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Riders in the Chariot

Aboriginal Conversion to Christianity at Kununurra[1]

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This paper attempts to interpret the significance of Aboriginal conversion to Christianity in remote Australia by analysing the context and processes surrounding the conversion, baptism and subsequent Christian life of a group of Miriwung people living on the outskirts of Kununurra in the late 1960s.

My interpretation is based on an exchange theory approach to human interaction in which the meaning of the processes is extracted by looking at the various human exchanges contained in them. I suggest that from this perspective the missionary strategy in these remote settlements can be described as attempted patronage — the strategic bestowal of goods and services to encourage the Aboriginal target group to reciprocate by becoming affiliated with them as their clients. The Aborigines for their part, I contend, employed a patterned strategy called "riding" or "kinship riding" when relating to non-violent whites possessing useful resources (a category to which most missionaries belonged).

My general thesis is that for Aboriginal people the outcomes of their encounter with Christian missionaries in remote Australia can best be understood as an amalgam of two orientations possessed by Aboriginal leaders, while employing their general 'riding' strategy. The first is an orientation towards securing the patronage of the missionaries by attempting to meet their expectations without losing their own integrity and autonomy. The second orientation is towards exploiting their incorporation into the missionary society by forming religious alliances with members of the missionary community to further their interests.

The suggestion of this paper is that where Aboriginal people retained considerable portions of their traditional culture and territory — as they did on remote Christian missions — Aboriginal religion continued to be the foundation of their spiritual being, even for those who became Christians. Aboriginal converts who carried out the prescriptions and practices of the missionaries, did not *replace* their religion with Christianity. They rather *located* it within categories of their own

religious world. They married the demands and enrichments of both according to their own philosophy and religious system and according to the demands of the socio-political environment created by their own needs and the needs of their various missionary and non-missionary interacting partners.

My approach here is to examine in detail a case study in which I was involved — the proselytising, baptism and subsequent religious life of the Miriwung in Kununurra. I want to propose a hypothesis about the meaning of 'conversion to Christianity' in this colonial context, provide a brief outline of the theory underlying the hypothesis proposed, and apply it with some additional corroboration to the case study in question.

1. Miriwung and Murinbata people dancing in the offertory procession during Mass near Kununurra Native Reserve, early 1970s

The Miriwung Conversion

On a sunny Sunday morning in November 1969, the convent school at Kununurra was converted into a temporary church to accommodate several hundred people. The routine Sunday Mass of the parish was, on this occasion, to include a special communal Baptism of the sixty or so Miriwung people who had recently migrated to Kununurra from cattle stations in the region.

Kununurra is near the northern coast of Western Australia, close to the Northern Territory. The region was occupied by pastoralists in the late nineteenth century. The Duracks, well-to-do Roman Catholics, were prominent among these settlers, and the diaries and journals of the family patriarch were to provide the foundation for Mary Durack's book *Kings in Grass Castles* (1959). In this book and in

her subsequent writing, she speaks often about 'the natives' and how they collaborated with the settlers in the setting up and maintaining of the cattle industry. It was their descendants who nearly a century later crowded into the school to be baptized and confirmed.

When I took over as the new parish priest of Kununurra in 1968 I was required to visit and say Mass for the Miriwung, who at that stage lived out of town on cattle stations in the Eastern Kimberleys . Priests who had been stationed in the region since the 1950s had been actively engaged in preaching Christianity to them. They had been given hospitality by the pastoralists and were permitted to 'visit the camp' and to 'evangelise the natives'. Where the pastoralists were active Catholics a 'station Mass' was celebrated, attended by virtually the entire station population.

2. Adapted Catholic Mass at the Aboriginal camp at Newry Station near Kununurra, early 1970s

With the downturn of the cattle industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the introduction of award wages for Aboriginal stockmen, an increasing number of unemployed Miriwung people came to live on the so-called 'Native Reserve' in Kununurra. This was a new and less protected environment for the Miriwung and they availed themselves, particularly in the early times of their settlement, of the protection and support offered by the Catholic priest and nuns — some of the very few people familiar to them from when they had lived on cattle stations. The Catholic nuns looked after the children and supported the parents with clothing, food and transport.

More than one hundred Miriwung came to live in Kununurra. They spoke their own language, sang their own songs and had an active ceremonial life to which the

sisters and I were frequently invited. At the same time, they attended Mass and prayers and participated enthusiastically as so-called 'catechumens' or Christians-to-be in all aspects of Catholic life. They had been promised baptism *when they were ready* and *when they knew more* about the Catholic faith. In those early days at Kununurra they participated in the Mass and other ceremonies but, as catechumens, were not permitted to receive Holy Communion.

When they came to Kununurra a number of the Miriwung leaders, both men and women, had begun to ask if 'their mob' could be baptised. They were considerably influenced in this by two Aboriginal elders of their group who had been baptised while confined in a Catholic leprosarium and who were the only ones able to take Holy Communion during Mass. There was some urgency in the requests for baptism in 1969. The senior nun they all knew was about to go to a new post and they felt that they might never get baptized once she was gone if they had to 'start again with a new sister'.

It was my task as their Parish priest to decide if they were ready for baptism. From their fervent and regular participation in Catholic religious practices and their apparent agreement in principle with Catholic morality there was every indication that they were.

As far as basic beliefs were concerned the Christian focus on the one transcendent God roused no quarrel with the Miriwung catechumens whose ancestral spirits were closer to home. They seemed quite impressed with the Christian teaching and happy to accept it.

The clearest challenge for Christian missionaries in many parts of Australia tended to be in reconciling certain Aboriginal practices with Christianity such as the practice of polygyny and the use of violence in regulating social behaviour. There were, however, no polygynous marriages among the Miriwung at Kununurra, nor was violence condoned as an acceptable form of social control. It is to be recalled that these people were the children of the children of people raised under the cattle station regime which intruded upon and controlled the activities of Aboriginal workers and 'encouraged' them to be monogamous and to become docile and obedient workers. As with any social group, there was some disordered behaviour, (fighting, drunkenness, etc.) and some non-participation in essential church services (the Sunday Mass, prayers and sacraments) but these behaviours were disavowed in principle.

It has always been difficult to identify the depth of a person's commitment to Christianity. There are, however, a number of convergent factors which tend to supplement a person's statement of personal faith and request for baptism. 'Conversion' understood in this way had some verifiable dimensions. A lengthy period of sober living with one partner, regular attendance at church services and participation in church social activities could be said to be grounds for the presumption of inner conversion. Certainly in other parts of Australia this would satisfy a great many ministers of religion, if accompanied by affirmation of personal faith and desire for admittance to church membership.

There was, however, the final question of their ceremonial life. Catholic Missionaries were obliged to advise Aboriginal applicants for baptism whether the continuance of their ceremonies would be appropriate once they became Catholics. Missionaries in earlier days tended to describe all Aboriginal ritual as pagan and therefore to be eschewed by people seeking Baptism. In later times they permitted

certain ceremonies but forbade practices involving so-called 'mutilation' to be carried out in areas under their jurisdiction. The rulings in the early days were not restricted to Aboriginal catechumens only but concerned all the Aboriginal people living on or visiting mission settlements. The initial question in those early days of missionary control was whether any performance of Aboriginal ritual (even by Aboriginal people not interested in Christianity) should be permitted, since it was held by some that even to permit 'pagan' practices was somehow to condone them.

A working ruling had been established to assist priests preparing traditionally oriented Aboriginal people for baptism: Aboriginal *religious* ceremonies were incompatible with Catholicism and could not be practised by Aboriginal people seeking baptism. Non-religious *cultural* ceremonies — sometimes called 'play-about corroborees' in Aboriginal English — could be allowed. In practice this was a difficult distinction to sustain since the dichotomy between religious and cultural realms did not exist in Miriwung thought. It seemed rather a continuum of two realities that overlaid one another. Furthermore ceremonies were sometimes performed with a number of levels of meaning at the same time. It was feasible that different levels could have different degrees of sacredness.The question inevitably became something that the missionaries were obliged to rule on with what knowledge of Aboriginal religious and ceremonial life they could muster .

After extensive enquiry I finally judged that the the ceremonies to which the Miriwung catechumens invited me must have been compatible with Christianity. Firstly, the elders mentioned above who had been baptised while at the Derby leprosarium and who were most active evangelising Christians, were frequently among the group in charge of the ceremonies. They spoke of them as compatible with, and even enriching, their Christian life. In the second place, Aboriginal people who had been exhaustively instructed by myself and the nuns also thought the ceremonies were compatible.

Having weighed up all of these facts I decided to accede to the requests of the Miriwung people for Baptism.

If the Catholic church had given evidence of its ritual and social beneficence the Aboriginal people were equally enthusiastic to reciprocate particularly in terms of ritual. Church officials and laity were often invited to Aboriginal ceremonies. Those who showed an interest were invited to more and more. I was invited to solemn and secret ceremonies among the Miriwung, Katjarawang and Ngarinman in the Eastern Kimberleys which covered most of the men's ceremonial repertoire. It was during one of these ceremonies that I began to think of and apply the interpretation of Aboriginal acceptance of Christianity to which I will presently turn.

I had attended special rites of passage through which initiated men were introduced to a new Law. After the ceremony I was driving the Toyota with one of the ritual leaders, an old friend and informant who had led all the people for me to baptize. I asked him if any 'whitefellas' ever 'went through the Law' (the local Aboriginal English way of describing the initiation sequence for newcomers to the group). He said that one or two young stockmen wanting to live with Aboriginal girls had been put through the Law. I asked about myself — did people like me go through the Law? He looked at me and said : "You already, you our Father". Whatever else was being conveyed it was obvious that the Miriwung had located me and my Christian ritual role *within* their scheme of things.

My informant was a committed Christian with piety and zeal to match. When his brother fell ill and was taken to hospital he visited him him there and recited Catholic prayers to the edification of some hospital staff and the bewilderment of others. The same man held to his own traditions and was worried that the "young fellas" were not following the Law. It was evident that for him somehow Christianity complemented his other religious allegiances.

In later years there was a change in the relationship between the Catholic clergy and the Miriwung neophytes. Other Christian proselytizers arrived and attracted a following predominantly from Aborigines not already closely affiliated with the Catholics. The regularity and fervour of Aboriginal participation in Catholic activities diminished during this period. This occurred at the same time as the Miriwung people's dependence on my services and those of the Catholic nuns was reduced by the provision of alternative welfare and transport services: social security and government granted vehicles. The Miriwung Catholics further attenuated their participation in Church activities as they gained access to alternative resources and protectors — the Welfare department and paradoxically, the police. Once it was established, the Welfare department provided a new supply of money orders and food during times of scarcity. The police gave nearly all the male leaders of Aboriginal households some affiliation with their power and immunity by making them honorary 'trackers'. There was also a competing church, the United Aborigines' Mission and a group linked informally with it (called 'the Shedley Mob' by the Miriwung after the leading family of that group), who attempted to recruit people on the native reserve along similar lines to those used by the Catholics.

The exclusive nature of the early exchanges within the closed Miriwung/Catholic church circle was increasingly breached and no longer constituted the sole arena from which help might come in times of difficulty.

I now want to examine the colonial context of the Miriwung conversion and develop some theoretical principles with which to interpret it.

The Context of Conversion

The socio-political context of the encounters between Aborigines and white missionaries is essentially a colonial context. The white settlers and their administration were extending control over the land and its original inhabitants. Although possessed of a radically different approach, the missionaries were effectively part of this program. Endowed with consumer goods and sponsored to a greater or lesser extent by the Australian government, they set out to establish settlements in remote country known to be occupied by Aboriginal people. Local Aboriginal people were then invited to participate in the activities of the settlement.

Once established, the missionaries set about persuading Aborigines about the values of Christianity by word, example and ceremony. The kind of Christianity offered to the Aborigines was that practiced by whites in Australia but modified to suit the dependent affiliate status to which Aborigines were relegated under the mission regime.

The Aborigines for their part were often interested in establishing exchange relations with the materially endowed newcomers but there is no evidence that they wished to surrender their identity and autonomy. Stanner, reflecting on the massive migrations of Aboriginal people towards centres of white settlement, had suggested

that Aboriginal people were extremely interested in — almost addicted to — participating in the activities and goods surrounding the settlements. He viewed what appeared to be Aboriginal people's irresponsible migration out of their country with alarm since Aboriginal culture needed to be grounded in the customs and Dreaming of their own land. In this respect he saw great value in the missionaries bringing enough civilisation to satisfy the needs of Aboriginal people who would otherwise want to migrate to white urban centres (Stanner 1954).

In addition Aborigines often cultivated the patronage of whites to form the foundation of exchanges they wished to enter into in order to obtain certain goods and services — food, clothing and transport, and some relief from white harassment. This occurred particularly in places where there were few whites and where Aborigines were required either as proselytes on missions or more commonly as cheap labour.The tin mines in North Queensland, (*cf.* Anderson 1983) and the pastoral industry in Central and Northern Australia, particularly the smaller holdings (*cf.* Collman 1978) are examples of places where cheap labour was required and where Aboriginal people were able, at least in the early days, to negotiate a kind of participation which suited their own agendas as well as those of their employers.

To deepen our understanding of the exchanges which were occurring in these contexts, it is first necessary to look at some appropriate theoretical principles.

Models of Exchange: Patrons and Riders

Robert Paine (1976) has discussed a set of relationships between missionaries and the Inuit in Western Canada which are similar to those between missionaries and Aborigines in Australia. His ideas form the foundation of the following theoretical considerations.

Patronage is a type of permanent and reciprocal exchange relationship between two parties. It is established when people in need accept un-requested gifts which they nonetheless hold as valuable and which are usually otherwise unobtainable. By accepting the status of 'one who receives gifts', the recipient then feels obliged to return gifts 'acceptable to the giver' in order to maintain reciprocity. In such exchanges both parties benefit. The bestower, or 'patron' gains people (adherents) and the receiver or 'client' obtains goods, protection, and sponsorship. There are also costs. The patron has to bestow, or at least be seen to be prepared to bestow, gifts and the client has to accept a degree of permanent dependence and inferiority.

One of the classic forms of patronage is that whereby a patron acts as a broker by controlling the mediation of goods to a client. In order to maintain his or her position as provider, the broker/patron needs to secure the *exclusive* mediation of otherwise unobtainable goods. Missionaries often occupied such a position and wielded considerable power, particularly when mediating government resources. The brokerage on these exchanges — the handling charges as it were — was bestowed as an act of patronage.

Patron/client relationships are established in two phases. The first phase is that of gift distribution. Aspiring patrons attempt to distribute goods, preferably those in their exclusive possession, over as wide a range as possible. Paine notes (1971:14):

> Ideally the patron, offers items and services that are new to the culture and to which he alone has access, thereby actually *creating the need* for [them].

Patrons try to create a "general dependence on their goods and services". Having established this general dependence they are then able to nominate what values are acceptable to them as counter-prestations. The return prestations, however, do not 'settle the score' but maintain reciprocity while at the same time displaying the client's acceptance of a dependent position and its continuance.

Ultimately what distinguishes patrons from their clients is that 'only values of the patron's choosing' are circulated in the relationship. The clients have to demonstrate to their patrons and others, their acceptance of the values which the patron has chosen for circulation between them.

The second phase is the permanent state of indebtedness on the part of the client and the continued power of the patron:

> the client may be made liable at any time for any number of different prestations, all of which the patron alone has determined as appropriate to their relationship. (*ibid*:16)

The client is thus constrained by the patron as to the choice and time of return goods and services. In this respect the relationship is different from other exchange relations such as those based on "generalised reciprocity" which usually exist between friends or kin. Generalised reciprocity is predicated on a two way giving and receiving relationship in which the power to nominate the values in circulation is not restricted to one partner. The patron does not have to make a return gift when the client makes a required offering. It is presumed that the client is enjoying a permanent state of endowment generated by being a member of the patron's clientele. The client's offerings, made according to the requirements of the patron who determines the occasion and kind of gift required, are seen as inadequate responses to the patron's beneficence. Such gifts are not understood as return offerings to be taken as at least partial payment of a finite debt. They are tokens symbolising gratitude and permanent indebtedness. In the other, more equal exchange relations mentioned above, each is indebted to the other at different times. This is not the case in patronage. Patronage is about structured inequality: paternalism on the one hand and 'obedience' and 'gratitude' on the other.

In many cases patronage can be the foundation of attempts to annexe the client's attitudes and values. Paine says:

> ...the patron *chooses* for the client those values in relation to which, the patron protects the client; moreover the patron expects the client himself to embrace these values. (*ibid*:19)

Clients have to bear or appear to bear the cost of this real or potential dependence:

> The costs to the client can be very little; some of the clients' own values may be supported by the patron ...and the clients may succeed in sustaining a deception over their embracement of the patron's values. (*ibid*:17)

It seems to me that the vagueness of the actual costs incurred by the client is due to a feature qualifying the reciprocity in a patron/client relationship. Reciprocity in

such relationships is partly real and partly notional : *expressions* of obedience and gratitude may suffice to serve the relationship. Material offerings, gifts and services may rarely be required. Compared to generalised exchanges the patron/client relationship can continue with few material prestations involved.

The very fact of being known to others as a patron or client, as protector or protegee may be the major value sought and enjoyed in the relationship. It may enhance prestige, it may protect from harassment. In fact it may even be tacitly understood that material claims should be minimised lest the limits of the relationship be exposed.

I have suggested elsewhere (Willis 1980) that many Aboriginal potential clients developed a strategic way of responding to the bestowals of their white would-be patrons. 'Patronal' bestowals (in response to which one is expected to become a 'grateful' client) were re-interpreted as quasi-kinship based 'normal' behaviour. White gift givers could then be treated like any other visitors to the camp, that is as people from whom bestowals were not wonderful acts of generosity requiring thanks and generating dependence but were the appropriate behaviour to be *expected* of visiting kin. The bestowers had just done the job appropriate to their status. The missionaries by defining themselves by kinship terms — father, sister etc. — were inviting such re-codification.

I suggest that in addition to re-defining the relationships between themselves and whites many Aborigines often pursued their own agendas by developing a special kind of strategic participation in white enterprises which I have called 'riding' or kinship riding. As we have seen, many Aborigines wanted to link up with whites in order to gain access to food, transport and protection from other whites. We have also seen that in most cases whites were only interested in forming relationships with Aborigines where they were in control. In many parts of Australia white control of resources spilled over into areas in which Aborigines were once self sufficient. Within such oppressive regimes, which Aborigines encountered in almost all contexts, 'riding' became one of the only ways to work towards one's own objectives; especially if they involved using resources appropriated or controlled by whites. Riding was thus a way in which disempowered and impoverished Aboriginal people attempted to achieve their objectives by selectively co-operating with enterprises initiated by patrons known to be friendly, while at the same time pursuing their own objectives under the cover of the patron's initiative, sponsorship and protection (*op. cit.*:101). Riding should be seen in the context of oppressive colonial regimes. It is an act through which Aboriginal people attempt to negotiate individual and group survival on the best terms available at any given time.

On cattle stations many Aboriginal leaders were able to negotiate some status by 'managing the camp for the boss', i.e., looking after their Aboriginal group living on the station. In this way Aboriginal leaders could have their authority endorsed and enhanced by their white bosses. They could also establish some modified autonomy under the regime of the cattle station by using their 'free time' (particularly the three months summer lay-off season when they were not needed for work) to pursue their own agendas. Sometimes they were supported to a limited extent by station resources — food and transport. The maintenance of the authority of Aboriginal leaders through this form of riding was a key to the survival of small Aboriginal groups on cattle stations and other locations in remote regions of Australia. During recent decades, when children returning from strongly

assimilationist mission schools showed little interest in or respect for traditional culture, Aboriginal leaders who were losing the traditional basis of their authority were able to retain control over their families by riding on the authority of the station boss.

Interpreting Aboriginal Conversion

In the following interpretation I am suggesting that the form that Aboriginal conversion took was not simply one of client responding to a patron's wishes. It was essentially a culturally appropriate response to the missionaries' political, social and religious initiatives. It co-incided with early Aboriginal attempts to create suitable and equal alliances with approachable whites. In this they used strategies of exchange and encounter from within their own cultural repertoire. Although both partners wanted to be related, each had different expectations of what that relationship should be.

Aboriginal conversion to Christianity can therefore be defined as a specific reciprocal act by which an Aboriginal group or individual displayed formally and solemnly their affection and approval for the commitment and support of the missionaries without becoming their clients and accepting their attempted patronage in any strict sense. This was effected, by 'going through' the Christians' rituals of acceptance and recruitment. In this way, from an Aboriginal perspective, an alliance between the whites and themselves became ritually expressed and sealed.

Aborigines thus refused to internalise the role of subordinate clients, to become grateful and obedient and to seek to become like the whites. They offered a lot in return, but as quasi kin and allies, not as dependants. In the Kimberleys there seems to have been provision within Aboriginal traditional culture for religious change under three counts. The first is by *dreaming* when someone creates or dreams a new ceremonial sequence which is then endorsed by the group's acceptance and participation. The second is by *religious exchange* when new rituals are taken into the group's repertoire. The third is as an *adjunct to social and political exchange* when new ceremonies are the ritual part of new relationships and alliances. I am suggesting that Aboriginal leaders used this third traditional competence when meeting and negotiating with the missionaries, among whites the group most amenable to being dealt with and managed. Political and social exchanges among Aborigines were linked to alliances giving shared access to country, to relationships (marriage partners) and to ritual. The meaning of individual exchanges and the significance of the negotiating style used was to be found in the aspiration of the participants together with the circumstances in which they found themselves.

These principles of Aboriginal/white exchange can now be applied to interpret the original case study. The Miriwung people were migrants from nearby cattle stations and were living in Kununurra on a small area of land called the Native Reserve. They had moved reluctantly from their own country and out of a formerly stable regime which, although authoritarian, was predictable, safe and relatively well resourced. They now had minimal resources, no vehicles and no cash reserves. Those who found paid employment were far outnumbered by children and dependent relatives. People were ill clad, sickly and often hungry. In coming to Kununurra, the Miriwung people became dislocated and vulnerable.

The reserve and the Catholic convent school were the focal points for an important set of exchanges between the Miriwung and the missionaries. The Sisters and I recruited children for the school. These pupils and their parents and relatives were often given food and clothing and taken to hospital or to the shops in the convent car. On Sundays the sisters drove people the two kilometres to the Church. It was thus a set of exchanges between an endowed recruiting group and a group of indigent recipients.

Those of us who knew and looked after these people were successful in recruiting them; they called themselves 'the Catholic mob'. They used the Catholic church's name when dealing with police, welfare and service providers. Other whites often came to us about 'your Aboriginal flock' and we accepted the affiliation.

The Miriwung people who made up this Catholic mob often asked to be baptized. In Kununurra they participated in Catholic Church life *as a group* and sought Baptism in the same way. Following the proposed interpretation, when these people sought Baptism as a collective, conversion had the dimension of a kind of federation style affiliation to the Christian group. When the older men supported by their women brought their whole group en masse into the Church, they were bringing a community whose internal identity and structure remained. In this way their authority too was recognised and re-enforced in the Church.

As these people derived their identity from the totality of a culture which was based on religious beliefs and ceremonies, I would therefore suggest that it was as a *religiously* formed and maintained entity, that this group sought to strengthen links with the Christian Church, their benefactors and protectors, by being baptized and confirmed.

Understood in this way, the act of Baptism had important effects on the linked parties. The Catholic Church had ratified an existing affiliation. It now had sixty new members to care for and, of course, to be pleased about. The Aborigines had a formal public testimonial to the acceptance of their conversion by the Catholics and to the protection afforded members by the Church, which had currency in white and Aboriginal circles. This interpretation provides an explanation for the enthusiastic participation of the Miriwung in Catholic religious life on the one hand and, on the other, for their repeated invitations to us the missionaries to attend *their* rituals.

I am suggesting, then, that an exchange approach can be useful in understanding Aboriginal conversion within a Missionary context. There is a strong interactional dimension to conversion which is best analysed by looking at the different interests and approaches of the participants involved in the exchanges. The Catholic church engaged in strategic bestowals of goods and services in order to make the people grateful and dependent. What the church wanted in return was for Aborigines to affiliate with the church and thus ratify their recipient status by adopting Catholic religious practices. It attempted to establish patronage relationships over the Aboriginal group by inviting them to become clients and affiliates. Christian behaviour could then be required from the Miriwung as appropriate acts of reciprocation to their Christian patrons.

It appears, however that the Aborigines had their own agenda in response to the missionaries' overtures. They were happy to take on another ritual system to enrich their ceremonial repertoire and they were happy to accept affiliation with the church. They were also prepared to accept the church's claims to patronage and to cultivate their beneficence. The leaders were further interested in cultivating

endorsement for their authority in this new non-station environment. In an earlier section of this paper I have called their strategy 'riding'. The clients ride on the patrons beneficence but without commitment — a kind of socio-political and religious hitch-hiking.

Conclusion

Religious changes on remote missions which occurred as a result of missionary activity were linked to socio-political exchanges between decision makers from Aboriginal and Catholic Christian groups. These exchanges took place within the context of attempted patronage by the missionaries and selective acceptance by the Aborigines; they derive at least one dimension of their meaning from these exchanges.

Religious change for Aborigines needs to be understood in terms of Aboriginal culture and religion. Aboriginal religious practice allows for the exchange of ceremonies. It is therefore appropriate for Aboriginal leaders to seek to increase their participation in, and ownership of, new rituals. Since Aboriginal culture does not separate fundamental religious beliefs from other social domains it is difficult to imagine how traditionally oriented Aboriginal people could change their worldview and still retain their Aboriginal identity with its overlaid perspectives on self, relations, territory and Dreaming.

When religious conversion appears to have occurred, and Aboriginal people still retain their identity, it must be presumed to be occurring somehow by *adding to*, rather than replacing, traditional religious practices. A consequence of this interpretation is to suggest that at least some forms of Aboriginal Christianity can be understood as kinds of additional ceremonial sets incorporated into Aboriginal religion. Aboriginal Catholics now include Christian practices in their ceremonial repertoire and some extra status is accorded to those Aborigines affiliated with it. Aboriginal religion would thus have incorporated another way for people to generate what Stanner has called 'the mood of acceptance' (1965).

Such an interpretation provides an explanation for the interest some Aboriginal ritual leaders in other places in remote Australia have in being involved in Christian religious life. Thus on Elcho Island the owners of certain sacred rangga (sacred ceremonial boards) who in 1959 departed radically from traditional practice by erecting these usually secret emblems in a public place near the church (*cf.* Berndt 1962), were engaging in Aboriginal religious acts within a Christian context. Other examples are the incorporation of ceremonial paintings in the Uniting Church at Yirrkala at about the same time (Morphy and Layton 1981), the Christian Pulapa at Yuendumu (see Swain in this volume) and the religious songs — Djaanba — used in Catholic ceremonies at Kununurra.

Perhaps while the Missionaries were thinking they had incorporated the Aborigines into their church, the Aborigines had incorporated the church into *their* world. There is a blessed irony when the humanists among the rapacious colonisers are manipulated to provide a base and refuge for the dispossessed Aborigines; our demise becomes their rebirth. Not as we wanted but as they did, so that the missionaries, like John the Baptist in a different context, may decrease so that the Aborigines may increase.

Missionaries have come under fire for destroying Aboriginal culture. This interpretation suggests that Aboriginal culture was not destroyed. Rather its

infrastructure was extended, and the missionaries, by their concern to deal with the Aborigines as an organised society and to promote their welfare, were able to be used by the Aborigines to provide an essential bridge from then until now.

Note

1 This is a revised and edited version of the author's Charles Strong Memorial Lecture for 1985.

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