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FROM THE 'KEEPARRA' TO THE 'CULTURAL BIND' -
AN ANALYSIS OF THE ABORIGINAL SITUATION

In this paper I will endeavour to explain a very difficult situation that we, the Mission Aborigines have been put in since the establishment of the Mission environments. My theory is that we Mission Aborigines have been unconsciously rejecting the Western man's education for fear we would be proven failures in absorbing it. I believe we must try to feed in some of our own education into the school system. By doing this we will gain pride in ourselves and our race and we will gain a sense of knowing who we are and what we hope to achieve out of life. This result can only be achieved when both white and black gain respect for each other. For us to gain respect for white people, we must be respected as human beings. Only then will we respond to white people's offerings.

In the early 1880's we, the people of the Thungetti tribe, Macleay River, mid-north coast of New South Wales, were forced to live on the State Government mission at Bellbrook, thirty-five miles west of Kempsey. This type of mission was set up by the New South Wales State Government. The body at that time was known as the Aborigines Protection Board. There was also a church involved but I forget which denomination. The Seventh Day Adventist church was also involved but they came much later.

When these missions were first established, many people believed they were set up for the protection of the Aboriginal people. It was about this time many massacres had taken place and the tribes were getting smaller each day. So the Government acted by establishing the Aboriginal Protection Act. Although these missions provided some kind of protection for our people from extinction, it is obvious the missions were used to bring our people under control. Once our people were on these missions it was safe for the white farmers to squat on land that was rightfully ours. When this happened our people were facing depression. They no longer had free access to the hundreds of square miles of tribal land they once proudly roamed. They were now confined to ninety acres.

Because of this, the will to be self-supporting was now lost. So the Government introduced rations and hand-outs to our people, again taking away the will to be self-supporting. Of course, there were some people who wanted to break away from this style of life but were afraid to do so because they feared what might happen to them. So they accepted this style of life.

Only certain people were allowed to leave the mission with the manager's approval. No Aboriginal strangers were allowed to camp near these missions. No one was let in or out without a white man's consent. Under these conditions it was impossible for any of

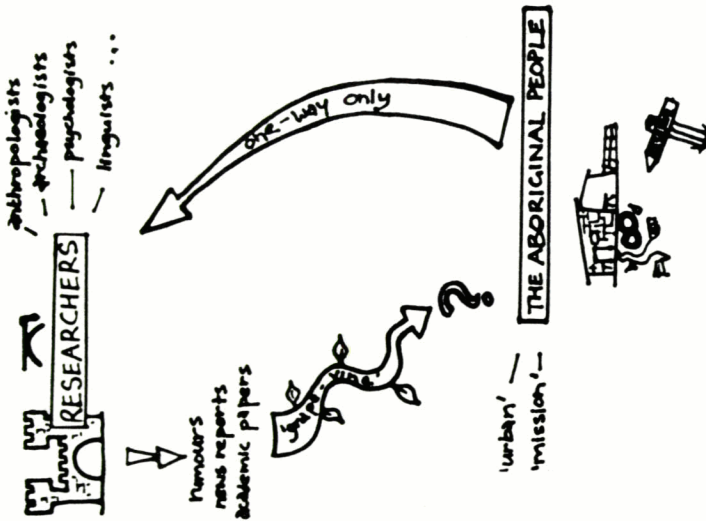
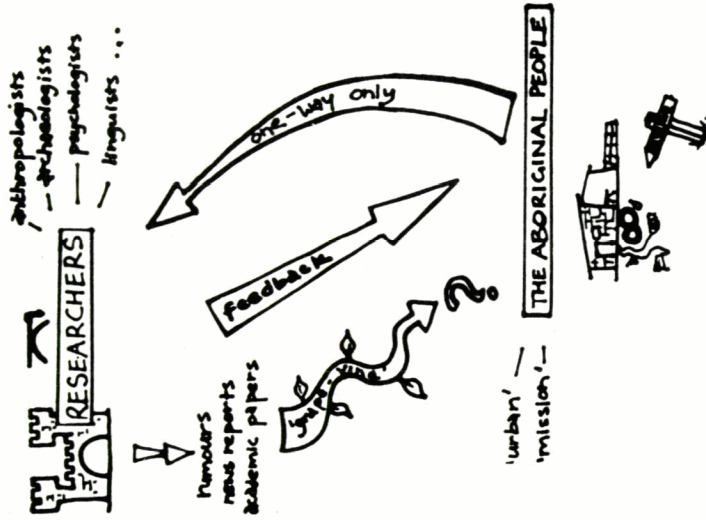
us to feel proud of ourselves, and our Aboriginal knowledge quickly began to fade away. The last of the initiations to be performed in our tribe was held in the late 1930's. Many of the old fully-initiated men were now dying without passing on the information to the un-initiated men. We were now in a cultural bind.

When I think back over the years and what I have been told of our past, it seems we Aborigines have stood looking towards the white man's education on the far horizon and unconsciously asking ourselves how much of this education do we really need. I guess we all know we would have had to drop our own culture and education to fit into the white man's way of life, and because of this, we were now thrown into a cultural bind. Our unconscious bind was: could we afford to lose all of our past Aboriginal knowledge just to absorb something belonging to people who weren't going to accept us anyway? Or should we absorb our own traditional form of education fully? In sorting out this bind we had little choice. So we became stuck in this bind, and drifted along doing neither. In my own lifetime, I am sorry to say that many of the old people were now dying without passing on the language and culture. In a way this sorted out the problem for us without us ever making a conscious decision. We were now on the road to trying to absorb the western man's education.

To me it seemed we were stuck out in a desert looking towards the far horizon. Every step we took forward in absorbing the western man's education, that horizon moved away in the same direction. This continued for the last forty years, and then we began to pick up pace. For me who left school twenty years ago, the pace had just begun to quicken over the last couple of years at school. For the first time in my life I had come in contact with a qualified teacher, someone who could see some value in me as a person, so I began to learn.

Over the last fifteen years, the kids at school have begun to absorb the western man's education more rapidly still. Some of them gained university degrees, and then proportionally more of them. Many of them have absorbed it to the extent where they are not recognised as Aborigines any more - either by whites, by themselves, or by their own people whom they have left behind. Now for them this distant horizon was at least coming nearer, but again the western man's education raised a new obstacle - this time a system that is workable for highly-educated people only. Even the best of our western-educated people found it difficult to keep up with the rapid change. Even the better-educated whites have had to run to stand still in their own system, so naturally it would be hard for us. Those of us who have stood up against the white social system have been marked out as radical idiots, because we refused to be pushed into something we felt was not catering for the rest of our people.

Now we are really in a new bind. The bind I see myself in is: what should I do about what is left of our tribal culture? Should I push my children into absorbing a white man's system which seems destined to fail them? The migrants who have their own culture



and community system seem to be so far in front of us. They have strength because if they fail in the white Australian system, they can fall back on their own. So we must also have our own. I look at it this way though: we Aborigines have no real alternative of our own, unless we do something active about the problem right away.

I feel we need to get all our people to become knowledgeable about Aboriginal history and culture - things that only a few of us seem to be interested in at present. To get them interested and knowledgeable, we have to make sure first that the knowledge is preserved in its Aboriginal meaning and then fed back into the people generally. I see this as the task of the Sacred Sites Survey which we are undertaking in N.S.W. No doubt our bosses at the Institute of Aboriginal Studies think the knowledge has been well preserved, but I think that although they have the facts they do not have the true Aboriginal meaning. They are only preserving a white man's interpretation - about as good as our understanding of what it is to be as Eskimo. I see the job of people like us on the Survey of Aboriginal Sites to be that of collecting the meaning as well as the facts, and then trying to find a way to give that complete understanding to all our people. Then we will have the same security as all the other people living in Australia.

The first problem blocking the way towards this at the present is to encourage white anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists in their 'ivory towers' to give direct feedback to the people they have obtained their material from. The way it has been in the past, all of these 'ivory tower' people have had direct communication with their informant, but no actual feedback has been received by the informant as to what has been done with the information, or whether the real Aboriginal meaning of the facts gathered has been understood. So far, whenever the grassroots Aborigines on the mission receive any feedback material, it is only either via the 'grapevine' or out of newspapers, and usually mixed up or misinterpreted along the way by urban Aborigines. Urban Aborigines have very little more understanding of these tribal matters than white society generally. When garbled information reaches the mission, what happens? In my experience, the informants are annoyed and switch off from providing any further information. It makes things very difficult for sincere researchers when they move into the field at any time after that. It often takes many visits to get these people to respond again.

What I feel should have happened was as I stated before: white anthropologists, archaeologists and linguists must return to the people they took the information from, tell them what they have done with it and where it can be found in the future. Most importantly they should make sure that the Aboriginal meaning is correct. Then only do I think the informants will be satisfied and keep on co-operating.

The next block to be overcome is the white education system, which has not accepted the need for Aboriginal kids to be educated in their own history and the significance of those less-sacred sites which it is proper they should know about - e.g. rock engravings,

rock art, and burial sites, and how their own tribal forebears found meaning in life. We have plans on the Survey to introduce teaching about these things for mixed classes in Armidale high schools in 1975. This will bring them to something less than kindergarten stage in their understanding of Aboriginal laws and culture but it is a necessary beginning.

Another group who already feel the lack of their own knowledge are men aged 30-60 who have shown signs of wanting to absorb the rules of the traditional system in a somewhat modernised form. We have plans on the Survey to feedback the results of our research to this group by involving them in projects to protect the sites and also, maybe, by a revival of the initiations.

A whole new education and 'feedback' system will have to be gradually built up, using all the old knowledge as a basis, together with a lot of new ideas coming from our thrashing out together the present-day realities that our people have to cope with. How to get this to happen? Maybe I'll be able to tell you in a few years from now, after I've graduated further in my own initiation!

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FROM THE 'CULTURAL BIND' TO A SOLUTION -
THE SURVEY OF ABORIGINAL SACRED SITES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Now that Ray has outlined the circumstances which led the Aboriginal people into the 'cultural bind' as he calls it, my intention is to show the part played by the Survey to encourage a 'revival' or 'renaissance' of the Aboriginal culture in New South Wales. From our experience on the Survey I will go on to make some suggestions which can be applied to research elsewhere in Australia. My view of the Survey is first that it is a natural development in sociological research in Australia and as such is closely linked with the events of the present decade when we have witnessed an extraordinary rise in the political and 'cultural' awareness of minority groups the world over, especially among the Aboriginal people, and an increasing desire to participate fully in matters concerning their destiny. Because of this the Survey has considerable social consequences and responsibilities.