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A Case Study in Failure

Kuku-Yalanji and the Lutherans at Bloomfield River, 1887-1902

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Out of the hundreds of Aboriginal communities in Australia in the 1980s, very few remain as Christian missions. Many of these communities, however, began life as missions. What happened? There is very little historical and anthropological analysis of this change. Can we say that Christian missions to Aborigines generally failed? Certainly, the missions often fulfilled a vital role providing aide and assistance to, what was considered by most of white Australian society, an outcast group, better left to die out. There were humanitarian motives for the setting up of missions in the early days of settlement; particularly when governments refused to tackle any of the problems associated with Aboriginal people in any systematic way. This humanitarianism, however, had its price. Distant congregations supporting mission work wanted evidence of spiritual progress. How many 'heathens' have been baptised? How many married in a church? How many are attending church services and school? In this latter sense of permanent conversion at least, we can say that many missions did fail.

But what is it that really leads to failure? Writers either assume this failure as though it were a natural fact, or else they assume that it stems solely from some sort of cultural barrier — Aborigines did not *want* to adopt Christianity, or they found its worldview too alien to their own — a process wholly intellectual. Nothing is said of the structural circumstances in which both missionaries and Aborigines exist, the force of which is, in some of its elements, not directly obvious to the actors themselves. By structural circumstances I mean the social, political and economic constraints and possibilities within which people must operate.

A Lutheran mission existed at Bloomfield River in southeastern Cape York Peninsula [hereafter SECYP], from 1887 until 1902. Although up to 120 Aborigines lived there at various times, not one person was baptised or converted. This, admitted the missionaries, was fairly clear evidence of abject failure. This paper describes what happened, attempts to explain why the Bloomfield mission failed,

and shows that it had little to do with conflicting worldviews or with Aborigines making a conscious choice to reject Christianity. While both of these, as we will see, were true, neither is sufficient to account for the failure. Indeed they themselves are outcomes of the systems I shall describe.

Background to the Mission and Summary of Events

The Lutheran church had already had considerable experience of mission work among Australian Aborigines when, in 1885, Pastor J. Flierl, stopped over in Cooktown, on the coast of north Queensland, on his way to the then German colony of New Guinea. He decided that a mission presence was needed in the area, and convinced the government to allow his group, the Neuendettelsau Mission Society of Bavaria, to take control of a reserve at Elim, near Cape Bedford north of Cooktown. Under Pastor G.H. Schwarz for most of its history, this mission, later renamed Hope Vale, is the oldest surviving mission in north Queensland (see Haviland and Haviland 1980; Rose 1978; Terwiel-Powell 1975).

After his visit, Flierl arranged for the Evangelical Lutheran Immanuel Synod of South Australia, under Pastor J.G. Rechner, to take responsibility for Aborigines south of Cooktown. The following year they agreed to establish a mission on a reserve of 260 hectares, located on the north bank of the Bloomfield River. Until the missionaries arrived, a local farmer, Mr. Louis Bauer, was appointed by the government as superintendent of the Bloomfield River Mission Station. In the first half of 1887, almost 100 Aborigines camped at the mission and worked there in return for rations. In September, Carl Meyer and Johannes Pingilina, a Dieri man from Central Australia, arrived at Bloomfield to take over from Bauer. Together with German mission helpers, they embarked on a building programme and intensified the efforts to achieve agricultural success. However, in 1890 Meyer was dismissed after being accused of accepting bribes from a *bêche-de-mer* captain to recruit Aboriginal men from the mission to work on luggers. He was replaced by Sebastian Hoerlein who continued the mission programme of attempting to attract Aborigines to the mission for training and Christianising. During his time, the number of Aborigines at the mission fluctuated between 30 and 120. By 1900, the death of his wife, his own ill health, continuing financial difficulties and government dissatisfaction with the mission's results led him to resign. The mission was finally abandoned in 1902.

Aims and Policy of the Lutheran Mission

The Lutheran Church's stated aim in the venture at Bloomfield was "not only... to civilize the Aborigines, but also to teach them the word of God and to make them acquainted with the Rules put down by the same" (Meyer 1889a). More simply, the missionaries wanted to raise Bloomfield Aborigines from their level of 'degradation', "so that they may turn from their former wickedness and confess the living Lord" (Meyer 1889b). These aims coincided with the missionaries' dim views of Aborigines generally and of aspects of Kuku-Yalanji culture in particular. In hundreds of pages of mission correspondence and reports, there are few favourable comments about Aborigines. Negative ones, however, are frequent. In 1889, Meyer reported that he was making slow progress in communicating spiritual teachings, and that "these

poor folk are showing signs of grasping their significance". But he then added, "And that's no small matter among people as decadent as these" (Meyer 1889a). Hoerlein (1889) described the Bloomfield Aborigines for the church magazine as "apathetic, insusceptible, defiant and lazy". Most aspects of traditional Aboriginal culture were seen as emanating from the Devil. The presumed inherent nomadic character of the Aborigines was constantly criticised — and not merely in practical terms. The missionaries argued that 'walkabout' was "morally wrong" (see Pfalzer 1887).

In the end, the missionaries felt they had little hope of success in converting the adults at Bloomfield. Meyer reported to Rechner in 1890: "It is painful and disappointing to be continually revealing the gospel message and find it meeting deaf ears everywhere" (Meyer 1890a). This despair found some solace in the general belief shared by the missionaries that Aborigines and their culture were doomed anyway. Flierl, on inspecting Bloomfield for the Mission Committee, stated: "All the mission can really achieve for them is a kind of Christian burial service" (Flierl 1898). They did, however, hold out some hope for the children and a great emphasis was placed on schooling to transform the "children of Darkness to the children of Light". Parents were encouraged to leave their children at the mission dormitory for this purpose.

The church's spiritual aims had necessary pragmatic corollaries. Firstly, the missionaries had to centralise Aborigines from the entire Bloomfield area at the mission by encouraging a settled life (see Plate 1). Rations were used from 1888 on to induce Aborigines to settle there (Meyer 1889c). The task of centralisation weighed heavily on the missionaries. Their correspondence is replete with despairing remarks about the Bloomfield Aborigines' propensity to roam, despite the rations (see Meyer 1890b; Steicke 1889a).

1. Missionary Hoerlein and Kuku-Yalanji mission residents, Bloomfield River, 1890s (Photograph courtesy of Mrs. H. Jones)

Secondly, there was a desire for the mission station to become self-sufficient as quickly as possible, in accordance with government aims as well as Christian principles. The Lutheran Church was keen to see its Bloomfield mission as an economically viable, self-supporting, even profitable venture. Meyer's first visit to Bloomfield in 1886 produced glowing reports on the station's potential. He felt that the land was an ideal mission reserve, and that it would produce enough food supplies and support enough cattle to maintain itself more than adequately.

The basis of the mission's self-sufficiency was to be Aboriginal labour (see Plate 2), but the missionaries' attitudes towards Aborigines and work was contradictory. On the one hand, they seemed to recognise that Aborigines could work well when they chose, but on the other, they believed that an important mission purpose was to train the Aborigines to work. After Meyer's first visit to Bloomfield, he noted: "All work except the house building has been done by aborigines. They seem to work very well" (Meyer 1886). A mission labourer had a more cynical view:

> We have really more than enough farm work to do. Of course, in theory labour is available, if only the blacks were willing to do a worthwhile job. The few who do come to work are really only interested in food ...but when they feel like it (which is only rarely the case), they really set to with a will, there's no denying that. But it lasts only for a short while. Afterwards they are all the lazier. Of course, it won't do to judge the heathens too harshly. One has to allow for the fact that they have been used to let their time go idly by. But we have to train them to work, for idleness is the root of all mischief. (Koch 1889)

2. Working on the mission farm, Bloomfield River, 1890s
(photograph courtesy of Mrs. H. Jones)

The Lutherans instituted standard European work routines. The work-day would begin at 8 a.m., "but they are apt to be late" (Meyer 1887a). The group of Aborigines present was divided into work teams, each of which was led by a European. The men did the heavier, clearing-type work and the women the planting and weeding jobs. At 11:30 they would break for lunch and the Aborigines were given their food rations: usually a lump of bread dough each, which they would bake in the ashes, and sometimes rice. At 2 p.m. work would again resume until 5:30, when they were issued with enough potatoes for the evening meal and breakfast (Meyer 1887a). At one stage, Meyer requested that a bell be sent up with which he could summon the Aborigines for work; "Their camps are at times so far from here that I have to fire a shot to call them: not really a suitable method" (Meyer 1887a).

Whatever the missionaries' opinion of Aboriginal labour, they were certainly dependent on it. The mission had no farm machinery at all, nor any draught animals. At its peak, it had about twelve hectares of land that, after clearing, needed hoeing, planting, weeding and watering. In addition, crops had to be harvested, carried and stored. With such a great need for steady and reliable labour, the missionaries became exasperated by the Aboriginal refusal to keep to the farm's seasonal cycle. Meyer wrote:

> The absence of so many of our black workers greatly retards our progress. Try as we may, we can't get ahead the way we should and would like to. Right now, I would like to see a large number of blacks here, to get the land ready for the next sowing season. (Meyer 1889a)

It was not just that the Lutherans wanted to have the mission keep itself in food, they wanted it to actually make a profit. There were strong attempts to establish cash crops (see Rechner 1890a). There is even evidence that the Lutheran Mission committee wanted Bloomfield to develop its agricultural potential to the full so that it could provide produce for Elim Mission (see Roth 1902:472). In any case, after a visit in 1898, the Queensland Northern Protector of Aborigines W.E. Roth, observed that the Bloomfield Mission "is not being worked for the amelioration of the blacks, [but] is run rather on commercial than on philanthropic lines..." (Roth 1898b:6). The last word was from a disillusioned Missionary Hoerlein: "The English [settlers at Bloomfield] are quite right when they claim this is a work colony and not a mission" (Hoerlein 1891).

The Missionaries at Bloomfield

The basis of the endeavour at Bloomfield was to conquer a recalcitrant nature, which was seen to include both Aborigines and the environment. The environment of the area presented the missionaries with great difficulties. Firstly, there was the problem of the poor quality of the land, and secondly, the missionaries had unrealistic expectations about, and lacked experience and knowledge of, the difficult north Queensland environment. The reserve at Bloomfield in fact included some of the densest, rockiest, most inaccessible land in the valley (see Meston 1896:1207).

In addition to the problems of the environment, the missionaries had to deal with four distinct groups of people: Aborigines, local Europeans, the Lutheran church administration in South Australia and Queensland government officials, including police.

The missionaries' views on Aborigines undoubtedly made dealings difficult. Their assumption of superiority, and at times pity or concern, was translated into paternalism and fatalism. Their negative attitudes left little room for appreciating any aspect of Aboriginal culture, even those which might have aided the missionary endeavour. Communication was also difficult. Meyer's first report in 1887 stated that no English was spoken by the Aborigines at Bloomfield, but in 1891 he was still reporting to the Mission Committee that the devotionals were held in German or in English. He refused to have the local language (Kuku-Yalanji) used in the school (Meyer 1889c) and reported to the Missions Congregation that:

> It is...not possible to learn the language really quickly, particularly when there aren't any forms of aid available. Every single word has to be discovered by the learner himself, and no one who has not tried this can imagine how difficult it is. Because one can't always make the blacks grasp just what it is one wants to know, one tends to get rather strange and quite inapplicable replies... (Meyer 1888a)

The despair at this attempt at 'civilising the heathen' is evident in Hoerlein's communication in 1900, at the end of the mission's days: "I have been [at Bloomfield] for 10 years, but have not come to trust or understand the Aborigines" (Hoerlein 1900a).

The European settlers also presented difficulties. Bad relations existed from the beginning due to jealousy and resentment at the mission's 'locking up' of land and resources (e.g. timber). There was also intense competition for Aboriginal labour. Other relatively minor but obvious things made relations difficult. The missionaries were insular and suspicious of anyone who was not German. Hoerlein claimed that "the English [at Bloomfield] dislike the German mission" (Hoerlein 1891b) and he wrote to Rechner that he was aghast at the prospect of Schulz, a mission teacher, marrying "an English girl" (1891c). They nonetheless had to depend on the settlers for many of the necessary supplies and services, and the mission was constantly in debt and had a bad credit reputation. Cooktown merchants on several occasions refused to honour Meyer's mission cheques (see Meyer 1891a).

Another element the missionaries had to cope with was their South Australian administration, the Mission Committee of the Immanuel Synod, which had to be consulted on even the most minor decisions. Quick action was impossible on any matter as the mail could take several frustrating months.

Given the many and diverse pressures on the missionaries, it is not surprising that they constantly bickered and feuded amongst themselves (see Mack 1890; Meyer 1890b). Both Meyer and Hoerlein ended their mission days broken and disillusioned. Meyer became a recluse and an alcoholic, and was forced to leave the mission in disgrace. Hoerlein left Bloomfield physically ill, depressed and bitter.

In 1902, W.E. Roth recommended that the mission be closed permanently. He summarised the mission's problems in a report for the government:

> The blacks have no incentive to come into the Mission where, unless work is done, no food is distributed. On the other hand, the surrounding scrubs are so rich in native foods that the daily wants of the Aborigines can be supplied with the minimum of physical

> exertion. Furthermore, there are several settlers and miners in the district from whom the natives can always get tobacco in return for very light services, as also for the loan of their women. During the past year there were rarely more than 10 or 12, usually under half-a-dozen, men present at the station, the rest being made up of women and children: even these, however, were continually changing —they might stay a very few weeks at the most, but would suddenly take their departure one morning and be replaced by another crowd a few days later. It was also impossible to keep the school going: the children might put in an appearance for a few days, but would then be taken away on the peregrinations of their elders. Only two men and one woman have been residing there permanently. (Roth 1903:467)

The status of the land as an Aboriginal reserve was thus canceled, and it was opened for lease occupation. The Lutheran Church's unsuccessful evangelisation of the Bloomfield Aborigines was summarised many years later by Dr. Otto Theile, then President of the Queensland Lutheran Church: "It fills the heart with sadness when it is realized that sixteen years of effort and sacrifice remained without result. During those years not a single native was baptised" (Theile 1938:107).

The Camp at Bloomfield River Mission

I turn now to Kuku-Yalanji usage of the mission. I suggest that the problems cited above were not the only nor even the primary reasons for the mission's failure.

First, it is important to stress that the mission *was* used by Aborigines. There is no evidence that Aborigines were brought under duress to the mission by either police or missionaries, nor that they were forcibly kept there. There was, it seems, always at least one residential camp not far from the main mission. The latter consisted of houses for the European staff, farm buildings and a small shed sometimes used as a dormitory for young Aboriginal men. There was no other built accommodation for Aboriginal residents at the mission (see Roth 1898a). The Aboriginal population at the mission varied between 20 and 120, usually averaging about 60 (see Anderson 1984: Table 11).

In considering the identity of the Aborigines who were using the mission, the first and foremost factor is that the mission was sited on a particular Kuku-Yalanji clan estate. The mission was situated on the *Wujalwujal* estate (named for the waterfall site upriver) and the patriclan and residential group associated with this estate were *Wujalwujalwarra*. Several historical references support this. Bauer, the first mission superintendent, noted that the mission area was called 'Wodall Wodall' (Bauer 1887). Hoerlein in a letter in about 1899 refers to the language of the local Aborigines as being the 'Wotjal Wotjal language' (Hoerlein n.d.). Meyer mentioned "members of the Wotjal Wotjal tribe" being at the mission. He also commented on the mixed clan composition of the group: "We are living on Wotjal Wotjal land. But quite a number of other tribes live here together on mutually very friendly terms and they all understand the local language" (Meyer 1890a).

This fact of mission location implied several things. Firstly, people with descent ties to *Wujalwujal* along with their affines would *ipso facto* have had greater *de jure*

rights than other Aborigines at the mission with respect to decisions concerning local events. Secondly, the traditional owners would have utilised the presence of the mission to increase their *de facto* power as well, and they would probably have had primary say in dealing with the missionaries. Meyer's (1887c) comments about a 'Wotjalwotjal chief' support this.

Thirdly, given the form of Aboriginal land tenure and residence patterns in the area (see Anderson 1984:78-111), we would expect that members of the same estate cluster as *Wujalwujal* would predominate at the mission. This would enable members of these linked clans to tap into the resources available at the mission. Hodgkinson (1886) confirms this with a list of actual patriclan names: out of the 19 groups he lists as having members resident at the mission, 12 are inland Bloomfield groups and five are related riverine and nearby coastal area Kuku-Yalanji (see also Roth 1910a:92).

The nature of the estate cluster residence patterns, would partially account for the low Aboriginal population levels at the mission. Yet it was almost always greater in size, and much more mixed in composition, than just one clan-group. However, we would expect that large numbers of other groups, particularly those persons without close consanguineal or affinal ties to the *Wujalwujal* group, would have been reluctant to stay for any length of time at the mission, because of their diminished rights there. This was especially so for groups which also had Europeans on their own estates. Had they not been 'home' they would have missed out on the access to goods and services available there because of the European presence (see Anderson 1983).

The conclusion to be drawn from these points is that a mission in SECYP located permanently at one site, would generally have relatively few Aborigines permanently resident (unless they were forced by external conditions to migrate there). Given the right conditions outside the mission, there would have always been other camps elsewhere in the Bloomfield valley, either in the bush or attached to the properties of other Europeans. Missionary comments support this. In 1888, Meyer reported that "there are crowds of natives in the region whom one *should* contact, but not until we have a better command of the language" (Meyer 1888a). After Hoerlein arrived, Meyer noted that they would now be able "to go on trips to the camps of the blacks in the out-lying areas" (Meyer 1891b).

That Aborigines in these other camps did not want to gather together on the mission site is supported by statements from other European observers in the area at the time. Robert Hislop, a local landowner and one of the most knowledgeable Europeans in the area about Aborigines, argued the case for "a number of small reserves [rather] than a few large ones owing to the disclination [sic] of the Aborigines to remain long away from their own hunting grounds" (Hislop 1897). The local government land ranger also felt that a large central reserve was unsatisfactory, "as more than two or three tribes of blacks will not agree to gather on such a reserve" (Byers 1892). With the power (in Aboriginal terms) that accrued from being able to live on one's own estate, and knowing the resources and advantages provided by having resident Europeans, it is not surprising that Aborigines from nearby estates tried to urge the missionaries to come to their country (see Meyer 1888b).

In summary, the mission was not *the* focal place for all Aborigines, as the mission and the government hoped it would be. Rather, it was merely another camp used predominantly by Kuku-Yalanji associated with *Wujalwujal* and nearby estates.

Functions of the Mission Camp

It seems reasonable to assume, given the evidence from the neighbouring Annan river area (see Anderson 1983), that Kuku-Yalanji associated with the country around *Wujalwujal* were happy to have the mission on their country. Here they could attach themselves to particular (hopefully permanent) Europeans which would serve a number of purposes. The first and most obvious is that the mission was an assured source of food, particularly flour and meat, but also tobacco and other goods. The records reveal that large amounts of rations and goods were being distributed at the mission as early as 1887, only eight years after the first European settler came into the area. Bauer, the first superintendent, was distributing every week an average of 210 lbs of meat, 230 lbs of flour, 150 lbs of tea, 110 lbs of sugar, 1500 lbs of potatoes, 574 lbs of pumpkin, 3.2 lbs of tobacco, seven knives and ten pairs of blankets. This was for an average Aboriginal population of 89, which works out at 2.4 lbs of meat, 2.6 lbs of flour and 16 lbs of potatoes per week per person.[1] In 1889, Meyer ordered 12 tons of flour, one ton of rice, one and a half tons of sugar, two chests of tea and one and a half cwt of tobacco (Meyer 1889a).

Several comments by the missionaries imply that Aborigines often only came into the mission, went to church and worked, in order to obtain food and other rations. Hoerlein mentioned the "sermon on Sunday afternoon between 4.30 and 5, to which the blacks come, because they get fed afterwards" (Hoerlein 1891a). The mission labourer, Koch, noted that "In theory labour is available, if only the blacks were willing to do a worthwhile job. The few who do come to work are really only interested in food" (Koch 1889). The supply of meat was a particular attraction. Hoerlein, in discussing the slaughter of the mission cattle every few weeks, noted: "Of course, the blacks ...get their share. They were longing for meat, overate straightaway, felt very ill but set to once more the minute they got better. No one who has not seen it could credit how much they can eat!" (Hoerlein n.d.).

The evidence also strongly suggests that Kuku-Yalanji fitted the mission into their seasonal subsistence cycle. The wet season in SECYP was a lean, uncomfortable time of the year for Aborigines; a time in which they gathered in large camps with substantial dwellings. The dry, on the other hand, was a time for travelling, visiting and hunting, gathering and camping in small groups. A range of comments from the missionaries, and the respective months they were made in, support a pattern of coming in to the mission in the wet and going out (at least more frequently if not permanently) in the dry season:

> 2/12/88: "At the moment very few [Aborigines] are here, but we are hoping that they will all be back with the wet". (Steicke 1888)
>
> 17/2/89: "The rain has brought plenty of blacks to the station". (Steicke 1889a)
>
> 12/10/89: "They say they want to return here as soon as we have some rain..." (Meyer 1889a)
>
> 14/11/89: "Heavy rain... There are lots of blacks at the station". (Steicke 1889b)

> 17/11/90: "Only 30 in camp. Main tribe has gone away but will return in the wet". (Rechner 1890b)

The plentifulness of the Bloomfield bush in the dry was also a factor in keeping people away from the mission: "The blacks are widely scattered now, and only a few are here to help with the work. And yet there are food and other things here available to them" (Pingilina 1889). Also: "Quite a few of the blacks were not present at the [clothing] distribution, for they like to go off kangaroo hunting and they also revert to their previous foodstuffs at times: bananas, yams, plums, nuts, etc. (see also Roth 1898a:14).

The mission also provided access to certain material culture items which were greatly sought after by Kuku-Yalanji. The mission had a problem for a time with the children stealing farm tools, presumably to take back to their parents (Meyer 1891c). Pipes, knives and 'bloodred handkerchiefs' were also highly prized (Hoerlein 1891c). Blankets too were eagerly sought, and not only for sleeping. Local settlers reported to the police and to Roth, the Protector, that they had noticed Aborigines using blankets as sails on their outrigger canoes (Roth 1903c). Meyer reported that the mission was "overflowing with the blacks" for Christmas of 1899: "Everybody had turned up, partly just from curiosity, partly because they had heard that there would be a distribution of gifts" (Meyer 1890a).

No doubt well aware that the mission's continued existence depended on their presence and occasional work, the Aborigines used this power to gain more of the things they wanted from the missionaries, especially food. They certainly refused to work when there were no food supplies at the mission. In May 1891, when the supply boat was unable to bring goods from Cooktown due to the bad weather, the mission ran out of flour. Meyer noted then that "The blacks stayed in their camps and we got no work done here. I had just enough to feed the children, so that they don't leave the station" (Meyer 1891d). Meyer also complained about the number of Aboriginal men in the camp who were not willing to work: "This, they declared, was because we did not give them enough. And one day they came and announced that they were all leaving" (Meyer 1889b). This was in May at the beginning of the dry season, the best time for bush foods.

Another important function which the mission fulfilled for Aborigines was that of a caring centre or repository for the elderly, ill and young. The missionaries' medicine and health care was a significant attraction. Hodgkinson (1886) referred very early on to the obvious effects of introduced diseases on the Bloomfield people. There are numerous references to the fact that sometimes the Bloomfield mission contained *only* the elderly, the ill and the very young. Several references exist as to the great number of children in the mission compared to the number of adults; also to only girls being left at the mission (see Steicke 1889a; Meyer 1887b; Hoerlein 1901a. See also Plate I). In 1899 Hoerlein noted: "We don't have many blacks, but enough when it comes to keeping them in food. They are mainly old people, sick people and children, about 40 in all" (Hoerlein n.d.). As for the mission's health focus, Hoerlein stated dejectedly in 1900: "I am virtually running a hospital" (Hoerlein 1900b). Roth (1898d) remarked on how the mission seemed to only support 'syphlitics' (*sic*) and 'orphan girls'.

The predominance of the children at the mission was the result of two things: the desire of the missionaries to concentrate their 'civilising' efforts on the children, and the use by Kuku-Yalanji parents of the mission as a safe place (especially) for Aboriginal girls. The mission encouraged the parents to leave their children there and built a cottage to house the school children. At the beginning of the scheme Meyer noted: "The parents don't want to part with the children. But once they feel sure that the youngsters cannot come to any harm here, I feel sure they will grow to approve of the practice" (Meyer 1891e). By at least the late 1890s, young girls were being left for the missionaries to 'look after'. I have no direct evidence, but it is possible that men were having their young promised spouses left for the missionaries to 'mind'. They no doubt knew that one of the latter's main concerns was to keep the girls separated from males of any age. A sample comment from Hoerlein: "So far the girls are conducting themselves well, but I fear the devil will yet tempt them to lust after men" (Hoerlein n.d.; see also Hoerlein 1900b). It seems also that Aboriginal parents used the mission to protect their daughters against the abuses of local European men (see Hoerlein 1900a). It was almost certainly also used generally by some Bloomfield Aborigines as a refuge against depredations and revenge killings by other Aborigines (see Meyer 1890c).

The Missionaries as Bosses

The first Bloomfield mission failed, from a European perspective, largely because it was unable to keep large numbers of Aborigines permanently at the mission. On the other hand, it should have been possible for a permanent core of Aboriginal people to establish themselves at the mission camp in the same way that Kuku-Nyungkul-speaking people had done at certain mining centres in the Annan area just to the north (Anderson 1983). While this may in fact have occurred at the mission during its first eight to ten years, it was not the case by the late 1890s. By this stage the mission generally consisted of small groups of young girls and old people (see Roth 1903:467). In order to understand the reasons for this, we need to look at some of the differences between the miners and the missionaries.

There are several reasons why Kuku-Yalanji may have preferred attachments to other Europeans than to the missionaries. One, perhaps too obvious, reason is that the mission expected more work by more Aboriginal people for an equivalent return in rations and goods. Even if the return was less with miners and other settlers, Aborigines may have preferred the latter because of their less strict schedules and work programmes. There were even times when rations were available at certain settlers' properties for no work at all.

The primary reason, from a Kuku-Yalanji perspective, lay with the missionaries themselves and the mission endeavour, and the inability of the Aborigines to establish what they felt were proper relationships with them. They were unable to turn the missionaries into 'bosses', or resident protectors and benefactors whom they could assimilate into their way of life. Kuku-Yalanji people clearly wondered about the differences between the missionaries and other European settlers, particularly the miners. The missionaries apparently had great difficulty in convincing the Aborigines:

> ...that we are not here for the same reason as the other settlers. We are not looking for gold or tin, nor are we working the land just for

> profit. And they are beginning to recognize the purpose of our presence among them. They really could not properly grasp this... (Meyer 1889b)

As time went on the Aborigines perceived other more important differences. For the early days there is evidence that the old men, at least, were attempting to understand the missionary endeavour, and to come to grips with a Lutheran world view, although this certainly did not imply acceptance. Meyer observed this on several occasions:

> Some of them repeatedly ask very important questions... But whether this can be taken to herald a thoroughgoing change for the better is by no means certain. Their questions prove that the preaching is not in vain... (Meyer 1890c; see also 1888a and 1888b)

However, the following quote gives the greatest insight into the Kuku-Yalanji view of the missionaries:

> When we expound the commandments to these people in their own language, we find that they feel most astonished that such rules are meant for *all* human beings, and that the Son of the Almighty should have suffered and died for the sins of all men. But still, they are most attentive and never try to contradict anything we tell them. The most regularly recurring questions are: whether they would be supplied in heaven with 'maji tjirai' [*mayi jirray* = 'plenty of food'] and much 'mina' [*minya* = 'meat']; and whether work was being done in heaven too. Such questions are of course not unnatural, coming as they do, from a population which knows of no other than material values. (Meyer 1888c)

There are no equivalent positive comments about Kuku-Yalanji responsiveness in the twelve years of correspondence following 1890, and this suggests that Kuku-Yalanji may have either given up their attempts to understand the Christian message, or that the nature of their relationship with the missionaries no longer required the Aborigines to humour them by going to church every Sunday. It may have been that the senior men, particularly, felt that the missionaries were presenting an active challenge to them and the way of life which they dominated. Other Europeans, especially some tin-miner bosses, did not present such a challenge. The population figures do suggest that in the later years, adult men stopped coming in to the mission altogether for any length of time.

There were several other factors which prevented Kuku-Yalanji from establishing proper 'boss' relationships with the missionaries. Firstly, as we saw earlier, the missionaries were actively opposed to most aspects of Kuku-Yalanji culture. The missionaries in fact attempted to set themselves up as agents of change with respect to the Aboriginal way of life: separating old and young, men and women, inculcating the children with new ways, having 'troublemakers' removed by the police, haranguing people about their beliefs, and so on. Secondly, all the missionaries at Bloomfield maintained their social distance from the Aborigines. Kuku-Yalanji

personal names are extremely rare in the correspondence and reports. Both the principal missionaries express feelings that they never got to know the people well. No real awareness is demonstrated of the reality or specifics of an Aboriginal way of life. There is no mention, for instance, of betrothal practices or of the significance of sites, both of which would have been prominent features governing Kuku-Yalanji life. None of the ethnological work on Bloomfield people done during the mission era relied on the missionaries for insight or knowledge. It would appear that the cultural differences the missionaries saw were rejected as 'superstition', or as other things in need of changing. Thirdly, the mission probably had too many Europeans with conflicting roles, and who were thus constantly bickering with each other. Some of the mission staff, furthermore, had such bad relations with Aborigines that the latter often stayed away from the mission until those Europeans either left or were sacked (see Meyer 1890b). Also, none of the Europeans were at Bloomfield for enough time to allow stable, long-term relations to be established. Hoerlein was at Bloomfield for the longest time (1890-1901), and there is some evidence that something akin to a relationship satisfactory to the Aborigines was beginning to develop towards the end of that time:

> When I sold the sewing machine and the wardrobe, the blacks realised I am going to leave them. They all started to cry and urge and press me to stay on. They said: 'If you go, then we shall also leave this place and we will take all the girls with us, to the mountains. We have entrusted them to you, but they are not staying for a new master.' They are very attached to me. (Hoerlein 1900b)

Early the next year, Hoerlein reports that the Aborigines were "beseeching" him to stay and were "promising all they can" (Hoerlein 1901b). And in April of 1901 Hoerlein reports that he "feels duty bound to stay with the female residents of the mission station, as they will otherwise be forced to go bush. For the first time my charges are going hungry! All the natives have come to the church service although everyone knows that no food can be made available after the ceremony" (Hoerlein 1901a).

For better or for worse, however, there was never any chance for the missionaries to undertake 'real' mission work. Meyer wrote that he was "Too preoccupied with the farm work to do all the mission work full justice" (Meyer 1890d). The missionaries were always too busy making it into a commercial venture, and success was measured almost wholly in these terms. The entire endeavour ended up being an exercise in how well church-associated whites could run a farm using Aboriginal labour paid with government rations. Apart from their labour therefore, Aborigines became, in a sense, irrelevant to the mission. Far from becoming good bosses in Aboriginal terms, the missionaries were unwilling or unable to relate to Aborigines in any meaningful way.

Why did the Mission Fail?

The camp attached to the Bloomfield mission had ceased to be a major residential site for Kuku-Yalanji by at least the mid-1890s. The camp disappeared altogether when the mission finally closed in 1902 "owing to the meagre results and unsatisfactory

management so far as the Aboriginals were concerned" (Roth 1902:1146). As we have seen, the mission had numerous practical problems: a shortage of funds, staff troubles, unsuitable land and problems with other settlers. There were also the difficulties created by the conflicting role expectations of the Kuku-Yalanji and the missionaries.

From a Kuku-Yalanji perspective, the mission did have its uses — primarily in providing food and other resources, and in offering protection and refuge for young women and the ill. The missionaries also acted in some instances as useful third parties in disputes. The mission was based on the assumption that everything had to be centralized and that *all* Bloomfield Aborigines would come in and stay there. Yet, as with other Aboriginal groups at the tin mines in the area, Kuku-Yalanji at Bloomfield treated the mission as a *camp* which was on a particular estate belonging to particular individuals and their group who had significant primary rights there. There were real disadvantages in persons not closely related to such a group ever being at the mission camp. The mission was thus destined to have no more than several dozen people on a sustained basis. Even the latter arrangement could not last. This was due primarily to difficulties involving the missionaries themselves. These difficulties prevented the kind of articulation between the Aboriginal and mission systems which elsewhere in SECYP had resulted in the maintenance of Aboriginal society: the missionaries were not good bosses.

There were also certain structural factors, associating the mission with the larger European system based on development capitalism, which ensured the mission's failure. Queensland government policy on Aborigines was primarily concerned with centralization and control. This policy was based on a number of implicit goals. The aim of centralization was to solve the 'problems' of Aborigines in 'unsupervised' situations. Centralization made the administration of programmes, allegedly for Aboriginal benefit, much easier to undertake. What this actually meant (and this is borne out by a number of official statements at the time) was that centralization on a reserve community not only facilitated the control of Aborigines, but also ensured their removal from land needed for development purposes. Control of Kuku-Yalanji necessitated control of their movements. More generally, this brought about the subordination of the Kuku-Yalanji social system to the requirements of the European system, and ultimately its total absorption into the broader European-dominated society.

The dependence of administrators on Aboriginal labour for their self-sufficiency programmes also meant, in theory, that Aborigines were working to solve their own problems, and in turn easing the government's dilemma with respect to conflicting development and welfare concerns. Control of Aboriginal movement allowed the removal of Aborigines from the public sphere. Kuku-Yalanji were thus condemned, largely through the role of the state, to reserve community life as a kind of training centre in isolation, or in fact, as a kind of jail. Indeed, Missionary Hoerlein refers to the Bloomfield Aborigines in his charge as 'station inmates' (Hoerlein 1900c).

However, the development of policies of centralization and economic self-sufficiency for the reserve settlements had not been based on any knowledge of the pre-existing Aboriginal socio-economic system nor on any 'rational' economic planning. The assumption was made that Aborigines were now supposed to recognize all Bloomfield land as European private property, and that Aborigines were supposed to confine themselves to using reserve land. There was no notion of

Aborigines owning the land themselves, in traditional terms or in a Western legal sense. Nor was there any recognition of the nature of Aboriginal local group organization. The intensely localised, fragmented nature of Kuku-Yalanji society meant that it was impossible to bring together in one place, for any length of time, groups associated with other country. In addition, as we have seen, centralization was meant to stop Kuku-Yalanji 'walkabouts'. Yet the meagre government funding to the mission for rations assumed (or at least required) alternative sources of food for Aborigines. In other words, they had to continue obtaining some bush resources. Self-sufficiency of a settlement of any kind requires worthwhile land, yet the mission was sited (in a sense, deliberately) on the worst land in the Bloomfield valley (and the settlers even complained about this). The basis on which the land was granted as reserve land was that it was not immediately required for European development. While striving for self-sufficiency, the poor quality of the soil, the terrain and the lack of secure tenure of the mission land all ensured economic failure and required that the Aborigines continue with alternative economic and social arrangements.

The mission's main aims of centralization and self-sufficiency failed largely because they were based on an externally-derived ideology which the state was attempting to impose as a general solution, but which had as its referent only the general aim of land exploitation and not any local reality.

Note

1 Record of rations distributed: Bloomfield River Mission Station 19/3/-28/5/1887, Col/A504, Queensland State Archives. I have left these weights in their original imperial measures.

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