-war phenomenon. Antagonism is less in the Lake Cargelligo district where the ratio is 300:1,500 and where the Aborigines live segregated on a government settlement (Murrin Bridge) 10 miles from town, but this may be only because contacts are so limited as to provide insufficient base for any positive attitude. In either case, there is a marked separation between White and Coloured. Far West Aborigines are integrated into the regional economy as wage-labourers and consumers, and into the governmental system as persons subject to ordinary laws as well as special “protective” laws, and the attentions of a special agency devoted to their “welfare”; however, there are many areas of Australian institutional life where few if any Aborigines penetrate. Bridge situations, which might lead to closer rapport between white and coloured, are few and in fact friendships are rare and intermarriage even more so. The

1 “Nomad tribe” was the name given to Australian pastoral workers by the author Anthony Trollope, when he visited Australia during 1870 (Trollope 1876:69); see also Ward (1958:9).
2 A more detailed account of race relations in the Far West can be found in Beckett (1964).
3 In 1957, four Aboriginal women were married to or living with white men around Wilcannia; there were no Murrin Bridge Aborigines married to or living with white people, though in neighbouring Euabalong five women and three men were involved in mixed marriages.