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Bora, Church and Modernization at Lockhart River, Queensland

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Introduction

Lockhart River Aboriginal Community is situated on the east coast of Cape York Peninsula near Quintall Beach at a latitude roughly midway between Weipa and Aurukun.

At Lockhart River old and new religious forms are practised side by side. These are the traditionally-based Bora initiation ceremonies, and Christianity focussed on a local church. The latter is marked both by mission-planted tradition and Aboriginal adaptations. While each is perceived as a discrete tradition with its own structure and leadership, there has inevitably been some interaction and cross-fertilisation between them.

Both traditions, however, have also been affected by modernizing changes, particularly the increased differentiation of sacred and secular realms. I will therefore be considering the effects of such changes on the character and practices of each tradition. It is important to note that the Christian Church was also involved in the modernisation process, and hence in the breakdown of the dominance of religion in life. This process was muted in the years of the mission because religious and management spheres were closely co-ordinated in community life, but even so there was a shift of power towards a secular management in which the religious control of social structure and life-style decreased. This process became much clearer after the handover to Government administration.

Both religious traditions have continued, but in a more pluralistic context in which they are related more to identity and to life passages than to life as a whole. I will argue further that, while there is goodwill in the community towards both traditions, the future of each is tenuous because of secular pressures and sources of identity.

I am using religion here in a broad sense to include the world-view and socio-religious practices that give identity and meaning to the lives of participants. This

approach avoids viewing religion in terms of static traditions and encourages the examination of actual beliefs and practices in their local context. In this regard I appreciate Hans Mol's approach to religion as "sacralisation of identity" (1976:1) and his study of Aboriginal religion and identity in terms of "the dialectic between identity and change" (1982:87).

I will begin by considering the way to approach the types of interaction that occur between old and new religious systems.

Dual Systems and Syncretism

I first considered the Lockhart situation in terms of the model of dual systems as outlined in Robert Schreiter's comparison of dual systems and forms of syncretism. Syncretism, he says, "has to do with the mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity" (1985:144). But with dual systems, he says, "a people follow the religious practices of two distinct systems. The two systems are kept discrete; they can operate side by side" (1985:152).

However, I find his approach inadequate on two grounds. Firstly, Schreiter keeps dual systems and syncretism rigidly apart as two different forms of interaction even though his descriptions of each overlap. For example, the adoption of analogous features, as well as filling the gaps in one system with elements of another, occur in both forms of interaction. It is therefore better to view the interface of religious systems as a single continuum in which a wide range of mixes and inter-relations occur.

Secondly I find the assumption that different systems can co-exist and yet be kept discrete to be simplistic, particularly where there are conflicting beliefs and practices. It is more likely that at some level there is a consistent underlying basis for the dual practice. This may be that the two systems complement or parallel each other sufficiently for inconsistent elements to be dropped, or to be of minor consequence. Alternatively, if apparently conflicting elements remain, these may be reinterpreted as part of a unified world-view, or may be ignored as being of little significance to the perceived role of the religious systems, for example, legitimating social structures or appeasing a dominant intruder.

In the case of the Bora and the Christian Church at Lockhart River the systems are apparently discrete but, as I will show, there has been significant interaction between them. Although some disparate elements have been dropped or modified, the belief systems are largely complementary and the social purposes of each are parallel.

I will now outline the Bora ceremonies that have continued to the present and then examine the form of Christianity that has developed.

Bora Ceremonies

Bora ceremonies have continued at irregular intervals (see Thomson 1933; Chase 1980; Thompson 1985), and in recent years these intervals have been up to 10 years. I have witnessed them on three occasions, each time from a different perspective. The first was during my initial year in the community in 1969, and as an 'outside-observer' I saw only the public ceremonies. But in 1971 I was an initiate and so a

'participant-observer', experiencing the whole process, albeit from a European perspective. Finally in 1980, on a return visit to the community, I experienced some of the ceremonies as an 'inside-observer'.

A restricted area is set apart for the ceremonies which can only be entered by the initiated, and the initiates under their guidance. Secret revelations are made there as well as preparations for the evening public dances which are held on an adjacent dancing ground. The Bora ground has an inner area surrounded by a screen called *kuu'ul*. At the time of the concluding ceremonies the women and children may enter the area in front of the *kuu'ul* for preparations.

Each initiate (*kannga*) is given two key relations in the Bora. A distant classificatory brother-in-law is chosen to be the *mawura* (lit. tiger shark) or guardian. His role is to guide the initiate's behaviour and to look after his needs. Then a distant mother's sister is chosen as *paapa*, "mother". Her husband automatically becomes *piipi*, "father". The initiate's mother's younger sister hands him over to his Bora "mother" at the commencement of the ceremonies.

A major focus of the Bora ceremonies is on developing a close relationship with these three, but specifically with the "mother". The initiate cannot speak to them or let them hear his voice for the duration of the ceremonies, or after their conclusion, until a final exchange of gifts is made. By then a close and serious relationship has been formed which continues in everyday life. Young girls do not have separate initiation but their adulthood is marked by being able to participate in the Bora as a mother from about the age of 17 years.

The initiates and leaders spend time at the Bora ground late each afternoon and at weekends. Because of work commitments they no longer camp there for the ceremonies' duration but return home each night. Public dances are held several nights a week for a couple of months. The actual number of nights and the period involved are affected by other community pressures, principally employment and the effects of the beer canteen. During the dances the initiates sit side by side in a single line with the *mawura* behind them while the Bora "mothers" stand and dance in a parallel line with each "mother" facing her "boy". Two groups of singers and drummers sit behind the initiates and usually one or two fires are lit nearby. Spectators sit in family groups behind the initiates and singers.

The singers and other participants represent the two Bora groups of the community and they in turn represent geographic coastal areas to the north and south of the old mission site. The ceremonies are held jointly, with each group of singers taking turns to lead. They sing from a repertoire of about 100 known songs in a special Bora language. While they sing the initiates must sit quietly and the "mothers" dance the *chaawul* (lit. "jump") dance. During some of these dances several "spirit-dancers" (my term) called *nyuchimu* emerge from the secret ground and dance behind the mothers.

Each *nyuchimu* displays a representation of an animal totemic ancestor (mainly fish species) and is completely shrouded by a long dark skirt extending from top to ground. These "spirit-dancers" are carefully surrounded with secrecy and the maintenance of this secrecy is seen to be integral to the integrity and future of the ceremonies. As Mol puts it: "Secrecy strongly enhances identity" (Mol 1982:39) and in this case clearly differentiates manhood from womanhood. Outsiders, women and children, may see the *nyuchimu* only in dim light and they are described to them as *awu* ("devils"), to emphasise that they must be perceived (in theory and practice)

as dangerous. This is the role-understanding expected of the "mothers" and it is ritually expressed by "the mothers" standing protectively between the initiates and the "spirit-dancers". However, the initiates gain a transformed view of the *nyuchimu* in the secret ceremonies.

Frequently the night's dancing reaches a climax when the mothers surround and hold the *kannga* in a protective circle while the "spirit-dancers" whirl around them. Here there is a competitive transition. The initiates have left their childhood ties with their mothers, and during the Bora they are under the influence and constraint of a tradition represented by the totemic ancestors. But at the same time a new ongoing adult relationship is established with the Bora "mothers" (also called "godmothers") that continues after the ceremonies have concluded.

During the ceremonies the initiates and the Bora ground are regulated by sanctions or taboos (*kincha*) which protect against the potential dangers of a sacred power or force called *kunta* (comparable to the Polynesian *mana*). When the ceremonies are respected, *kunta* is lifegiving and leads to responsible adulthood and prowess in hunting. On the other hand some misfortune or sickness may be attributed to a disregard for *kunta* through carelessness, scepticism, failure to carry out some duty or to a mistake in the ceremonies. There are specific songs for covering up or compensating for such transgressions and errors.

The transitions being facilitated by the Bora become clearer in the final ceremonies. The first of these takes place at the beach at first sign of daybreak (or before). The initiates and their "mothers" are "sung" into the shallow waters in a line of pairs and "spirit-dancers" emerge to herd them in as they are splashed thoroughly with the cold water by the initiated. They are now cleansed from the contact with *kunta* and most of the associated constraints. The initiates' new freedoms and status are evident in the ceremonies that take place that evening.

In the late afternoon the participants are decorated with body paint and with head and arm bands and grass skirts prepared by the "mothers". The men also prepare *ancha*, simple spears for "play-fighting", and the women prepare *kachin* (yamsticks), and cook dampers. The women can go part way into the Bora ground for these preparations. In the first ceremony each initiate asks food of his mother and she, with yamstick in hand, places a damper in front of her "boy" who simultaneously jumps over it and spears it. (Prior to the introduction of flour, yams were used.)

The symbols of hearth (yam/damper) and manhood (spear) are not made explicit in this joining ceremony but it clearly marks a climax of the relationship building between "mother" and initiate. The evening concludes with several traditional dances, including the kangaroo (*kuympachi*) dance and a dance in a circle (*yaranala*) performed together by "mothers" with yamsticks and initiates with spears.

All that remains now is for speech taboos to be lifted and this is done individually in the following weeks or months when a simple exchange of gifts is made (clothing and money).

Donald Thomson witnessed Bora ceremonies in the region in 1929 and wrote about them in terms of a "hero-cult" based on the major story of the crocodile of the northern Bora. But he gave little attention to the role of women in the Bora and the significant relationships that are developed. This is largely a matter of emphasis, for his interest was in describing the secret ceremonies and activities of the old men. He neglects the social aspects and only in passing does he mention the nightly dances

of the women and the *nyuchimu* on the outer dancing ground. He refers but vaguely to speech taboos between the initiates and "certain specified individuals" (Thomson 1933:481), although I have been told the names of the Bora "mother" and "father" he was given.

I am unable to follow Thomson by describing the secret ceremonies. The pattern he described remains largely the same although his account of the final ceremonies varies from current practice. He described the same kangaroo dance but his account concludes with a more elaborate washing in the sea. There is no mention of the damper-spearing ceremony. He wrote that the initiates wore body paint which was washed off by the women. This is strongly disputed today and the paint-up after the "swim" is claimed to be correct.

1. The damper spearing ceremony at the conclusion of the Bora ceremonies: Lockhart River, 1981

One of the problems of the Bora today is that it is more difficult to hold together its sacred and secular dimensions. The ceremonies still draw on the heritage of past traditions to reinforce and develop identity and community in the present. In this sense the Bora is sacramental (*cf.* Stanner 1960:248). But today there appears to be less emphasis on the mythological basis which receives little verbal explanation, and there is a greater stress on confirming Aboriginal identity and integrity through ceremony. The ceremonies in 1980 were sparked off by the indignation of an older man who was told on a visit to Canberra that "Lockhart has no culture left".

Although the Bora ceremonies formalise the transition from childhood to adulthood (a social rather than physiological distinction, *cf.* La Fontaine 1985:116), the liminal state is now blurred by the various accommodations to modern conditions, in particular the return home each night by the initiates, and the reduced authority of older men in contemporary community life. Furthermore the irregular occurrence

of the ceremonies usually means that many of the initiates are in their post-teens when they participate. Hence the ceremonies are now less a rite of passage and more a culturally significant means of legitimating Aboriginal identity and social relationships.

Having provided this brief overview of the Bora I will now outline the formative years of the mission before going on to examine the interaction of the two religious traditions.

The Christian Church

The Lockhart River Mission was established by the Anglican Church just south of Cape Direction in 1924. The word "Mission" conjures up some stereotypes but in reality each one had its own particular characteristics based on many formative factors, not least of which are the local history and the individuals involved.

There were several significant factors that contributed to the character of the Lockhart River Mission. Firstly, there were considerable outside contacts for some time prior to the Mission (*cf.* Chase 1981 and this volume). These ranged from the Torres Strait Islanders and the occasional Papuan from the north, to lugger crews (including Japanese), and to the rugged character Hugh Giblet, who established an unofficial settlement in Lloyd Bay early in the century. He was instrumental in discouraging many of the excesses of lugger captains seeking Aboriginal crew.

The contact with the growing Church in the Torres Straits was an important factor in the development of a local church at Lockhart River. An early request for the Mission came from an Aboriginal couple on Thursday Island (*The Carpentarian*, Oct. 1930) and others working on boats. Torres Strait Islanders were included in the Mission staff from the beginning. The 1927 Report praises the Torres Strait family of Tom Savage — "besides being of great practical help to the mission, their example has been of untold benefit" (*ABM Review*, June 12, 1928). The first teacher was Mick Conrad from Yarrabah near Cairns (apparently an Aborigine or Pacific Islander), and Kitty Savage was the teacher in 1930. The first chaplain was the Torres Strait priest Poey Passi who served for a couple of years from 1925 (Bayton 1965:155). In 1931 his fellow priest, Sailor Gabey, arrived to serve for two years, and the Year Book 1932-3 records that he was welcomed with dancing and a presentation of mats woven by the women. At that time a branch of the Mother's Union was formed under the guidance of Mrs. Gabey. Other Islander teachers and clergy served there in later times.

The first Superintendent, Harry Rowan, spent 14 years in the position and this gave a stabilising continuity in the formative years. In 1924 he reported that there were "35 aboriginals" and "each year more of these people come in of their own free will from outside the reserve, and settle down" (1924 Report). By 1929 the population was 301, and in 1937 it was 383 including a large proportion of old people, 114 of them drawing rations (*ABM Review*, Aug. 1, 1937).

Reports of the period indicate that a combination of spiritual and physical change was involved in mission life. The reports range from Church statistics to accounts of progress in water and sanitary schemes, gardening, housing and hospital activities. Baptism and Confirmation figures give an indication of Church growth. In 1930 29 adults were baptised at Easter followed by 3 infants later in the year (1930 Report). By June 1932 the total baptised was 91. Of these, 65 were

preparing for Confirmation, while another 55 were preparing for baptism. By 1936, 260 were baptised with 90 of them confirmed and by 1945 all residents were baptised except for a few old people.

Behind these bare statistics are some important reflections of the style of Christianity that was introduced. It was an Anglo-Catholic tradition within the Anglican Church which emphasised sacramental/ceremonies with the priest serving as the ritual specialist, and which had a strongly corporate emphasis supported by infant baptism. (This contrasts with communities in Arnhem Land where there is an evangelical emphasis and adult baptism is generally the norm.) The Torres Strait influence brought with it the established lay roles of church warden, councillors and servers, as well as the tradition of composing hymns in the local language with Islander melodies. Islander-style secular dancing was also performed on Church festival days and this became dominant over Aboriginal dancing in the 50s and 60s until the revival of other forms in the 70s. The hollow drum, common traditionally to both the Torres Strait and Lockhart groups, was (and still is) used to accompany both church hymns and Islander-style dancing.

The Torres Strait influence included a relatively authoritarian style of leadership which tended to be frustrated by the more diffuse leadership patterns of Aboriginal society. It nonetheless meant that the Church was not simply a European intrusion but had multi-cultural dimensions. The definitive lay leadership roles also provided for significant Aboriginal involvement. These features, together with the cultural adoption of both secular and sacred Torres Strait music styles, and the general acceptance of mission living, encouraged a group response to the Christian Church as the spiritual side of mission life.

Some enthusiasm is indicated by a report in *The Carpentarian* of October 1930 that there were requests from Aboriginal people for a church to be built and that local fundraising had been initiated. However a school building doubled as a church until 1953. It is significant that the mission was frequently in financial difficulties and this usually meant that the priest was withdrawn and services were maintained by Aboriginal and European lay leaders. These withdrawals indicate the differences underlying the overlap between sacred and secular spheres in mission times: the "essential services" character of the secular and the more voluntary character of the sacred.

Because of financial problems self-sufficiency was stressed. The same report described the aim of the mission as being "to help the Aborigines to settle down under happy conditions, to encourage them to be self-productive with their own bit of land and their home". The emphasis was upon developing a settled self-sufficiency in a Christian environment. As well as the development of vegetable gardens, 40 to 50 men signed on with the Thursday Island fishing fleet each year. (The latter brought a temporary affluence for material purchases, but some was dissipated on alcohol.) This same pattern emerged strongly in the 1950s with the attempts to establish a Co-operative industry by Alf Clint and John Warby.

The growth of the Church at Lockhart River was therefore a people's movement to a significant degree, although the corporate community emphasis in church life and the practice of infant baptism meant that, in practice, there was a mixture of commitment by some and unthinking involvement or nominalism by others. In 1932 the Superintendent reported: "I have been surprised at incidents showing how wholeheartedly some at least have taken on the new life and are holding fast".

People today can still recall being rounded up for church as children by the Aboriginal church councillors. While this may reflect attempts to meet mission expectations, it does indicate positive Aboriginal leadership and local expectations (evident today) that community support for special activities sometimes need stirring up.

Interaction of Bora and Church

It appears that Harry Rowan was respected, and had some sensitivity to Aboriginal culture, for in 1932 he reported that desire for baptism among old people was keen and that discussion had taken place concerning sorcery and other matters in conflict with mission expectations. As a result various objects were brought forward and practices "put away" as they "readjusted the intricate relationship tribal laws" (*ABM Review*, June 1932). However, Rowan could also be firm, for it is said that he stopped the use of spears in fighting at an early stage. There is difference of opinion as to whether or not he discouraged initiation ceremonies, but in either case they continued periodically.

It is therefore evident that some adaptations to traditional practices took place at the mission at an early stage (although fears and accusations of sorcery have persisted to the present) while at the same time the basic social structure persisted, periodically supported by the Bora ceremonies. The long periods that young men were away on boats contributed to the weakening of some cultural practices including a decline in use of the traditional language. The dormitory system that existed for many years likewise contributed to these tendencies. I have been told by a Bora leader that during a later period (1950s) the superintendent John Warby was taken into the Bora grounds and was generally happy with what was happening there. The negative attitudes of others have been reported but these people did not stay very long. Other encouragement was given by the occasional anthropologist or linguist.

It seems clear that the interaction of Bora and Church goes back to the early years of the mission and that adaptation of cultural practices took place in both. But while the Christian Church was accepted along with other aspects of mission life and white settlement, the new ways were not entirely under Aboriginal control. The final direction of both sacred and secular spheres lay largely in the hands of outsiders (whites and Islanders). Thus the new ways were not true sources of Aboriginal identity, despite the community-building aspects of Christianity. The persistence of the Bora enables the affirmation of their identity and social structure through autonomously regulated ceremonies.

Government Administration

The next major period in Lockhart history began with the handover of the administration of the Anglican Missions in Cape York to the Queensland Government in 1967. This followed a long period of struggle to maintain the missions with finance and staff, and the failure of attempts to move all the Lockhart residents to Umagico settlement (near Bamaga) at the top of Cape York Peninsula in 1964. Only a few families moved there and it appears that this was due as much to disputes in the community as to outside pressure (Chase 1980:126).

After the takeover, the Queensland Government set out to move the remaining residents to a more accessible site about 50 km north near the Iron Range airstrip. This move was completed in 1969 and I was the first resident priest at "new site".

This era of Government administration brought to the fore the dominance of the secular in community life. The overlap of the secular and sacred had been maintained in the mission period and the relations of both Bora and Church to social life were seen to be parallel. This is expressed simply in the saying, "Bora is like Church". This is said in the context of justifying the Bora to whites and the main correlation is that in each case membership and belonging are established through ceremony: adult membership of the Aboriginal community is instituted through the Bora, and membership of the Church occurs through baptism and confirmation.

The power of the sacred to order social life had, however, been weakened for a long time. The cross-cultural and secular influences prior to the mission brought in alternative world-views and began to demonopolise Aboriginal religion. The mission led to a more definite pluralism, embracing both Bora and Church. However, neither had exclusive control over social life and so both were subject to secular relativism through the dominance of the managerial side of mission life. Hence it was not surprising that, as I have mentioned, when funds were short, it was the priest who was withdrawn and church services were maintained voluntarily by lay people. Berger's words are relevant here:

> The pluralistic situation, in demonopolizing religion, makes it ever more difficult to maintain or to construct new viable plausibility structures for religion. The plausibility structures lose massivity because they can no longer enlist the society as a whole to serve for the purpose of social confirmation. (Berger 1973:154)

When the Government took over, this pluralism/secularisation process was reinforced by the clear separation of Church and State. As one man said to me categorically in 1969, "the Church is not boss here any more". The changeover and the move to the new site that quickly followed were unsettling to the people and several significant developments occurred. One was the relegating of the Church to a lower priority in community life as indicated by poor church attendance. This highlighted the need for a different emphasis if the Church was to re-establish its relevance. Another was the revival of Bora ceremonies at the new site with the invitation to some white staff to take part as initiates. This appears to have been an attempt to re-assert Aboriginal identity in the face of the clearly secular and dominating authority and to regain some control in the new situation on their own terms. This was hardly achieved but the ceremonies were effective in establishing co-operation and solidarity on a community scale.

Another reaction was to claim equality with whites by asserting the right to drink alcohol. Drinking alcohol began in pre-mission times with Hugh Giblet and occurred occasionally in mission times. The Government initially denied Aborigines the right to drink alcohol in the community but allowed white staff to bring it in for their own use. Parties in staff houses, which were right in the centre of the community, exacerbated the resentment of the locals and they began ordering in drink by barge and later by plane. This typically resulted in heavy drinking bouts and large disturbances in the centre of the community. By the time that a legal beer

canteen was introduced, drinking had become a firm means of Aboriginal solidarity. As a secular means of identity it is often counterproductive to the religious means because it frequently results in alcoholism and disruption to family and community life.

In this situation the Church needed to be perceived more clearly as a voluntary institution with a meaningful and serving role in the community. This meant avoiding coercive approaches to church attendance while at the same time discouraging nominalism. I took the view that the priest needed to be less an authority figure and more a catalyst, encouraging Aboriginal people to take leadership roles, making decisions and carrying them through themselves. My main tasks came through spiritual ministry and practical activities such as facilitating the availability of many small items not always available at the Government Store. My role also involved encouraging people to reflect upon the relationship between Christian beliefs and practices and Aboriginal culture in the local context. This in turn meant that I needed to take the latter seriously, and involved me in studying the language, recording music and participating in the Bora.

Three-way Interaction

This review of Bora and Church shows that a three-way interaction has been taking place — between the Bora initiation ceremonies with a world-view lacking theistic notions, the Christian Church with a theistic world-view, and the secular organisation of community life. As a result a basic shift in emphasis has occurred so that a religious definition of reality no longer dominates the organisation of social life. As Luckmann says of modern industrial society: "Versions of the sacred cosmos are no longer transmitted in anything like homogeneous processes of socialisation" (Luckmann 1983:132). His further comment is also relevant: "The social structure is secularized but the myth of secularization fails to account for the fact that the individual is not secularized" (*loc. cit.*). The secularization of social structure does not mean that religious world-views are abandoned in the community consciousness, but rather that the authority of religious leaders is weakened and that there is a major competition for attention from secular institutions such as the beer canteen. At Lockhart River initiation into the canteen "club" occurs individually for both boys and girls on their eighteenth birthday when they are legally entitled to drink alcohol.

Various adaptations have occurred in the Bora ceremonies as a result of these interactions. Punishment by death has long ceased and other ways of dealing with transgression have expanded. Because of the necessities of regular employment the initiates are no longer kept isolated from regular life for 2 or 3 months during the ceremonies, but continue living at home and visit the Bora ground only in the late afternoons and weekends. The public dances are held on several nights during the week in balance with other community activities.

One of the major hindrances to recommencing the ceremonies today is the necessity to close the canteen on dance nights and this inevitably conflicts with the institutionalized alcoholism. One of the song leaders confessed to me (July 1987) that, as much as he wants to, he cannot stop drinking. At risk in all this is the secrecy surrounding the "spirit-dancers" and people remember some irregular displays in recent years. Maintenance of this secrecy is seen to be essential to the power of the ceremonies, even if only kept in symbolic role play. In contrasting them to the more

open ceremonies at Aurukun, an older women said to me, "They are only acting, we really believe". With this comment she reaffirmed her traditional role and indicated some sacramental understanding in the Bora at Lockhart River.

The Christian Church in turn has found its contemporary relevance mainly in transition or crisis points in life. In mission times major points of involvement were the baptism of infants, their confirmation in the pre-teen years, marriages, ministry to the sick and aged, and funerals. The sacrament of Holy Communion was a major focus and the main attendance was on Sundays. Some also attended daily services of Morning Prayer, Mass and Evening Prayer.

The Christian initiation process of baptism and confirmation is seen to be analogous to the Bora initiation. The Anglican practice of having godfathers and godmothers for infants is likened to the Bora mothers and their husbands who are referred to colloquially as "godmother" and "godfather". The use of water in baptism is likened to the splashing of initiates in the sea in the final Bora ceremonies. In both cases the processes of belonging and relationship-building are the key factors. In addition, confession of sin before communion is likened to confession of wrongdoing to Bora leaders if a mistake or an accident happens in the Bora ritual.

A further parallel that makes the Church relevant is its sacramental understanding of power in ceremonies. In the Bora the sense of power (*kunta*) remains an underlying feature. Parallels in the Church are in the sacrament of Holy Communion where bread and wine are symbols of spiritual food, and in the use of holy oil in the anointing of the sick for healing. In contrast to the periodic operation of the Bora, these are regularly available, although they are valued more during crisis times (e.g. sickness) or on major festival occasions.

Both Bora and Church, however, are now under severe restraint because of the secular institutionalizing of beer drinking and the subsequent alcoholism which inhibits other community-scale activities. The Queensland Government is encouraging this by making the Community Council dependent on the canteen for some of its income. Consequently, there is difficulty in recommencing Bora ceremonies, which are community-based, and the regular Church services are attended by small numbers. Church services are, however, more readily maintained because they have a more individualised, voluntary basis. Infant baptism is also declining and very few formal marriages occur today. Instead de facto relationships are accepted and incorporated into family structures, although the couples are not regarded as properly married. Christian burial of the dead, however, inescapably continues, reflecting a similar pattern in the wider Australian scene (Wilson 1983:86).

World-View Differences

It might be expected that there would be a conflict between the world-views of Bora and Church, but in practice they have found a complementary accommodation. (*cf.* Thompson 1985:18f). Traditional religious beliefs begin with a created world in which totemic ancestors formed features of the land and imparted their traditions. These ancestral beings had unique powers but they are not conceived of as divine in a theistic sense. The Bora complex has a sense of the sacred or a power that is not clearly personal, impersonal or theistic.

In contrast the Christian belief in a personal God is theistic. The aspect of Christianity that has complemented the Bora is the understanding of God as a

2. Two Deacon candidates and one Confirmee are led with the Bora initiates' song to the sacramental ceremonies

3. The Aboriginal priest Arthur Malcolm robes Stephen Giblet who is to be made a Deacon

personal creator and father. Hence the local language word for "father", *piipi*, is used to translate "God". Discussion on the relationship of this God to the Bora has produced the reflection that "we know now that all this culture came from God, he give we that culture". This position was made clear in 1974 when I encouraged the addition of extra verses to an old local language hymn based on a Bora song. It had one verse in the special Bora ritual language. The verses that were added translate as follows:

1. The Father taught us our sacred song.
2. The Father made all people, all of us.
3. We bring a sacred song for the Father's house.

A further expression of this relationship was made at the conclusion of the Bora ceremonies in November 1981. Some of the damper used in the damper-spearing ceremony was kept and taken to the church to be used as the bread for Holy Communion the next morning. The Bora participants took part still decorated with body paint (Thompson 1985:37). The background to this association was not smooth and there were fears at one stage that the Church was attempting to takeover the direction of the Bora. An acknowledgement of the Bora leaders' control was necessary. Such links are to some extent superficial but they do represent the accommodation and complementary understandings that exist between Bora and Church.

The semi-personal sense of power (*kunta*) in the Bora, alongside the personal faith-based spirituality of Christianity, could be regarded as a point of theological disparity between Bora and Church, but *kunta* is comparable to the early Hebrew notion of *quol* in the Old Testament, which was a power or holiness associated with sacred places and ritual taboos (Thompson 1985:20-21). In any case this disparity is more or less absorbed by their complementary accommodation, and in practice is obscured by the predominant social-identity emphasis in the Bora.

Bora, Church and Modernization

Religion is in a fragile situation at Lockhart River mainly because of the increasingly entrenched alcoholism. There is goodwill towards the church in the community and a co-operative attitude from the Aboriginal Community Council. At the time of writing the priest is a Solomon Islander who is now sufficiently experienced to be sensitive to the cultural context, and who maintains ministry on a small scale. The position of the Bora is also fragile. The older leaders of the last Bora ceremonies have now died. Their middle-age successors express keenness for the ceremonies to recommence but they will need a strong and co-ordinated effort to achieve this. Unfortunately life-expectancy at Lockhart River is short and the early loss of the present song leaders could well means its demise as a viable complex. Already there is a trend to perform parts merely as a general cultural display. Thus, for example, two dances including the damper-spearing ceremony were performed at the Laura dance festival in July 1987.

No great change is likely to occur in this situation unless rehabilitation programs are promoted and workable alternatives developed: such as an outstation at the old mission site, which retains its significance as a traditional meeting point between

groups and the birthplace of many. The road access is being improved and a group of four Melanesian Brothers are attempting to establish a religious household and gardens near the old site. Another possibility for change would be through a Christian revival movement arising such as happened at Yarrabah, Queensland and in the Northern Territory. However, the lack of strong local Aboriginal Christian leadership militates against this.

Writing of the East Kimberleys, Erich Kolig perceived a shift of emphasis in traditional religion from cosmic significance to social relevance. "Religion is no longer an awesome tool to prop up the universe; however, it is rapidly becoming the vehicle of ethnic awareness in the wider Australian society" (Kolig 1981:178). Potential for something of the same is evident at Lockhart River, but will be thwarted unless positive rehabilitation and revival occur.

Note

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