16

Dependency and Assertiveness

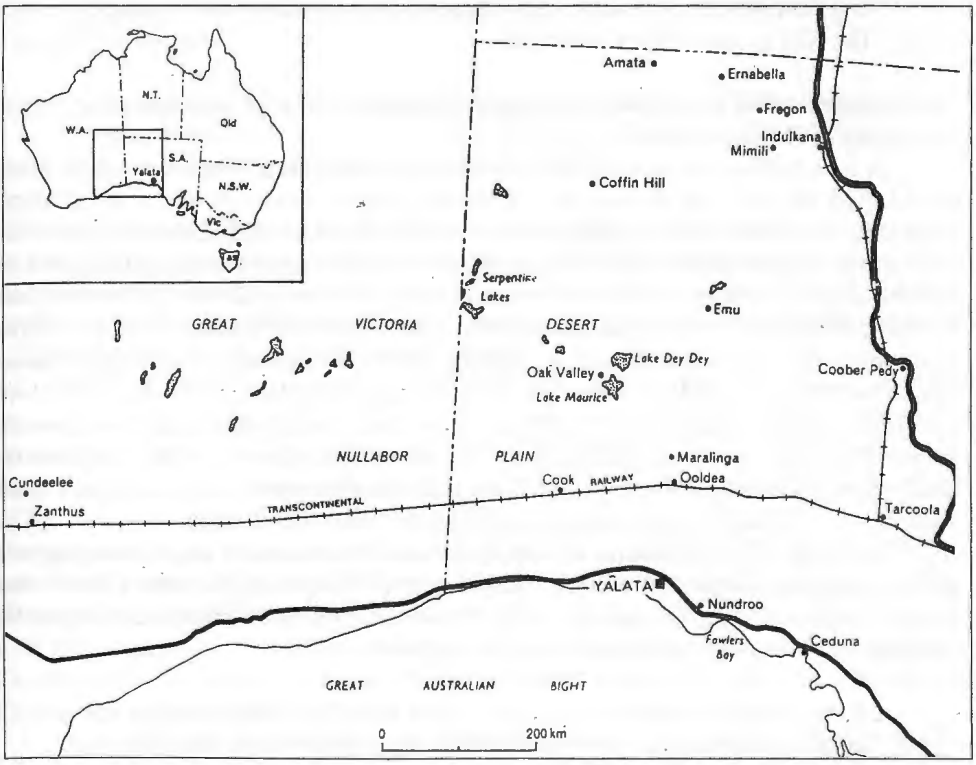
Three Waves of Christianity among Pitjantjatjara People at Ooldea and Yalata

Maggie Brady
Kingsley Palmer

In this paper we describe a community of Pitjantjatjara-speaking Aborigines living in the far west of South Australia. We examine the Aboriginal experience of Christianity in its several manifestations by tracing the contact sustained by one particular Aboriginal group, with missionaries and Christianity over a fifty-five year period. What we describe is fundamentally a reactive process, wherein Aborigines were forced to respond to the demands of the mission by action that included both accommodation and resistance. As a result of this process Aboriginal social and cultural action became modified and eventually transformed. As the role of the missions developed, their economic and cultural controls tightened and Aborigines became increasingly dependent upon the missions and upon the Whites who promoted them. As their dependency upon the missionaries increased so too did their powerlessness, and the Aborigines had little or no control when it came to determining their own future. With the emergence of self-management and the decline in the role of the mission, Aborigines were able to appropriate a form of Christianity and turn it into a thoroughly Aboriginal system. The Aboriginalisation of Christianity was a religious movement that, in part, restored Aboriginal autonomy. It gave to believers a legitimating framework to counter anti-social activity and to reassert their own identity and self-sufficiency, albeit it for a brief period.

Ooldea and the United Aborigines Mission

During the early decades of this century, Aboriginal people of the Great Victoria Desert in South Australia were engaged in large scale population movements which brought them into contact with Europeans. These movements had probably been in process before Europeans arrived in the region (R. and C. Berndt 1945:326). The building of the Transcontinental Railway line between 1912 and 1917 meant the



Area map indicating location of place names used in this article

establishment of railway workers' settlements and ration depots along the line. Aboriginal people who travelled through the desert country north and north-east of the line were attracted by the activity and by the 1920s many had gathered at Ooldea Soak, a permanent soakage on the south-eastern fringes of the desert. It was at Ooldea that many of these Western Desert people first encountered Christianity.

Daisy Bates set up camp near Ooldea Soak in 1919 and remained there until 1935. She refrained, however, from explicit Christianising and indeed was antagonistic to the notion of a mission being set up. She wrote:

> I would not advise any concessions to any aboriginal 'mission' on the line. It would merely be a 'jumping off' place for prostitution. (Bates 1924)

She treated Aborigines around her camp with homely medicinal remedies, shared her meagre food supplies with them, and documented social life, language and mythology (*cf.* Bates 1938). The attitude of Bates towards Aboriginal religious practice and belief stands in marked contrast to the attitudes and practices of the Christian missionaries of the day. Bates wrote of her Aboriginal informants:

> I kept religiously to their prejudices and tabus, and was as mindful of their tribal restrictions as they were themselves. By attending

> their totemic and initiatory ceremonies, I tried to keep alive in them the will to live. (Bates 1938:216)

She disapproved of the United Aborigines' Mission whose missionaries she was to encounter at Ooldea in 1933.

The South Australian Council of the United Aborigines' Mission (U.A.M.) was established in 1924. Eager to gain a foothold in the remote north-west of South Australia, the Council had applied for land at Ernabella in 1929 in order to establish a mission. The request was refused and later the Presbyterians succeeded in purchasing the lease to establish a mission there (Gerard n.d.:12-13). Undeterred, the United Aborigines' Mission sent one Miss Annie Lock to Ooldea Soak in 1933 to establish a formal mission station, having heard that a large number of desert Aborigines had assembled there. Soon Lock began to receive official government assistance and supplies of rations to deliver to the Aborigines. Lock 'had come to stay with the dark people and give them "plenty tucker, plenty clothes", and would teach them about God' (Turner, 1950:15). Relations between Lock and Bates were strained (Hans Gaden, pers. comm.) and in 1935 Bates left Ooldea.

The work of all missions at this time was concentrated on remedying the perceived moral degradation of the 'native camps'. The rationale of the U.A.M. was to 'save' children from the 'satanic' influences of Aboriginal religion, and to separate children of mixed descent from their Aboriginal families:

> A half-caste is a native at heart. ...Let the child, the younger the better, be brought up in our midst, then see which influence is greater. (Gerard n.d.:17)

In order to save the children from the evil influences of camp life the U.A.M. established a dormitory system at Ooldea, where parents were encouraged to deposit their children. The missionaries also strove to correct the 'nomadic habits' of the Aborigines and the distribution of rations was one method utilised by the U.A.M. to persuade these people to settle in one place (see Brady 1987:38-41). The initiation of the young boys into Aboriginal religious life was another focus for the U.A.M. They perceived that an initiated young man was subject to the 'will of the old men... when he becomes an old man himself he is so steeped in spiritual darkness that he has no desire for any light' (Turner 1950:145). The role of the missionaries was understood to be to 'snatch them as brands from the burning ere it be forever too late' (United Aborigines' Mission, August 1951:12). Noting that the U.A.M. made no attempt to use indigenous beliefs as a basis for their work, Bates wrote:

> We have not taken the lessons of the early Christians to heart. These good men, with characteristic prudence, merged many of these pagan beliefs into the Christianity of those days. (Bates 1914)

R. and C. Berndt, anthropologists who worked at Ooldea in 1941, also remarked on the fact that the U.A.M. had failed to utilise Aboriginal religious beliefs in a positive way which would 'allow the old to be welded gradually into the new' (R. and C. Berndt 1945:57). The attitude of the missionary in charge of Ooldea was quite different to the sensitive one shown by Bates. When invited to attend Aboriginal

ritual, the missionary interpreted this privilege as an opportunity to further his evangelistic aims:

> ...because of his entrance into the secrets, he is better able to gain a hearing from the people for the claims of Christ for their lives. (United Aborigines' Mission, April 1951:10)

R. and C. Berndt document that when given some secret objects which were normally only shown to ritually mature men, the missionary photographed them and showed the photographs to young boys (R. and C. Berndt 1951:137), thereby undermining the authority of the older men and attempting to destroy the status of what had formerly been esoteric knowledge.

The U.A.M. met with many failures in its stated endeavours to Christianise the Aborigines of Ooldea. R. and C. Berndt commented in 1942 that in fact little of the Aboriginal culture had gone (R. and C. Berndt 1945:53). There is documentation of large ceremonial gatherings continuing unabated at Ooldea, and of the movement of groups of one hundred or more Ooldea people to ceremonies at other locations throughout these years. In 1950 large numbers of Ooldea people travelled to ceremonies near Kalgoorlie and were absent for a period of six months (United Aborigines' Mission, May 1950); in November 1951 many visitors from Laverton and Mt. Margaret in Western Australia, and from Coober Pedy had gathered at Ooldea for major rituals. In May 1952 three to four hundred people congregated at Ooldea for ceremonies.

Notwithstanding the strong commitment that Aborigines had to their religious practices, which is evident from these large gatherings, the tone of the dispatches from Ooldea which were published in the *United Aborigines' Messenger* was determinedly cheerful, with frequent assertions of spiritual success. However, from time to time an account is rendered which perhaps more accurately reveals the extent of the mission's difficulties. One missionary at Ooldea recounts walking through the Aboriginal camp (a kilometre over the sandhills from the Mission itself) in an effort to spread the Word. What he encountered were Aboriginal techniques of avoidance:

> ...some point to spinifex peoples' section, intimating 'they need it and we know and don't want to hear'. Some pretend to be asleep, and a few tell you point blank they don't want to hear ...some point you towards the mission ...but praise God, some are willing to listen. (United Aborigines' Mission, 1 Dec. 1945)

On another occasion a missionary made a determined attempt to interrupt a mortuary ritual. He approached the man leading the burial party and suggested that the deceased should receive a Christian burial. He was 'flatly refused' (*ibid.*, October 1950). In May 1952, at the end of sixteen years' work at Ooldea, a U.A.M. worker wrote:

> We see the ignorance of the native mind, for even after years of contact with civilization and the Christian teaching, their ancient beliefs are exercising a great influence upon their lives. (United Aborigines' Mission, May 1952:7)

Despite these set-backs and failures, the U.A.M. did make advances in some areas. The missionaries devoted considerable energy to attempted interventions in traditional burials. They stressed the 'superstitious dread' of Aboriginal people when dealing with death and provided many accounts of its manifestations (Bolam 1978:75-77; Turner 1950:120-126). Much is made in these accounts of the rituals of grieving, such as wailing and self-inflicted wounding, and of the Aboriginal fear of the spirits of the dead. The missionaries felt these were areas where they could undermine the Aborigines' ability to carry out their own rituals, by stressing the necessity for a Christian burial and by exploiting the Aboriginal ambivalence toward the spirits of the dead. Turner wrote, 'they appreciate the sympathetic clasp of the missionary's hand at such a time... so they asked Mr. Green to accompany them to the grave...' (Turner 1950:120-121). While Aboriginal mortuary practices continued during the 1940s (see R. Berndt and Johnston 1942), once the move was made from Ooldea further south to Yalata in 1952, traditional mortuary practices ceased altogether.

Above all else the U.A.M. had achieved a system of dependency for Aboriginal people by institutionalising their children, administering rations and eroding traditional practices. Aboriginal children had been brought up in the Children's Home, not in the desert country, and now lacked the necessary knowledge to return and live there as hunters and gatherers as their parents had done. R. and C. Berndt writing in 1951 remarked:

> When they [the children] enter the Children's Home they do not entirely forget what they have learnt, but they have fewer opportunities of widening their range; and the new gospel choruses and hymns, by constant repetition, come to have an over-shadowing effect. As time goes by, and the children acquire a veneer of European culture, they not only lose a certain amount of interest in their indigenous background, but they also become much less adept even than they used to be. (R. and C. Berndt 1951:136)

For the adults the system of rations had meant that food was always readily available at the mission. One Aboriginal woman told a missionary in about 1930, 'Oh, we don't work, Government will look after us and keep us fat and lazy' (United Aborigines' Mission, 1 June 1930:5). Visits to the desert were made increasingly less frequently. Waterholes were not maintained and people's confidence about living in their own land declined. Aboriginal subsistence was now inextricably tied up with the operations of the mission and the missionaries who administered it. Traditional subsistence and a hunting and gathering economy away from the mission was no longer a real alternative. In advancing Christianity the missionaries had systematically undermined the influence of the older men and women by keeping their children from them in the homes and by opposing traditional ritual practices. For young men who had not been initiated the mission environment was the only alternative if they were to enjoy any status as adults since they were socially regarded as 'boys' by members of their own community. The marriage of 'boys' in Christian ceremonies was strongly resisted by the Aborigines, but the missionaries' persistence meant that this opposition was slowly eroded (Turner 1950:104-5). In some cases, however, it was better for the married couple to go and live elsewhere (United Aborigines' Messenger, Sept 1, 1948).

The dependency which was the product of twenty years of U.A.M. missionary activity was circumscribed by other, wider, issues into which the Ooldea people had unwittingly been drawn. Unknown to either the U.A.M. or the Ooldea Aborigines their traditional lands were being earmarked for atomic weapons testing which would render them prohibited regions for the next thirty years. Part of the justification for the choice of the southern Great Victoria Desert for weapons testing was the assertion that all Aborigines had abandoned these lands in favour of the missions which lay to the north (Ernabella), south-west (Cundeelee) and south-east (Ooldea). This assertion was subsequently proved to be erroneous (McClelland et al. 1985:319-323).

Christian proselytizing was not the sole prerogative of the U.A.M. The Lutherans, with a strong presence on the far west coast of South Australia, saw the Ooldea Aborigines as grist for their missionary mill and a means of expanding their influence in the region. There was, moreover, talk of moving the Ooldea site because conditions there had become extremely harsh. The site at Ooldea had for many years been most unsatisfactory. The quality of the water had deteriorated as a result of the vast quantities pumped out of the soak for use by the steam trains on the railway line. Furthermore, denudation of the site as a result of the missionaries' goats and Aborigines taking firewood and branches for shelters and windbreaks had allowed the sand dunes to encroach on the central mission buildings. The mission clearly needed to be relocated.

In 1951 the South Australian Government purchased a large tract of land at the head of the Bight on the Yalata estate, with a view to re-settling the Ooldea people upon it. The Lutherans, who operated the Koonibba Mission, a few kilometres west of Ceduna, opposed the proposed U.A.M. presence at Yalata, and asked that the mission be given over to them. The Lutherans felt so strongly about the issue they were willing to send a deputation to the Premier if the Yalata property were to be handed over to the U.A.M. The U.A.M. urged their fellow missionaries to pray for success (United Aborigines' Mission, Oct. 2, 1950). The Lutherans claimed that a second mission in the area would 'aggravate the employment situation' (Hampel 1977:4-5). Given this fierce competition to control the bodies and souls of so many Aborigines there was little chance that the Ooldea people would be given any opportunity to develop independence of action or choice in determining their own future.

The U.A.M. problem was solved for the Lutherans by what must have appeared to be an answer to their prayers. In June 1952, the U.A.M. withdrew its personnel from Ooldea. Internal disputes between the State and Federal branches of the mission resulted in the S.A. branch breaking away from its parent body. Without the support of the national body it was unable to maintain the Ooldea station and orders were given to close the mission.

The actual closure was effected quite suddenly. Harrie Green, the U.A.M. missionary and his wife packed their bags, issued rations for the last time and departed (United Aborigines' Messenger, August 1, 1952). The people were left with little choice when deciding their fate (see Brady 1987 for a full account). They were psychologically and physically ill-equipped to return to their homelands and many of the younger people knew of no life but that of the mission. Some chose to travel the Transline to Cundeelee, others attempted to go east and then north, hoping to reach Ernabella. However, they were dissuaded from this endeavour by Walter

MacDougall, a Patrol Officer employed by the Long Range Weapons Establishment at Woomera. He persuaded them to return to Ooldea and said that he would arrange for the Lutherans to pick them up in trucks for transportation to Yalata.

One man told us in 1985, when discussing this time, 'We wanted to go north really, but [we were] thinking about rations'. Another stated, 'We were *ngurpa* [ignorant] why Green left. We didn't realize. Big shock. It was really hard. We didn't know what to do.' A Lutheran Pastor involved in the removal wrote:

> The writer ...said to them as the party was about to leave [Ooldea], "We will look after you". They looked at us and, apparently reassured they replied, "Good, you look after us". (Hampel 1977:9)

It should be remembered that this was written of people who, less than twenty years before (and for many the period of time was considerably less), had lived independently. They had lived on their own lands, following their own social and economic systems with no reliance whatsoever upon Europeans or missionaries. The mission had created a condition of dependency for which the Aborigines were to pay dearly.

Yalata and the Lutherans

Initially, the newly-arrived refugees from Ooldea were ministered to by visiting Lutherans from Koonibba Mission, who brought rations and medical supplies. Two years later, in 1954, the site of the new mission was selected and Lutheran staff took up residence. The first building was an ex-army hut donated by the South Australian government; the old Ooldea U.A.M. buildings were dismantled and brought to Yalata.

Over their twenty-two year tenure of Yalata the Lutherans created what their own official history unashamedly terms 'a vast business organisation' (Hampel 1977:47). Over the next two decades Yalata provided the Lutheran Church with a large and potentially profitable property and an opportunity to enlarge their congregation. It also provided employment opportunities for dozens of Europeans of the Lutheran faith.

The South Australian Government was generous in its treatment of the new mission. The property (4,560 sq.kms.) was purchased in March 1951 for £64,000, and in July 1954 the land was transferred to the Lutheran church for a mere £10,000 to cover the cost of stock and plant. It was claimed that the station had the potential to run up to 60,000 sheep, although this estimate was never realised. The Government was to supply all rations, drugs and medicines, blankets and clothing, provide the salary of a nursing sister (usually the wife of a Pastor or other mission worker), and pay all rates and taxes. It also reimbursed the Church for the cost of work 'already done amongst the natives', and gave a grant of £7,000 for improvements to equipment. In 1975 at the official end of the Lutherans' tenure, the newly incorporated Yalata Aboriginal Community paid the Church $54,686 for its sheep (Hampel 1977).

The pecuniary preoccupation of some church members was apparent at the Lutheran General Convention held in Victoria in 1953. One pastor spoke defensively of the 'property transactions' that had taken place saying:

> Subsequent events have shown that the possession of these assets and their efficient administration have helped the church to preach and teach the Word of God with a minimum of outside interference. (Hampel 1977:18)

Yalata continued to be a business undertaking under the direction of the Lutherans who initiated an on-site beer canteen in 1969 for the distribution of alcohol to Aborigines: it made a 'handsome profit' (Hampel 1977:37). In April 1974 the Superintendent applied to the South Australian Department for Community Welfare for the full salvage rights to the disused Maralinga village, the headquarters for those conducting the atomic tests (McClelland et al. 1985:542). Between 1974 and 1979 using (paid) Aboriginal labour from Yalata, buildings at Maralinga were demolished, and equipment salvaged and sold. 'Many thousands of dollars worth of valuable supplies have been brought out of Maralinga and sold in the interests of the Yalata community' wrote Hampel (1977:38). It was also the Lutherans who instigated the proposal to build a roadhouse on the Eyre Highway 3 kms from the Yalata Mission. Yalata staff, Hampel wrote, 'were favourable to the idea as it offered employment for Aboriginals, a shop for the sale of curios, and *another source of income*' (1977:39, emphasis added).

With the addition of the 400 Aboriginal people who had eventually moved (voluntarily as well as involuntarily) to Yalata, the Lutherans' 'head count' tallied a flock of 1,000 Aborigines, twenty per cent of all Aborigines in South Australia. They had inherited 120 'Christians' from Harrie Green of the U.A.M. in 1952 and statistics of spiritual successes showed that by 1958 216 Yalata Aborigines were baptised (this figure included those baptised by the U.A.M.). By 1976 there were also 89 communicant members. The Australian census data for the same year note that the 'Christian' Aborigines at Yalata are 'Lutheran'. The remainder are classified as having 'no religious denomination'.

More than fifteen missionaries have worked at Yalata since 1952, and in addition, nursing sisters, teachers, mechanics, and works overseers belonging to the Lutheran Church have been employed there. The South Australian Education Department took over responsibility for the school in 1962, but until the early 1980s positions at the school were still advertised in a Lutheran magazine. Although the mission became an incorporated Aboriginal community in June 1975, many positions including that of Manager continued to be held by Lutherans for some years after this. A Lutheran pastor still resides at Yalata. The Lutheran management of the mission kept tight control of every aspect of the daily life of its Aboriginal residents — from the location of their living area (known as 'Big Camp'), to dissuading community members from attending land rights meetings (*cf.* White 1977:101; Toyne and Vachon 1984:85).

The Lutherans continued to stress the importance of Christian rituals at the expense of traditional Aboriginal practices. Mortuary rituals became the sole prerogative of the missionaries and traditional burials were unknown at Yalata. In recent years four Aboriginal couples who had been married according to tradition decided to have Christian marriage ceremonies. This was a Lutheran continuation of a tradition started by the U.A.M. who had, in 1951, married three couples who were *already* married.

The Yalata Aborigines were now far removed from their country, to which they were barred entry in any case because of the atomic bomb tests and the declaration

of a vast area of their traditional lands as a Commonwealth Prohibited Area. An increasing number of Aborigines knew of no other life than that of the mission settlement. They were dependent upon the mission for the provision of stores, for the smooth running of their community and for the maintenance of what had become their 'home'. By the 1960s the Aborigines had become incorporated into the welfare economy administered by the Lutherans. Like the U.A.M., the Lutherans anticipated a decline in all traditional practices as Aborigines became Christianised. The environment within which this could be accomplished was one in which Aborigines were increasingly dependent upon the Lutheran administration (which had incorporated some of their number) and were powerless to determine their own future. In this condition the conversion to Lutheran Christianity would be possible, and the undesirable elements in Aboriginal traditional practices and belief would be relinquished. A pamphlet, prepared by the Lutheran management and still being sold at the Yalata Roadhouse in 1981 stated:

> Tribal laws and traditions still play a significant role in the lives of the people. Corroborees are quite common, although the influence of these rites is gradually diminishing as the effects of education and Christian conviction supply satisfying answers to many things previously classed as mystical. (Yalata n.d.:2)

The Development of Aboriginal Self-Management

The Government policies of welfare and assimilation of the 1950s and 1960s favoured and indeed supported missionary endeavours and the increasing dependency of Aboriginal people. Thus the blame for this dependency status and its concomitant powerlessness does not rest with the missionaries alone. However, the combined effects of both Government policies and missionary activity resulted in a population alienated from their homelands, living on country that was not their own, and with little autonomy (Palmer 1982:54-63).

While the switch in Government policy to self-determination and later self-management allowed for a loosening of the bonds of dependency, Government bureaucracies to some extent were merely substituted for mission control particularly when it came to issues of community management and the direction of budgets. However, with the gradual diminishment of the Lutheran missionary presence, marked by the departure of the last manager in 1981, there was an accompanying increase in the autonomy of Aboriginal culture. There was a growth of political awareness and a regaining of self assurance on the part of Yalata people. They had observed from a distance the struggle for, and success of the *Pitjantjatjara Land Rights Act (1981)* by their kinsmen to the north (*cf.* Toyne and Vachon 1984), and after 1981 a concerted effort was made by Yalata people to gain their own freehold title to the 'Maralinga Lands' (*The Maralinga Tjarutja Land Rights Act 1984*). In 1982 an outstation was established on these lands and for the first time since leaving the desert, Aborigines returned to their homelands on a permanent basis. These historically and socially influential factors have helped to strengthen the notion that the Aborigines at Yalata could do things in their own way. Not surprisingly the Christianity that accompanied this new era of Aboriginal cultural autonomy had a particularly Aboriginal flavour.

The Aboriginal Christian Revival

Late in 1981, a Christian revival occurred among large sections of the Yalata population as a result of a visit from Aboriginal evangelists from Indulkana. The initial impetus was maintained by later visits by members of the Aboriginal Evangelical Fellowship, an all-Aboriginal church (*cf.* Gale and Wundersitz 1982:5). In June 1982, some visitors from Cundeelee in Western Australia brought an evangelist with them, and the movement gained momentum. This wholly Aboriginal organised religious movement involved a good deal of gospel singing and the giving of personal testimonials. A rough wooden platform was constructed in the centre of the settlement, adorned with a hand-painted religious tract, and loud communal singing was broadcast over the surrounding area with the help of amplifiers. The new movement took possession of the Lutheran church building for much of its activities and the Lutheran pastor was, for the time being, displaced and outshone.

Prayers and testimonies were made in the local language, as were the hymns and songs. The services, which were held every night in the church building, followed a consistent pattern. A choir sang numerous songs and hymns with guitar accompaniment. There were personal testimonies which were generally greeted with applause, prayers and Bible readings. The essential act in the Christian ritual was the act of dedication, termed 'giving yourself' or in Pitjantjatjara *kurturtu unganyi mamaku*, which means, 'giving your heart to God'. Every night an Aboriginal church leader called for new members to come to the front of the church and become 'Christians' by 'giving their hearts to Jesus'. During this time the congregation sang an emotional and repetitive hymn, swaying in time to the music. Established church leaders placed one hand upon the head of a novice, to induct them into the religious community, generally holding the other hand aloft while doing so.

Once inducted, a man or woman participated in the daily Christian rituals, and embraced a general philosophy best summed up in the words of one of the songs most frequently sung: 'we all one big happy family'. People stressed their oneness and unity and their access to a supernatural agency which bound them all together. Songs (*inma*) were believed to have been given to important men by God in dreams, and there was 'one big Law' for everyone to follow. Some people claimed to have seen Christ or God in visions, which had deeply impressed them and changed their lives.

For approximately nine months, with some lapses, the revival continued with regular communal gospel singing, accompanied by young men on electric guitars and a women's choir. Popular gospel songs in Pitjantjatjara and English were sung with enthusiasm, and there was a good deal of joining of hands and rhythmic swaying to the music. Cassette tapes of similar songs were played at camp late into the night — an unusual practice, for people usually went to sleep early. The tapes included exhortatory speeches by preachers telling people to 'give themselves to Jesus' and warning of the dangers of 'turning away from God'. Racial unity was preached, so that one cassette tape recording of a convention called for 'half caste people, tribal Aborigines and any whites too ...come forward for God'. There was generally an absence of exposition or teaching and the form of the Christian ritual was followed repetitively night after night.

People generally considered that Christians 'loved', and did not harm one another. Fighting and arguments were condemned and because those activities

were empirically the consequence of drinking alcohol, drinking was thought to be undesirable. The general feeling was summed up by one woman who said that 'people got to think about heaven and God, not grog'. Another explained that people gave up drinking not because the preachers demanded it, but because they 'got shame'. By this she meant that the act of becoming a Christian had made people aware of the degrading consequences of getting drunk and of the intrinsic value of life itself. Others said of Christians 'they can't drink'. This expression was meant to signify that sobriety was not the result of a specific prohibition, but emerged because the two modes of existence — being a Christian and being a drinker — were entirely incompatible in the eyes of the adherents (*cf.* Myers 1986:269). They asserted that the 'gospel makes you feel good inside', expressed in Pitjantjatjara as *tjuni kanpi*, which means literally 'belly, fat', but which is associated with warmth, well-being, comfort and goodness.

The attitude of the new Christians to drinking was in sharp contrast to that of the Lutheran missionaries. The mission had not only permitted drinking but had actually started the canteen in an attempt to 'teach' Aborigines how to drink in moderation. After the Aboriginal Christian revival the beer outlet was closed due to lack of support. This raises an important question. Although drinking and Lutheran Christianity were considered to be compatible, drinking and Aboriginal Christianity were acknowledged as being incompatible, and the converts to the new Christianity generally did not drink. Yet the Lutherans also preached that men and women should love one another and that drunken fights were wrong. What was it then that determined that Aboriginal Christian revivalists eschewed liquor, but Aboriginal Lutheran Christians indulged freely?

We have noted elsewhere that in order to understand drinking at Yalata it is also necessary to understand the powerlessness and dependency of the Aboriginal people who live there (Brady and Palmer 1984:66-74). When people drink they also change their view of the world, their manner of interaction and their presentation of self. Drunken people at Yalata speak English, make statements about past and present injustices and openly challenge European Australian staff members with demands and accusations which they would never make when sober. European Australians find such confrontations very difficult, and seek to avoid them. Sometimes the stress of repeated incidents are too much for the European staff and they leave the community. Even if the intoxicated person is unable to confront a European Australian he or she can vociferously enumerate dissatisfactions with the *status quo* in the camp or, more frequently, in the community settlement where all can hear him. Intoxication is an altered state in which the wrongs and injustices of life in the settlement are easily aired and in which Aborigines believe that they are the equal of any European Australian.

The powerlessness and dependency which marked the Yalata people found its expression and its abortive remedy in drinking. The drinking Act substantially changed nothing. Drunken threats were often misunderstood by Europeans, or simply provoked annoyance, anger, or even desertion. Moreover, the status thought to have been achieved while in a drunken euphoric state endured only as long as the effects of the alcohol.

When people gave up drinking and embraced Aboriginal Christianity they substituted one way of obtaining a desired goal for another. In adopting Christianity, drinking did not so much become 'wrong' as merely unnecessary. It became

redundant. Like drinking, Aboriginal Christianity was a wholly Aboriginal affair. It involved complex organisation, leadership for some, and overall community involvement. Aborigines were able to regulate their own business according to their own rules and ideals, and thereby express their own capabilities, their own effectiveness. The Aborigines organised trips to neighbouring communities and to some which were several hundred kilometres away in order to perform Christian services or attend Christian conventions. Christianity provided the opportunity for Aboriginal people to pursue their own business without any reliance upon European Australians.

In addition, by following the 'one strong law', Aborigines believed they had access to a spirituality which was above the commonplace interactions of daily life. They had, so they believed, a direct relationship with a deity which was also the White people's God. This God, whom the missionaries had claimed was on their side and who was therefore responsible for the material prosperity enjoyed by so many Whites, was now theirs. Indeed, many Aborigines claimed to have actually seen this God in visions. In the euphoric world of Christian revivalism the inequality between Black and White was considered broken and the powerless and the meek would, they thought, eventually inherit the earth. Calley, writing of the Badjalang of northern New South Wales wrote:

> Within the pentecostal sect an aborigine can achieve status and authority and make decisions without reference to white outsiders. Over his religious life the administration can exercise only very limited control. In the sect he finds a new social solidarity as well as a new self-respect. (Calley 1964:56)

Like drinking, Christianity was based on a mythical assumption, but unlike drinking the assumption was less ephemeral and certainly less damaging socially and physically. Whatever Aborigines were able to achieve through following the enterprise of drinking, there is no doubt that the aftermath was (and remains) in many cases devastating. Christianity, in attaining the same goals, was less socially disruptive and physically detrimental but it still provided only a mythical solution to the dependency and powerlessness of the Aborigines engendered from over fifty years contact with Europeans.

Conclusion

The three waves of Christianity experienced by the Ooldea and Yalata people illustrate the fundamentally different approaches of the religious systems concerned. The U.A.M. and the Aboriginal Christianity have more in common with each other than with the Lutherans. Thus the Aboriginal Christian movement's terminology bore a startling resemblance to that utilised by the U.A.M. thirty years earlier. The emphasis on 'giving your heart to Jesus' in the Aboriginal movement echoed the exhortations made by the U.A.M. to 'stir the hearts of the Lord's people' and the identical phrase, 'giving your heart to Jesus' (Turner 1950:59,62) was a part of the U.A.M.'s preaching. However, both the Lutherans and the U.A.M. saw the Aborigines as people who must be converted to European Christianity and so become incorporated into the cultural values of what was fundamentally a non-Aboriginal

system. The Aboriginal evangelical movement, on the other hand, stressed its essential Aboriginality and affirmed Aboriginal ability to organise their own action and ritual in their own way without being dependent upon Whites. The Christian experience also confirmed, so Aborigines believed, that they had no less power than non-Aborigines and by achieving strength and independence through ritual action, they no longer needed to attempt to establish their equality through drinking. There is an essential irony here. When Christianity was introduced to Ooldea in 1933 the missionaries fostered a dependency among the Aborigines which later found its expression in excessive drinking. Half a century later, Aboriginal Christianity provided the momentum that enabled Aboriginal people to curb excessive drinking at Yalata.

However, the Aboriginal Christianity provided no structural alteration to the status of those Aborigines who promoted it. The actions of the missions had been predicated upon a series of irreversible events associated with the alienation of a whole continent and the dispossession of its Aboriginal inhabitants. The adoption of an Aboriginal Christianity did not reverse the economic dependency of the Aboriginal people, or their real powerlessness when it came to determining their own future. This is not to say that Aboriginal Christianity (or any other sort of Christianity) is incompatible with independence and the development of self-management programmes. However, if people are to acquire the ability to control the direction their community will take, they require real control over real property, budgets, goods and services. In this fundamentally practical and political process Christianity at Yalata has made no inroads. However, the perpetuation of an Aboriginal Christianity that proclaims Aboriginal independence and asserts Aboriginal self-sufficiency might provide the environment in which Aborigines would readily take advantage of opportunities presented to them by a Government whose agenda now admits to the possibility of self-management for Australia's indigenous people.

References

Bates, D.M. (1914, 1924), Various correspondence (with Railways Commissioner, Aborigines Protection Board), Australian Archives Document Series AA B300 7037/2.

Bates, D.M. (1938), *The Passing of the Aborigines*, Sydney: John Murray.

Berndt, R. and C. Berndt (1945), *A Preliminary Report of Field Work in the Ooldea Region, Western South Australia*, Sydney: Australasian Pub. Co., (Reprinted from *Oceania*, Vols. 12,4; 13,1-4; 14,1-4; 15,1-3.)

Berndt, R. and C. Berndt (1951), *From Black to White in South Australia*, Melbourne: Cheshire.

Berndt, R. and T.H. Johnston (1942), 'Death, burial and associated ritual at Ooldea, South Australia' in *Oceania*, 22,3:189-208.

Bolam, A.G. (1978), *The Trans-Australian Wonderland*, Perth: University of Western Australia Facsimile ed., (1st ed., 1923).

Brady, M. (1987), 'Leaving the Spinifex: The impact of rations, missions, and the atomic tests on the Southern Pitjantjatjara' in *Rec. S. Aust. Mus.*, 20:35-45.

Brady, M. and K. Palmer (1984), *Alcohol in the Outback*, Darwin: North Australian Research Unit.

Calley, M. (1964), 'Pentecostalism among the Badjalang' in *Aborigines Now*, edited by M. Reay, Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Gale, F. and J. Wundersitz (1982), *Adelaide Aborigines. A Case Study of Urban Life 1966-1981*, Canberra: Development Studies Centre.

Gerard, A.E. (n.d.), *History of the U.A.M.*, Adelaide: Hunkin, Ellis and King Ltd.

Hampel, N. (1977), *Yalata Lutheran Mission 1952-1977*, Yalata Lutheran Mission, unpublished ms.

McClelland, J.R., J. Fitch and W.J. Jonas (1985), *The Report of the Royal Commission into British Nuclear Tests in Australia*, Vol. 2, Canberra: A.G.P.S.

Myers, F.R. (1986), *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, Washington and Canberra: Smithsonian Institute Press and A.I.A.S.

Palmer, K. (1982), 'Grey Earth and Clean Sand', Flinders University of South Australia, unpublished report.

Toyne, P. and D. Vachon (1984), *Growing Up the Country. The Pitjantjatjara Struggle for their Land*, Melbourne: McPhee Gribble and Penguin

Turner, V.E. (1950), *"Ooldea"*, Melbourne: S. John Bacon.

United Aborigines' Mission *The United Aborigines' Messenger* Newspaper, published monthly, Melbourne.

White, I.M. (1977), 'From camp to village: Some problems of adaptation' in *Aborigines and Change*, edited by M. Reay, Canberra: A.I.A.S.

Yalata (n.d.), 'A Guide to the Yalata Community', Yalata: mimeographed.