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Choose Your Mission Wisely

Christian Colonials and Aboriginal Marital Arrangements on the Northern Frontier[1]

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Christmas Eve 1977, the lights of the settlement at Ali Curang burn brightly. Aboriginal voices join with a few Anglo-Australians to sing 'Away in a Manger'. The local Aboriginal band, more at home with Country and Western than hymns, accompanies the Warlpiri rendition of 'Jesus Loves Me'. On other occasions when attending church services, I had noted the predominance of young women and children and the presence of those men and women employed in work generated by the service centre of the settlement: school, store, police station, hospital, council office. Tonight, the Christmas service is led by an Aboriginal man who has spent much of his life at the Hermannsburg Lutheran mission. The small congregation is clustered in the yard of the simple brown brick Baptist church. Many of the regular churchgoers are missing. Less than 200 metres away, in territory considered outside the white sphere of influence, an initiation ceremony is in progress. Several hundred men, women and children have gathered.[2]

During the Christmas holidays, when many settlement employees visit friends and relatives in the cooler climes of southern states, the non-Aboriginal segment of the settlement population (about 10% of 750 residents) is dramatically reduced. During this same period the Aboriginal population swells as visitors arrive from neighbouring stations and settlements for the round of initiation ceremonies which may now proceed uninhibited. With no obligation to send children to school each morning, with no responsibilities in the stock camp (this is the stand-down period of the industry), Aborigines on pastoral properties and settlements are free to organise and execute elaborate and time-consuming ceremonies.

For the remainder of the year, as long as Aboriginal people appear for work on time and do not keep their children away from school for lengthy periods, the managers of cattle runs and the settlement administrators by and large keep out of Aboriginal business. Although there is an uneasy tension between these 'white bosses' and local groups, long serving welfare officers and second and third

generation pastoralists often have a working knowledge of language, family relationships and country affiliations.

But understanding aspects of Aboriginal culture in the context of friendship, work or the implementation of welfare policies is fundamentally different from the missionary zeal to 'settle and civilize'. The latter has entailed a concerted attack on beliefs and practices and a move to create monogamous Christian households, with a husband at the head and a wife freely chosen from women of his own age. Old men with many wives deeply offended Christian sensibilities and thus the polygynous gerontocracy was targeted for reform. Initiations were prohibited, sacred objects burned, women given 'protection', children removed from 'unsavoury' home environments.

On this clear, still Christmas Eve, I watch as each major constellation of stars comes up over the horizon and I concentrate on the initiation ceremony. The music is provided by the clicking of boomerangs and the hollow clap of one cupped hand hitting the other. The songs conclude with a yelp and answering trill. There is no amen or hallelujah. The purpose is not to celebrate the birth of a saviour but to mark the passage from childhood to adult life of three youths. I call these boys 'son'. I have a place at this ceremony. I am researching Aboriginal beliefs and practices but I recall other Christmas Eves spent wrapping presents; preparing food in the evening cool in anticipation of the scorcher forecast for Christmas Day; lighting a candle; listening to The Messiah. I wonder if the Aboriginal carollers recall other 'Christmas' contexts with their families.

It is my second 'festive season' in the field and my Aboriginal women tutors have told me I need to be present when the boy's future mother-in-law is nominated.[3] 'Watch', they say, 'she will be given the firestick to hold.' Marriage arrangements forged during initiation between the parents of a young girl and those of the initiate are not always realized. They may be subject to further negotiations between the families; or upset by determined couples who defy their parents. The degree to which a particular group can claim to 'marry straight' is however an indication of the importance they attach to following the Law. To speak of promised marriage implies that initiation persists, that land is accessible, that the sacred objects which encode knowledge are in current use and that their young people are being groomed to carry on the Law.

Midnight passes and the carols cease but the initiation ceremony continues to the dawn. We sleep fitfully till mid-afternoon when the preparation for another night of attendance at the ceremonial ground begins. As a classificatory 'mother' of the young initiates, I am camped with other close female relatives of my 'son'. Our ceremonies during the past ten days and our discussions during the month leading up to the 'capture' of the boys have concerned his readiness for initiation and the alliances we might establish with the group to whom his prospective mother-in-law belongs. The negotiations are complex. Previous initiations, marriages, land based relations, ritual obligations and personal preferences are taken into consideration. Women with whom I have attended church, who sat, heads bowed to pray, now hold aloft the sacred boards which tell of their rights and responsibilities in land. They give decisive instruction to younger girls. They rule on who should hold the firestick. The implications are broader than marriage for the children of the union have a place within the country of both parents. The passing of the firestick affects three generations and as those making the decisions at this initiation are similarly

constrained by the marriage alliances established by their parents, a stone in this pond will send ripples through time and across space.

In this region the preferred marriage is with one's mother's mother's brother's daughter's daughter/son. Marriage with a father's sister's daughter/son is also considered 'straight'. A woman's first husband may be as much as twenty years her senior although generally is much less. According to customary practice, her first marriage should be the outcome of a promise made at initiation. Subsequent marriages, after divorce or the death of her first husband, may be with a man closer to her own age. She may, for instance, marry a younger man whose 'promised' spouse is yet to join him. Young women frequently find on assuming wifely duties that they have an older woman to serve as role model, to assist with child raising and, given that they are often sisters, to act as an ally in matters concerning the rights of her family in land. They share much of the family productive labour and are responsible for the provision of the bulk of the daily diet.

For men the practice is polygyny, for women serial monogamy (Bell 1980:250). Although subsequent marriages entail a degree of choice, it is within tightly circumscribed limits. The articulation with the system of land tenure is exact. Land, marriage and ritual responsibility constitute a complex interlocking web of relationships (*ibid.*; Bell 1983:264-272). The dictates of the Law established by the ancestors are made known in ceremonial observances and given form in everyday practice. Remove people from land, disrupt the rhythm of ceremonies or prohibit promised marriage and the impact will be felt in each domain. Attack all three and it will reverberate through the generations.

Writing of the thirties, Elkin (1938:120) observed:

> The custom of old men marrying young girls is changing in those parts of Northern Australia occupied by whites. Many young men are seen with young wives, though seldom with any children. Polygyny is also being dropped. Such changes are apparently the direct or indirect result of white influence.

Frederick Rose (1962:8) later posed starkly the question implicit in Elkin's observation: Was the change due to ideological or material factors? Did Aborigines abandon polygyny in the face of a morally superior value system advocated by missionaries or did changes in productive relations occasioned by settling a hunter-gatherer society precipitate specific changes in the relation between men and women and thus within marriage?

Certainly Christian ideological influence is apparent. The Warlpiri Easter *purlapa*[4] at Yuendumu tells of the crucifixion and resurrection. At Ali Curang the symbol of the cross has been painted on a young boy in a women's health ritual and being a Christian is said to be a sufficient reason to abstain from drinking alcohol. The representations of local dreamings in the stained-glass window of the Yuendumu church, the adobe huts and a towering cross at St Teresa, and the white rendered stone of Hermannsburg all bear witness to the missionary presence and its diverse cultural roots. Christians have clearly inscribed their various cultures on the land but how far have their values permeated Aboriginal society?

There is no doubt that missionaries sought to reconstruct Aboriginal social and economic domains. The 'settle and civilize' maxim was to presage a time when,

wandering ways curbed, Aborigines would come to recognise the superior value of Christianity. Strategies for realising this end included education of children by rigidly separating them from the bush-tainted influence of their elders. To see their children, parents stayed close by. A quasi hostage system operated. To receive rations they adopted appropriate behaviour and ceremonial activity was organised far from the missionary gaze. Some missions, to avoid syncretism, set out to repress all pagan traditions. More benign regimes offered a buffer between two worlds.

In previous analyses of the nature of the impact of colonisation on gender relations I, like Rose, have favoured a materialist explanation. My focus has been on the process by which wives became dependents, were excluded from decision making arenas, their work deemed 'domestic'. In Daughters of the Dreaming (Bell 1983:101-4), I compared the Warlpiri and Aranda (Alyawarra and Kaytej) residents of Ali Curang and argued that the pastoral frontier had been less intrusive than the establishment of communities under the control of administrators and missionaries. In 'Desert Politics' (Bell 1980:248-9) I examined the variations in Warlpiri marriage practice at a number of different settlements. Marriage, I found, was a sensitive indicator of change: both of its direction and speed, of what we might call the 'velocity of change'. The missionary onslaught on traditional marriage systems in a number of different places and under a number of different regimes therefore offers a context within which to test Rose's hypothesis. For while missionary programmes for reform focussed equally on practices and beliefs, a careful analysis of the data allows us to recognize whether the ideological or material front was determinative. Here I will examine the Tiwi and Aranda cases before returning to the Warlpiri people of Ali Curang.

The Tiwi

At first glance, Bishop Gsell of the Sacred Heart Order appears to be a missionary who undertook a most systematic attack on the twin institutions of the gerontocracy and polygyny. He set out to ameliorate the position of women, which he took to be one of drudgery, and to introduce Christian marriage to the Tiwi of Bathurst Island.[5] In his view monogamy would achieve a more equitable distribution of women. He recognized the difficulties inherent in his task but felt that if one generation could be taught to cultivate the soil, their progeny would follow and then all would enjoy the benefits of Christianity and civilization. The first generation, in Gsell's opinion, remained 'saturated with sensuality it inherits from countless ancestors. The delicate blossom of conjugal love as we know it can develop only very slowly and gradually' (1959:99). To Bishop Gsell (1959:61), however, sincere paganism was preferable to false Christianity and he was content to spend a considerable time providing the model of Christian life before attempting to convert, baptise or re-marry the Tiwi. Writing of his first decade he stated: 'If it was not yet conversion it was already an exchange of civilities' (*ibid*.:73)

Gsell's arrival co-incided with a particularly brutal phase of Tiwi history and it is not surprising that of the island population of 1,000 only a few old men were willing to stay at the mission.[6] It was not until the later arrival of the nuns that women were prepared to visit the mission. The nuns presented a unique vision of womanhood. Like the Fathers they professed celibacy. Unlike some white women they undertook any task necessary to survival. They maintained an independence of spirit. Unlike

missionaries' wives who passed on information to their husbands, the nuns could be trusted with women's secrets. They provided a cultural analogue to the Tiwi gender based separation of tasks.

Under the supervision of the Sisters, the girls learned cooking, cleaning and household chores. Milking, Gsell (1959:65) admits, puzzled them. Older people were prepared to leave their children at the mission while they remained mobile. Gsell's first real crisis of conscience came when a young girl, Martina, sought the protection and sanctuary of the mission after her husband came to claim her. He reported:

> There came to me a hairy anonymous man who said, " I have come to fetch my wife."
>
> "And who is your wife?" I asked.
>
> "That one," he said; and he pointed to Martina.
>
> Nothing could be done, I knew. No one might challenge the law of the tribe. No one had ever thought of doing so. Martina, not yet baptised, must go to this hairy, anonymous man and be lost in the sad company of the tribal women, slaves, owned body and soul by the men of the tribes... Our love might reach to where the forest began and then be lost in its gloom; the light we had tried to direct towards little Martina would be darkened for ever. (Gsell 1959:80)

Gsell(1959:81) advised her to pray; for he said 'only God can help you.' She returned five days later with a spear wound in her thigh. An 'ugly mob of gesticulating tribesmen' gathered (*ibid.*:82). Emulating the Bathurst Island men's strategy for dealing with raids on their women,[7] Gsell welcomed the visitors, fed them and, while they slept prayed for guidance. The inspiration came for Gsell (*ibid.*:83) to buy Martina. On a table he spread out 'untold riches' and waited for the sleepers to awaken. From his hiding point he watched and when the goods had been duly admired, he approached and made the offer: all the goods if Martina could stay with him. He realized he was asking for more than could be given under customary law, whereby women are 'lent', not 'sold'. After some discussion Martina's kinsmen decided they would sell but on the condition that the Bishop kept her for himself. Gsell (*ibid.*:86) replied ambiguously,'I'm glad you decide to sell. Take everything, and I'll take the girl'. The goods went and Martina stayed with the sisters to become 'a good and devoted Christian.' She chose a lad of her own age and Gsell blessed the union (*ibid.*:87).

What Gsell had not appreciated at the time was the nature of the Tiwi marriage. Tiwi practice country endogamy (there are probably less than ten 'countries' on the islands) and matrilineal sib exogamy.[8] People should marry into their father's matrilineal sibling set and contracts are reciprocated. This leads to brother sister exchanges within countries. Marriages were organized through a form of pre-natal betrothal whereby an infant female is bestowed as a mother-in-law upon a young man who is recognized by the father as a worthy affine.

All the progeny of the bestowed woman are potential wives of the young man. This system leads to an age difference of some 35 years between spouses and to some men acquiring many wives. It is a system of far greater extremes than that operating in desert regions. Tiwi also practice a form of the levirate. In theory there are no

widows. From birth to death, women are married. Men readily admit they need several wives because they would starve with only one, women state co-wives are needed to assist with child care and food collection. Mission life provided an alternative means of assistance in the early child-bearing years and it also provided new options for widows. The mission simply bought them.

After Christian marriage came consolidation of hearth and home. Unfortunately Gsell had not appreciated the time depth of marriage arrangements. His second and unforeseen crisis came when Elizabeth, Martina's daughter was claimed by her husband. Gsell (1959:88-90) then realized that he needed not only the girl but also the rights to her unborn daughters. At the peak of his purchasing career (1921-1938) Gsell had acquired 150 'wives'. His perception that he was buying their freedom was unfortunately not shared by others. He came under attack from Communists in Sydney, other members of the church and locals. But, reassured by Pope Pius XII, with whom he had studied, Gsell maintained the practice (1959:105-6). It was the Japanese pearlers who ultimately revealed the weakness in his scheme. They saw him as a seller as well as a buyer of women and when he refused to sell, they negotiated directly with the islanders. Their regular gifts, plus the bonus that the women would still be available to Tiwi men at the end of the pearlers' visit, was a better bargain than the Bishop's. According to Gsell (1959:140-1), the only women who escaped this arrangement were those in his care. As a government patrol boat sent out to sneak up on Tiwi camps failed to catch any cohabiting Japanese, it was decided that the only solution was a settlement. Thus Purlarumpi was established in 1937.[9]

Gsell certainly changed the face of Tiwi society in his fifty years as a missionary. To his mind he presided over a change from feudal lordship to a Christian brotherhood wherein men and women enjoyed the same rights and obligations (1959:119). His influence is evident in contemporary Tiwi society. The priest has remained the head of the community and became manager of the land council when it was established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act*, 1976 (Stanley 1983:10).

On Bathurst Island monogamy is now the norm and the age differential between spouses, although higher than the Australian average, is consistently lower than at the turn of the century. However, if we trace actual marriages and explore the genealogies, we find the women Gsell allowed to exercise 'free choice' did so within carefully confined limits. Women 'selected' youths to whom she had at least tentatively been promised by a relative (Hart and Pilling 1950:108). Furthermore, under Gsell's regime young men could get wives and this undermined the power of the old men. But, in terms of the contract of Catholic marriage, a husband could not acquire further wives. Younger men found if they established households and gathered about them their own female relatives, the younger of whom they could later give away, they were in a similar position to men of the pre-mission days. The young man could 'bestow' his female relatives one at a time on men of his 'choice'. He could ask his son-in-law for presents. These would come from the mission to a man who renounced rights in the daughters of this union. As Hart and Pilling (1950:105-112) note, the system began to take on the characteristics of bride price and bride service became the basis for marriage arrangements.

In these big households women enjoyed a wide measure of freedom in choices of spouse — girls could communicate their preferences to their fathers who then

approached the young man — and widows need not remarry but could remain in the household of her father or brother who could then 'arrange' the marriages of her daughters. Successful Tiwi men thus remained the heads of large households but within the group had only one wife. This household had much the same function as did the constellation before the mission: younger women gathered food, older women minded children.[10]

Tiwi women continue to wield political power and to be as outspoken as Goodale has asserted in Tiwi Wives. Thus, for example in 1981, women reversed a decision made by the male council on the matter of availability of alcohol in the community. Of course, the fact that they were not consulted initially is important. Tiwi women are employed in the various craft enterprises on the island (Stanley 1983:23-7). Of the 1981 population of 613 Tiwi women over the age of fifteen, only thirty-six received widow's pensions and twenty-five supporting mother's pensions. The fishing, bakery, printing, pottery and tourist industries are well established (Stanley 1983:11). While the second generation Tiwi have not embraced the work ethic as Gsell hoped, per head of population they enjoy higher employment than most other Aboriginal communities. Women are none the less under-employed and engage in work which a western sex-based division of labour deems suitable for women.

Hermannsburg

In stark contrast to the syncretism tolerated by Gsell is the work of the Lutherans in Central Australia. The Hermannsburg missionaries made a concerted effort to stamp out all 'brutal' ceremonies. The scope of their Central Australian activities was somewhat broader than those of the Catholics amongst the Tiwi, for the desert peoples practice circumcision at puberty and subincision, which ranked high on the missionary scale of obscenities. Like Gsell, the Lutheran missionaries at Hermannsburg (established in 1877) sought to build a model Christian community. The German Lutheran pastors Swartz and Kempe from South Australia were not, however, prepared to tolerate pluralism as Gsell had done (Sommerlad 1973:11).

The Aranda and Luritja of the Hermannsburg area had first observed the behaviour of Whites when they encountered the labourers on the overland telegraph lines in 1872 and the workers at the railhead at Oodnadatta. Frontier violence erupted as the potential of the newly explored Finke river district became evident. In 1874, under the command of Trooper Willshire, punitive parties pursued a savage policy of pacification so that the frontier could be made safe for the pastoralists who flocked there during the 1880s land boom. Willshire recorded his observations of Aborigines at some length. He saw Aboriginal men as dirty, lazy, treacherous and could barely mask his disgust at having to deal with them. On the other hand, of Aboriginal women he wrote:

> (White) men will not remain so many years in a country like this if there were no women (i.e. dark women) and perhaps the Almighty meant them for that use as he placed them wherever pioneers go. (*cit.* Strehlow 1971:587)

Not all drew such distinctions. Schiechen (*cit.* Scanlon 1986:85) records the disgust of Homman, a nineteenth century Lutheran missionary, who was of the opinion that the high incidence of syphilis amongst Aborigines was a result of their "vices and obscene habits".

For Hermannsburg Aborigines, mission activity followed close on the heels of first contact. The Lutherans had deliberately chosen the 'uncontaminated primitives' so that conversion could be unimpeded by outside influences. But the Aranda found the missionaries were very different men and women from the labourers on the lines. They intended to remain, to learn the language, to change people's lives. The Aborigines were not incidental to their purpose.

The mission at Hermannsburg offered rations to the aged and sick but the healthy were left to roam, a distribution of resources not well understood by local Aborigines. The missionaries learnt the language and translated the Bible and various hymns into Aranda but, until the 1930s, did not reciprocate by attending Aboriginal ceremonies. It seems to me that the much praised practice of singing hymns in the evening provided a means of undermining the authority of the old people. Traditional songs could only be sung by older knowledgeable people. By translating hymns, the missionaries provided an alternate outlet for youth to sing in their own language of matters 'sacred'.

The principal aim of the mission was to provide education (religious and secular), training, work skills and to inculcate Christian values. This was done through rigid institutionalisation: dormitories for children and supervision of parents' lives. In his defense against repeated charges that Hermannsburg missionaries were locking girls in unsanitary 'dungeons', Pastor Kaibel replied that, because of:

> the low intellectual status of the native... his utter rottenness in things sexual...(this action was essential) else they would swarm about all night and their mixing with parents and adults... would procure the direst results. No white man has any conception, not even the most wicked white, what depths of infamy these blacks are steeped in. (*cit.* Mulvaney and Calaby 1985:468f., n.9)

The Lutherans succeeded in forcing many ceremonies to be performed in a covert and restricted manner. Depopulation caused by disease, dispossession and a drift to the fringes of Alice Springs, the railhead (completed to Alice Springs in 1929) and the telegraph station, further undermined Aranda ceremonial practices. The Spanish influenza epidemic of 1919 carried off many of the older people who had been initiated before the missionaries arrived. The losses have been substantial but the Aranda nonetheless continue to pursue an energetic ceremonial life and knowledge of country persists.

Today, Hermannsburg is no longer a mission. Under the Land Rights Act, the mission land was handed over to five local land holding groups. In 1982, an Australian Law Reform Commission (1982:32) report of a field trip stated that less than 30% of extant marriages were solemnized by the church. However, the continuation of the disruption to traditional marital arrangements caused by the mission interference with alliance forming ceremonies was obvious. The subsection system, which provides a shorthand to the system of kinship and marriage, shows

signs of severe dislocation. There are so many 'wrong skin marriages' that many people prefer to live together, rather than claim to be married. Children of 'wrong way' marriages grow up with ambiguous relationships to potential affines and many fights arise from this confusion; whom should one avoid or defend? The Lutheran prohibition on initiation and 'increase' ceremonies struck at the very foundation of Aranda social structure which, in terms of the interlocking web of relations of land, marriage and ritual, is similar to that of the Warlpiri at Ali Curang (see above). Furthermore on the mission an addiction to 'tea, flour and tobacco' developed. Women no longer produced the major part of the diet. They had no clear role in arranging marriages and they became dependants within family and mission structures.

In the mid-1960s the mission recognized the need for change and sought to emulate a Community Development model. The missionaries were to become liberal educators as enablers, supporters and stimulators. All this while glaring inequalities existed. Older women continued to be employed as 'housegirls' and the superintendent still had final say on policy. Given the dynastic nature of the mission — the Albrechts, father and son, from 1926 — it is not surprising that the attempt at deinstitutionalisation failed, nor that a patriarchal ethos still holds sway (see Sommerald 1973).

Alice Springs Christians

The position in the towns was quite different from that of Aborigines in isolated areas and Frank McGarry, known as 'Francis of Central Australia' provided a very different model of mission activity. In times of crisis he did not seek help from the Pope but rather turned to his family in Sydney and local Catholic traders (O'Grady 1977:29). In direct contrast to his Bishop, McGarry began by forbidding 'brutal ceremonies'. With the assistance of patrol officer Ted Strehlow, son of Carl Strehlow, the long serving Lutheran missionary of Hermannsburg (1894-1922), Frank decided to 'work quietly towards the elimination of these practices' (O'Grady 1977:45, 49, 58; see also Strehlow 1971:xxii).

At the Little Flower Black Mission, which he established in Alice Springs in the mid 1930s — a period when Aborigines were not allowed into town (O'Grady 1977:36) — Frank taught the alphabet and then the catechism. McGarry was moved by the ideal of 'love of God and love of God's poor' (*ibid.*:10). He firmly believed that there was no point preaching to Aborigines 'whilst their bellies were empty and bodies cold' (*ibid.*:31) so he clothed and fed those in his charge. While the boys planted trees in front of the neat shelters built for them at the new mission and erected clothes lines, cleaned latrines, cut wood and swept the church, the older women were in charge of the kitchen. This task had been undertaken by Frank until the arrival of nuns. Three women washed the children and six were detailed to clean the utensils and one to wash the towels (*ibid.*:42). Even under his strict regime of 'no work, no food' (*ibid.*:24) Frank found he ministered to an ever expanding flock.[11]

Aborigines' Inland Mission

I began this paper discussing the contexts of a Warlpiri initiation ceremony. We may now pick up the trail of the people at Ali Curang in several ways. In 1930, F.W.

Albrecht began the second Lutheran attempt to "bring the gospel to the nomads" northwest of Hermannsburg. The people he encountered were fleeing from the Coniston massacres of 1928. Albrecht assured them of his goodwill and promised to help "above all by bringing them the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Albrecht 1977:49). Lutheran resources were, however, limited and Albrecht prayed for an answer. It came, in his view, some twelve years later when a letter arrived from the Baptist Union of South Australia requesting information on a potential source of Aborigines to convert. Plans were delayed until the end of World War II. When the Warlpiri Labour Corps was no longer needed, the Native Affairs Board (N.A.B.) established the settlement of Yuendumu and the Baptists moved in, for all intents and purposes running the institution (see Fleming n.d.).

By 1947 Frank McGarry was working at Yuendumu. To him fell the responsibility of feeding some 380 souls. The missionaries, paid as welfare officers, exasperated him. 'Their main effort seems to be going around after 5 pm on Sunday playing the concertina to the healthy mob' (O'Grady 1977:122-123). Frank left when he failed in his application to be appointed superintendent. Departmental policy was to appoint married men (*ibid.*:130).

The more easterly Warlpiri on the government settlement of Warrabri — established in 1955 and now called Ali Curang — were not subsumed by the Central Australian Baptist mission enterprise until 1957. Some of these people had nonetheless felt the Christian presence in earlier years as residents of Tennant Creek and, later, Phillip Creek some 50 kms to the north. It is on these early and most disruptive years that I will concentrate here.

Catholics in Tennant Creek had only ministered to the white population. A few itinerant missionaries, like Annie Lock (Turner n.d.), of the U.A.M., were active south of the town, but the main focus of Aboriginal population was at the telegraph station, seven miles north. Established in the 1870s — the same era as Hermannsburg — it initially provided rations for a few Warumungu but after the 1920s drought and the Coniston massacre of 1928 Warlpiri immigrants swelled the population. Other Warlpiri went to Tanami and the Granites where gold had been discovered, or to work on stations. In the 1940s the Tennant Creek camp was moved to a base six miles east of the telegraph station in order to remove the Aborigines from the growing numbers of miners who came to the town after the discovery of gold in 1934.

The Aborigines at Tennant Creek first received Christian instruction and welfare services from the Aborigines Inland Mission. The A.I.M. was initially interdenominational but eventually became an independent mission body. Its goal in this area was to improve living conditions. Their opportunity to establish a model community came in 1945 when the government settlement at Phillip Creek was founded (Dawson 1977). Once again the missionaries implemented policy and acted as welfare officers on a voluntary basis. Warlpiri and Warumungu people remained under mission control until 1951 when the N.A.B. assumed full control.

The period of the A.I.M. presence was a critical one. The assimilation policy was in full swing when Thomas, a married man with two children, took up residence. He established a strict dormitory system where boys, girls and children of mixed descent were rigidly separated. The rules were clear. Children were to be supervised and parents kept at a distance. They could only visit between prescribed hours. A hostage system indeed but, beware the keepers. Missionary Thomas found the young nubile girls of the dormitory very attractive and seduced several. When the

abuse could no longer be ignored, the older women took action. They ambushed him one night and as a result of the consequent scandal, he was brought to trial and sentenced to eighteen months imprisonment.

Under control of the N.A.B. there were serious attempts to deinstitutionalise the settlement. Children were no longer to be separated from their parents. However, the damage had been done. Today, older women speak with some scepticism of the ways of white men of God and distinguish between those missionaries who offered protection, those who exploited them and those who befriended them. Topsy Nelson Napurrula vividly recalls life on the mission: hiding in a rubbish bin in a desperate escape bid to join her parents; being chastised for catching and eating frogs; obediently throwing the legless frogs back into the water and being then instructed to pray for them as they were 'God's creatures' (Bell 1985:9).

One of the features of the ration distribution at Phillip Creek was that men, the nominal heads of households, collected the rations. This caused problems for women living in the single women's camp and had obvious ramifications for relations within the family. The twelve to twenty Aborigines who worked on the settlement received extra food and once again we find the women engaged in very traditionally western pursuits. Four women were responsible for milking the goats, two worked full time in the kitchen and sewing dresses with the wife of the superintendent and a further two looked after the mixed descent pre-school children (Dawson 1977). The feeding regime left many hungry and one of the happy memories is weekends away from the mission with parents, eating bush foods. On these occasions it was the women who provided the reliable part of the diet.

The men in contrast were employed driving, cleaning latrines, building, butchering and baking. They also worked on a nearby station during the appropriate season. For the men, this was a continuation of their war-time experiences when, for the first time in their lives, they received wages, were issued with proper clothes, learnt to tell the time and became accustomed to speaking standard English. When village councils were set up in the 1950s, it was these men who filled positions in the new decision-making bodies.

Gender Relations

I have offered a partial view of the activities of three missionaries — Catholic, Lutheran and the Aborigines Inland Mission. It is partial because I have focused on the politics of marriage and how, through its changing forms we may understand the nature of the transformation of a hunter-gatherer mode of subsistence to a sedentary life. Comparison of life histories from the pastoral frontier with those whose primary contact with white culture was on missions and on large government settlements established during the assimilation era of the 1940s, further illuminates the nature of the mission impact.[12] If a patterned response in all contexts emerges, we may begin to answer the question implied by Elkin's observations regarding the velocity of change. Similarities and differences of mission, pastoralist and settlement contexts assist in answering the question posed by Rose.

In establishing cattle runs in the north of Australia, Aboriginal women, like their menfolk, engaged in heavy labour. Slightly built great grandmothers speak of their days mustering, branding cattle, breaking horses, building and repairing stockyards and working the windlass. They made decisions concerning the conduct

of their affairs. Although food was given in lieu of wages, it was possible to draw extra rations and to remain away from the station (often only in a makeshift camp) and to live, at least in part, off the land. For women this meant the possibility of giving birth in the bush; continuing women's land based ceremonies and maintaining a family life free of constant intervention. Although in those initial years there was disruption to Aboriginal lives — cattle despoiled waterholes, Aboriginal women bore children to white pastoralists, a dependency on tobacco developed — life was by and large unsupervised.

A process of accommodating and incorporating whites began with the first pastoral leases. A striking feature of the life history material is the recollection of the abrupt change in women's lives once the 'white missus' arrived. Women's mobility was curtailed and their activity restricted. Their lives were under daily surveillance. Where they took care of the children of the station manager, their morals, personal hygiene and family life became a subject for censure. Aboriginal women continued to maintain a separate domain from their men but the content was transformed. They no longer engaged in tasks of a status similar to men's: Nora became the 'laying the table girl'; Mona 'the watering the vegie garden girl'; Hilda the 'baking the bread girl'. Aboriginal women were engaged in domestic work regulated by a gender determined division of labour within the monogamous marriage. This pattern of 'women's work' was not very different from the sewing circle supervised by the wives of welfare officers or the ladies guild of the church. However, polygyny and a semblance of traditional authority structures persisted on many properties, especially those where large camps were tolerated and ceremonial life was possible. On large government settlements the concentrated population made major ceremonies feasible. However, settlements were often some distance from traditional lands and thus the reciprocity between land holding groups, which is reflected in marriage was often dislocated. On cattle stations, on the other hand, it is not unusual to find people living close to traditional lands in smaller family groups although to participate in initiation ceremonies they had to travel vast distances and sustain themselves away from the station. This is difficult when payment for work is rations rather than wages.

Berndt and Berndt (1964:511-2) argue that access to hearth and home provided Aboriginal women with first hand experience of white culture in a way denied to men. While this may be so, it was access limited to the domestic domain. When community spokespersons were required, they were invariably men and spoke of men's affairs. Thus, while women may have found an accommodating niche in the bedroom and kitchen of white men, they were locked out of the decision making processes which were deemed to be political activities and thus appropriate to man alone.

On missions, stations and settlements the provision of rations lightened the load of women's work load but led to a dependency on welfare-type structures (see Hamilton 1975). The degree of dependency and the extent of the supervision of family life is the key to the shift to monogamy. Where the practice of polygyny passed into folk memory, missionaries could gloat that now there was an equitable distribution of women, free choice of marriage partners and conjugal love. Once a relationship of interdependence, marriage became one where men had to provide for wives and women had to rely upon men for subsistence. Men produced artefacts which missionaries sold for higher prices than women's equally labour intensive

work. A boomerang was a prestige item in the eyes of the Sydney agents who priced the objects, a coolamon a household piece. Men earned wages, women were paid in kind and were thus in a disadvantaged position when it came to purchasing new technology like axes.[13]

Was it then the persuasive ideology of Christianity or the impact of changes in the relations of production which may be seen as providing the climate wherein monogamous marriage became the norm? I have argued here that the latter was the feature common to all contexts. The actual level of intervention depended upon the period in which the mission was established, the people to whom they ministered and the particular charters for reform imported by the various missionaries. Missions established during the mid 20th century assumed a welfare-like role whereas those of the 19th sought the 'pristine native' whose soul could be saved. The Tiwi, whose regime allowed two belief systems to co-exist and who had extensive contact with outsiders were, as we have seen, in a better position to cope with intruders and to negotiate 'deals' than were the Aranda of Central Australia. Missions did not operate in isolation from one another but rather mission comity, a geographical denominationalism, meant each had its own territory. Common to all was the desire to see women relieved of hard work and taught more civilised ways. It was the missionary notion that 'settling' and 'civilising' went hand in hand that generated the repressive and intrusive regimes. It was the interference in the marriage regulating ceremonial life, the extension of supervision of women's work, the notions of wifely duty, and, the promotion of husbands as household heads that transformed relations between men and women and thus the nature of the marriage contract itself. Ideas concerning Christian marriage informed the strategies of missionaries, but of themselves held little sway amongst the colonised.

Notes

1 This paper was delivered to the 'Christianity and Colonialism' conference of the 'Gender, Ideology and Politics' work group of the Anthropology Department, R.S.Pac.S. A.N.U., December, 1983. I acknowledge the contribution of fellow members of the group and in particular the conference conveners Martha Macintrye and Margie Jolly. I am grateful to Debbie Rose and Tony Swain for inviting me four years later to submit the paper to their volume. If I were to address the issues anew I would probably write a different paper but I have kept to the form of the original and with extensive and much appreciated assistance from Tony Swain have translated the oral presentation into written form.

2 See Bell (1983:73-89) for a description of the structure of Ali Curang, formerly Warrabri.

3 *Ibid*: 205, 271-2.

4 *Purlapa* is a gloss for ceremonies which men, women and children may attend. The *purlapa* which tells the Easter story was brought from Yuendumu to Ali Curang in the late 1970s.

5 Gsell's mission at Nguiu, established 1911, was the third Catholic mission to Aborigines in the Northern Territory. Previous experiments by the Jesuits at Daly River in 1890 had been abandoned after severe flooding and at Rapid Creek in 1882 as too close to Darwin to provide proper separation of the races and attract 'pristine natives'.

6 See Gsell (1959:81-2) for details of the long and varied contact history of Tiwi; for accounts of changes generated by contacts see Goodale (1971:6-13), Harris (1985:150), Hart and Pilling (1950:98-103), Stanley (1983:1-2, 10-11); note in particular Stehlik (1986:69-70) and grave robbing activities of Europeans.

7 Having depleted the island buffalo population, Joe Cooper's men from the mainland turned to raiding women. The local men met them at the shore, welcomed them, admitted the weakness of their position — spears against guns— and invited the visitors to sleep the night. In the morning they promised women would be brought from the bush. But in the night the Bathurst men attacked and sent the mainlanders packing. As a precaution they confiscated their guns and this led to further complications.

8 See Goodale (1971:10-12, 15, 17, 77, 86, 98) and Hart and Pilling (1950) for descriptions of the marriage system.

9 The population drift to places like Paru, the buffalo shooters' base, to Nguiu and the new settlement accelerated changes in land based relations. By living, dying and burying off their country important modes of affiliation to land were ruptured.

10 This is not dissimilar to the adjustment of what constitutes 'correct' marriage by Warlpiri (see Bell 1980:249).

11 With his mission flourishing, McGarry turned his attention to the establishment of a mission for the eastern Aranda at the gold mines at Arltunga and later to St Teresa south of Alice Springs, then to the Warlpiri at Bullocky Soak and the Granites.

12 Here I am drawing on life history material from women in the Roper River area (see Bell 1982) and in Central Australia (Bell 1983:64-69).

13 Access to other resources exhibits similar inequalities. Men received boots and coats, women dresses and headscarves. Men rode in vehicles or on horses. Women were reluctant to be transported in cars because of the problems associated with kin avoidances. Access to driving licences has overcome some of these problems.

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