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SOME ASPECTS OF THE POSITION OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

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TOWARDS MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING BY ABORIGINAL AND NON-ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

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This paper includes a short history of Aboriginal women in Australia from about the turn of the century. This has been made possible by the writings of such women. Most non-Aboriginal women have been and are ignorant of this history. They need to understand this past in order to come to terms with it. Aboriginal women are also not aware of how misinformed non-Aboriginal women are of the role of Aboriginal women in their own society. An extensive dialogue is needed to develop the mutual understanding necessary for the construction of a peaceful and just post-colonial Australia.

Aboriginal women have a special role to play in the construction of post-colonial Australian society. Because of their experiences, arising from their sufferings as part of the misunderstood and mistreated minority group who are the descendants of the pre-colonial inhabitants and owners of Australia, they have a particular point of view. It is important that this point of view is shared, communicated to and understood by all people in present-day Australian society. Their unique contribution to the understanding of the forces which have shaped present-day Australian society will be lost if this does not happen. It is particularly important that non-Aboriginal women hear what Aboriginal women are saying. All women have experiences in common arising from the place assigned to them and the responsibilities demanded of them, primarily as producers, rearers, and educators of children. Secondly, but very significantly, as nurturers in all other areas of adult life. There are important parallels in their role and status which can form strong bonds between women who carry out nurturing functions irrespective of their different cultures.

There are also common experiences arising from their position as women in relation to men. In the past, Aboriginal men have

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spoken with non-Aboriginal men. Many misunderstandings have arisen when only one half (the male half) of society has spoken for the whole of that society. Misconceptions have been compounded when only one half (the male half again) has heard and translated these misunderstandings to the rest of their society. It is only when women of each society speak directly to each other, and help each other to see each other's point of view, that there is any chance that the false one-side of views of each society for the other, that have arisen in the past, can be corrected.

One of the main barriers to communication between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal society in the past and today has been in the mode of communication. In Aboriginal society the oral tradition was, and is, the chief method of communication. In non-Aboriginal society the written word was, and is, all important.

Each society probably puts undue reverence on its mode of communication. For non-Aboriginal society the written word is of much greater importance than the spoken word. Because non-Aboriginal society has been dominant, oral histories have been discounted. It is only when they are written down that they are significant to non-Aboriginal society. Because of this, generations of Aboriginal history, told from the Aboriginal point of view, have been lost to present day non-Aboriginal people. Two different points of view of history have been taught: one in the oral mode to Aborigines by Aborigines, and one in the written mode to non-Aborigines.

Now there are changes occurring because Aboriginal men, and particularly Aboriginal women, are writing down their life histories and in this way enabling communication with non-Aboriginal women to take place. Also non-Aboriginal women have become much more active and prominent in the work place. If a reciprocal change could take place, and non-Aboriginal women were able to use the Aboriginal-style oral mode, other communication gaps would, no doubt, be bridged.

Further changes arising from this would then be able to occur. In other words, the traditional oral mode needs to be seen as of equal importance to the written mode. What has happened to date is only a beginning. Because of the value that non-Aboriginal society places on the written word, the small handful of biographies that are available are of great importance in aiding non-Aboriginal women to understand the suffering, adversity, poverty and difficulties that Aboriginal women have experienced and do still experience as a result of the past. They also illumine their sustaining roles as women in Aboriginal society.

THE LIFE HISTORY OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN WRITTEN OR TOLD BY THEMSELVES

The life histories of Aboriginal women written or told by themselves are important, as they give a very personal dimension to a common historic experience of a particular generation.

Mrs M. Quinlan (1983) speaks of her grandmother's lost generation. Somehow, at the "time of the killings", (p.11) her father and mother as children escaped the slaughter which took the lives of their mothers. Later they met, and Quinlan was born in about 1912, near Kempsey, New South Wales. She married in 1932. Her sister and cousin were taken under the domestic training scheme and kept in Sydney for five years. During the depression in the 1930s, many other Aboriginal people came to her father's place at Bellbrook, as it had been taken over by the Aborigines Protection Board, declared a mission, and a manager was put in charge. The manager was also the school teacher. If he was no good, or lazy, the children's education would suffer. Mrs Quinlan said that "it wasn't that they were cruel to them...but they wasted our kiddies' time". Rowley (Quinlan and Eckermann, 1983, p.10) reminds us that the government policy in New South Wales during the Great Depression was, that any person of Aboriginal descent would be ordered by court to a reserve where that person had to remain until the court order was cancelled. It would appear that Aboriginal people were scapegoated during those harsh economic times.

Ella Simon (Simon, 1978) was born in 1902 near Taree in New South Wales. Her grandmother had been abandoned as an infant by her tribe. (She had an Irish father, and her mother died.) She was then raised by station people. She must have got in touch with her tribal people when she got older, as she knew her brothers, and raised one family of nephews and nieces when their parents died. Ella Simon was brought up by this grandmother. Her grandfather established himself at what was later known as Purfleet, near Taree. As the Aboriginal refugees' camp on the fringe of the town was becoming overcrowded, he persuaded several families to come and settle on his place. Later, the Aborigines Protection Board set aside twelve acres in the adjacent area. After Ella Simon was married, her father, who was white, and elderly, came to live with her family. Such was the entrenched and lawful prejudice at the time, that he was not allowed to stay with them at Purfleet, because Ella's house could only be reached by walking through the Aboriginal reserve, and whites were not allowed on reserves by law. This law was only partially repealed in 1941. In 1955 'approved' Aborigines, such as Ella Simon, were given freedom of movement

to banned places, such as hotels in New South Wales, providing they carried the newly introduced Certificate of Exemption from the provisions of the Aboriginal Protection Act. Ella was not impressed.

Eliza Kennedy (Kennedy and Donaldson, 1982) has recorded the fear and avoidance of white people that she experienced as a child. She too was born about 1902, and recalled the last of the 'school for making men' in 1914 (p.10). Her childhood was hard, in that poverty, starvation and TB were always ready to close in. "I think it's great how we battled through it all and come up out of the *nhaalya*"* (p.12). Eliza Kennedy felt that it was important to learn English as a second language; and domestic skills, which were economically useful in white society. She found this latter task very hard, and of domestic service says: "I never learned to do anything, only cry!" (p.13). Drought in 1923, and later Aboriginal Protection Board policies (1926) resulted in the coming together of different groups of Aboriginal people at Carowra Tank. 'The mission' was demoralising for everyone (p.15). Eliza Kennedy felt that her generation of women "woke up to themselves mainly through our husbands," who taught their wives how to drive; and how to understand men - as shown by her competence as a shearer's cook - not so much as a cook, but as a person who would stand for no nonsense and who could stick up for herself. In 1933 all the Carowra Tank people were moved to Menindee - without consultation. Many people died of fear (perhaps of sorcery) and disease. They were given rations of unfamiliar food, such as dried peas and beans, which no one knew how to cook. As with Ella Simon, Eliza Kennedy could reconcile Christianity with her old beliefs. To her, God and *Kurikuta* were the same thing, and she would break the law of neither. Eliza noted the anomie of some of her people and accurately judged the cause. Later the Menindee people were uprooted again and shifted to Murrin Bridge in 1949. Here their total powerlessness reduced the people - men, women and children - to such apathy, that alcohol was their only refuge. Sympathetic managers were sacked if they tried to make the Aborigines Protection Board improve the lot of the people. Eliza Kennedy and her husband could not stand mission life, and worked for many stations in the western area of New South Wales until the death of her husband in 1952. She then lived in Eubalong, doing domestic work, then with her son and daughter-in-law at Trida, and later at Lake Cargelligo (near Murrin Bridge).

Dixie Lee (Lee, 1983) tells of how she was virtually abducted from near Tennant Creek when she was a child of twelve. Her parents allowed a white family to take her 'East' to help them while they were on 'holiday' (oral communication, December 1983). She never

**nhaalya*: the fallen leaves under the bushes in Ngiyampaa country - around Carowra Tank.

saw her family again for many years. Only after she retired from a life of domestic service was she able to learn to read and write and put her story into a book.

Margaret Tucker's story (Tucker, 1977) is now well known through the film *Lousy Little Sixpence*. She, too, was forcibly taken from her parents and sent to the Cootamundra Training School. The heartlessness and inhumanity of the Aborigines Protection Board bureaucracy is well described in chapter seven, when she, (aged 13) and her sister and friend (both aged 11) were seized from their classroom at Moonahculla by the police. But for the manager's wife, who was their teacher, they would not have had time to say goodbye to their mother - whom they did not see again for many years. She well describes the hopelessness and powerlessness of the Aboriginal adults when confronted by this power of the whites to control their lives. It would seem that white Australia was in the grip of some kind of collective madness, not only to allow, but to enforce by law, such actions. Many children never saw their parents again. Some died in training from TB. The harsh discipline of the time ruled at the school. Insufficient food, a beating from a bad-tempered teacher, caused her and others to run away - only to be caught and punished further. Later, service under an unkind (cruel) and insensitive mistress caused her, in her homesickness and loneliness, to contemplate and attempt suicide. Just how many young Aboriginal girls lost their lives in this way is unknown. Tucker briefly mentions the hardships caused by the Aboriginal Resistance in the 1930s when Jack Patten was ordered off the Cummeragunga Reserve. Many left with him, giving up the dole in doing so. They faced certain starvation with a determination to make a go of things and remain independent.

Monica Clare, as a result of her experiences of growing up during the depression, wrote a social novel, *Karobran* (1978). When she presented her manuscript she said "It was like this for most of us. That's how it was and that's how it is for Aboriginal kids" (1978 preface). After her mother died her father kept his family together, but eventually, in 1931, the children were taken by the Child Welfare. Many hardships came into Monica's life. She struggled with prejudice from mean individuals, and was supported by the kindness of others. She devoted her life to working for the political and social equality of Aboriginal people. As one of the speakers in her book says, "...we are the only ones that can tell them how we feel and what we want" (p.94).

After reading these accounts it is not hard to understand how difficult it is for Aboriginal people to trust the white system, and to forgive present day white people for the sins of former

generations. While white society uneasily hides from its recent colonial past, dreadful hurts, such as separation from one's parents for many years, and perhaps for ever, cannot be forgotten by this generation of Aboriginal women. Yet they are forgiving. What shines through these accounts is a great pride in being Aboriginal, and a determination to hold on to the Aboriginal way of life; a sturdy stoicism, and a will to survive in the face of extreme adversity: "we survived and turned out great women" (Kennedy and Donaldson, 1982, p.12). The inevitability of circumstances at the time is accepted, and a vigorous determination to change the future, if only by recording their life histories. Simon, Kennedy and Tucker also record the amalgamation, each within their own worldview, of the old Aboriginal religious concepts and and the newly arrived Christianity. This amalgamation of the old and new values produced strong personalities, with sure identities, rooted in the old and growing in the new.

Another such woman is Elsie Roughsey (Labumore), born 1923, who has spent her life amongst her own Lardil people on Mornington Island. Here the effects of the invading culture are more easily discernible as there has been a much longer time available (relatively speaking) for the effects of culture contact to develop.

On Mornington, the stern missionary system disrupted the culture, and introduced diseases would have taken their toll. Elsie reminisces nostalgically of the good old days, when people always shared with each other and were happy. "A sad, quiet, frightened people" resulted from the entry of the white man and the white man's way of life into the Aboriginal way of life (Roughsey, 1984, p.2). The old tribal people knew and understood what was happening. They realised that if they embraced another way of life they would lose their own. They refused to pass on their laws and customs to people of non-Aboriginal descent. Elsie comments that white life seems quiet, lonely, friendless, and dull compared to the loud, noisy, cheerful, loving Lardil people who lived with "great interest and happiness" (p.53).

It was also strange to the tribal people that everything was fenced and locked up rather than shared. From this point of time it seems bizarre that everything had to be so hard. That children had to be locked into their dormitories, and belted to work, by rough and cruel people. Elsie comments "now life is free and not so easy" (p.10). When the tribal law was operating the laws were strictly obeyed and everyone was happy. When missionary law operated, although harsh and ignorant things were done, life remained ordered and happy. Now, in the present time, no one knows who is boss and what system is to be honoured. Chaos results (p.185).

Roughsey notes that parents have become involved in children's fights; children only love and claim their own parents instead of all the elders. Young people don't realise how tough the world is and their impracticality rebounds on their parents who may then have to look after grandchildren who would otherwise be neglected (p.189). Roughsey observes that unless people understand the importance of their law and culture, and guard and maintain it with pride, they will throw it away in the face of a new culture. In doing so they will lose their identity, purpose and direction (p.227). All societies that are in transition face these problems.

Elsie Roughsey has many important lessons to teach in the cross-cultural context. She believes that the old tribal way of life was good and that the new Christian way of life, introduced by the missionaries was good. But it was wrong for the new way to depose the other. Everybody stood in a kin relationship, and its attached set of obligations and behaviour, to everybody else. This led to a peaceful, loving, caring society in which everybody had a niche and was valued and loved. The missionaries forced these old good ways apart (p.185), mainly because they did not understand what they were doing. They could only feel impatient with the inconveniences caused by the kin rules, such as in-laws not being allowed to speak to each other at church meetings. But, by destroying these rules, extensive social cohesion, meaning, and purpose in life was lost. The incoming missionaries did not respect the spirituality of the Aboriginal people. They did not acknowledge that they had as great an understanding of spiritual matters as themselves. Elsie Roughsey puts it this way -

Dark man had his ten commandments long before white man came with his gospel and bible. They believed in One Spirit but they knew not his name as God. Only the bible came and they knew... yes, He is the one, whom my people had faith on. So the tribes knew Him a mighty long time before the gospel came to them! (p.203).

By not recognising the spirituality of the tribes and the goodness and worth of the tribal way of life "christianity has let down all the good the tribes had" (p.231).

If I understand Elsie Roughsey correctly, what she is saying is that the present day European way of life is hard because the Europeans have to choose between good and evil. That choice is what Christianity is all about. The tribal way of life was not hard because one was trained entirely to do good. The tribal values were carefully worked out. The observances of these brought peace and happiness into the lives of tribal people. Even when evil

came, as the result of wrong doing, in the form of Mulgree the great sea spirit, there were wise men to deal with it (p.235). With this background it is so hard for Aboriginal tribal people to understand the European way. It is almost impossible for each way to be understood by the other, because there has only been a partial sharing of each other's way of life. Elsie Roughsey feels that what is needed now is a moratorium on social change for her people. Time is needed to work out the direction in which they want to go.

We have drifted so far from that [tribal] life and have gladly marched forward into the life that is really hurting us, *to care not to go any further* (p.235).
(Emphasis mine - MV).

THE NON-ABORIGINAL DEFINITIONS OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN

The non-Aboriginal definitions of Aboriginal women in the past, and to a great extent still in the present, do not recognise the greatness of these women. Along with the other women so far quoted, Elsie Roughsey stands out as a strong person, a knowledgeable tribal person, and a leader in her own community both by her example and her wisdom.

This is not the role of Aboriginal women which has been traditionally recognised by non-Aboriginal society. There are many reasons for this, some of which have arisen from Australia's recent colonial past, and some of which have arisen from Western anthropological scholarship which assumed, until recently, that male dominance was universal (Sanday, 1981, p.113). Sanday carefully assembles the evidence to show that the effect of Western male dominated colonial society on various two-sex societies in the pre-colonial world was to bias them towards male domination. In Australian colonial society the frontier was always predominantly male. Usually it moved beyond the reach of the law, and the law caught up with the actions of those at the frontier and ratified those actions in retrospect (Wright, 1981). In Australian colonial society men were the explorers, the decision makers, the land owners, the government officials and the university research scholars. The guiding religious symbols of this incoming, conquering, male colonial power were those of male dominance: the patriarchal decidedly masculine God, and the sexual, inferior female who tempted the male from the path of righteousness (p.215).

These symbols are very important as they underly the justification of the intellectual downgrading of Aboriginal women and the barter of their bodies. In the words of Bernard Smith -

...at the heart of the Australian experience lay a sexual tragedy of enormous historical dimension in which love, mockery and hatred battled for the mastery, and that the tragedy was performed across the bodies of Aboriginal women.

(1980, The Boyer Lectures, p.31)

It affected the perception of the social status of Aboriginal women by Western scholars, and very quickly altered their actual status, as Aboriginal men became upgraded in status by virtue of their sex alone. White men dealt with black men in all spheres of life. Women were ignored and their power and prestige diminished (Bell and Ditton, 1980). They were increasingly seen as pawns in male games, both black and white. One of the most recent and cunning of these has been to shift all the blame onto white women for the sexual behaviour of white men on the frontier (Herbert, 1975).

In traditional Aboriginal society, apparently a 'two-sex' model operated (Berndt, 1970). While the sexes were fairly separate and independent of each other, there was a great degree of interdependence. Catherine Berndt (1983) feels that this was reflected in the traditional myths which embodied the values of Aboriginal society.

In the myths the female spirits were just as important as male spirits. They were both immortal. Women acted independently or together with men. Sometimes in co-operation with them and sometimes opposed to them (Berndt, 1983, p.13). The spiritual heritage was cherished and guarded by both men and women (Berndt, 1983, p.20).

In child rearing, men theorised more about nurturing while women actually did it. To compensate for not actually producing infants men claimed to create life by helping the spirit children achieve life (Goodale, 1971, p.338...). Later, at puberty, men were involved in 'growing up' their young wives and in turning boys into men, through the initiation ceremonies. The wisdom of these old concepts has been denigrated and many ceremonies lost, not just to Aboriginal society but to the whole human race, through the undervaluation of these insights by white society. Also by a refusal to pass on the traditions to the unworthy by the tribal elders. "Not all men went through the law" (Roughsey, 1984, p.189). Only those who were worthy to be elders of the tribe were so educated.

Because non-Aboriginal scholars such as Elkin (1977, 1945) were witnesses to spectacular male ceremonies, they assumed that women's religious contributions were not very great. As in white society, women were relegated to the kitchen and the bedroom and belittled as "breeders, feeders and follow the leaders" (Cawte, in Bell, 1983, p.242).

Just as women's role in white society was (and still is) belittled, so women's role in Aboriginal society was steadily misinterpreted and diminished by anthropologists who worked from within a Western male chauvinistic framework (Berndt, 1983, p.20, note 2). The basic tenets of this framework are that men leave the home in order to work, that work is not done within the home, that the women at home have an easy time, that is, that child production and rearing are not work. Also that nurturing children, such as kindergarten and primary school teaching, is low-class work, as is nursing and cooking, visiting the sick, etc. These views are confirmed by the fact that when men stay home in order to look after a small child, they quite often do this job very badly, getting annoyed because they cannot get on with whatever they intended to do at that time. The problem is that men cannot see the full dimension of a task. They cannot see it as work, and hence cannot see it as being of very great importance.

Women's work tends to be undervalued, misunderstood, unsung, or else given token recognition and praise but no actual power in which to effect social change. It is at this petty level of misunderstanding of the female role that the mistakes of well-intentioned male scholars, bureaucrats, missionaries, etc., have their roots. Bell (1983, p.162, p.176) points out how the important ceremonies for emotional and social well-being held by women have been belittled and pigeon-holed as "love magic" by missionaries and anthropologists who have not understood their social significance, their religious content, or their relationship to the land. Physical appearances of women have also been judged from the sexist point of view by white males. The young and nubile are acceptable, the old wise women are viewed as "toothless old hags" (Hart and Pilling, in Bell, 1983, p.229).

In Aboriginal society, mature men appreciate mature women. In myth and reality, older women and men court each other, and younger partners. Women regard themselves as desirable regardless of age, and do not have the self-image of "old hag" (Bell, 1983, p.166). In present day white society, the pathetic attempts by males and their female sycophants to keep women in eternal puberty, could be viewed with pity by mature women but for the fact that the endless stream of girlie magazines, sexist advertising and pornographic greeting cards presents images of women from all backgrounds that are demeaning physically, mentally and spiritually. It is by the challenging of these images by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women that the role and importance of Aboriginal women in the maintenance of their land, their place as peace-keepers in the regulation of their laws, their roles as educators of their children, and their need for split cheques in Social Service benefits, will

be recognised by Australian society as a whole. Bell has found that her experiences in the field, at Warrabri in the Northern Territory, led her to different conclusions about the role and status of Aboriginal women, from that of previous (mainly male) anthropologists, Meggitt, Spencer and Gillen, Maddock, Munn, Hart and Pilling, and Roheim (Bell 1983, pp. 229, 232, 24.).

Bell feels that these scholars worked from the paradigm "Man Equals Culture" and this biased them against women. Women anthropologists who worked from an "Anthropology of Women" paradigm, viz. Kaberry in Kimberley in the 1930s; Goodale with the Tiwi people on Bathurst and Melville Island (1954 and 1962); Catherine Berndt in Northern Territory (1960s); Annette Hamilton at Maningrida, Northern Territory in 1960s to 1970s, all stress the traditional importance of women's activities, their role and their status. Tiwi society in particular would seem to have had a very egalitarian approach to the sexes. It was a culture which had not severed its ties with the land (Goodale, 1971). The old ceremonies were vigorously observed, the most important ritual being the naming ceremony of the infant, which marked him/her off as a unique individual (Goodale, p.335). There were two important rites of passage for females: at the onset of menarche, and at death (Goodale, Introduction, p.xxiii). The initiation ceremonies were for both men and women (p.205) and started at about thirty years of age. These were not passive processes, but required active participation and courage in the form of public speaking and performing. Full adult status was not achieved till about six years later. Every Tiwi was a land owner through his/her father (p.14). In the old way of life the basic equality between the sexes was stressed.

Even in this resilient community, however, by 1962 women had lost much of their status (Goodale, 1971, p.229) as a result of changes induced by both Government officials and missionaries. They considered the husbands to be the boss of the domestic groups and backed husband against the wife or mother-in-law in any argument. Also, the insistence by non-Aboriginal Law on the desirability of monogamy rather than polygamy meant the presence of unwanted widows who thus lost much status. This removed the hierarchy of power of the co-wives; it also removed the helpful, comforting, educational function of the older wives to the younger. In this situation, older women lost the power to influence other lives and this, in turn, weakened the kinship structure. It is now better understood that these changes eventually lead to social disruption and increasing chaos. Societies so affected collapse in their own social and moral vacuum.

C. Berndt (1965, 1970, 1979) and Hamilton (1975) also approach anthropological work from a feminist perspective, as does Bell and Ditton (1980) and Bell (1983). Berndt points out that although some Aboriginal men did exploit their women, and some groups value them less than others:

the exploitation of Aboriginal women by Europeans, like the exploitation of Aborigines generally, far overshadowed anything of the sort that may have gone on in traditional Aboriginal Australia.

(Berndt, 1979, p.36)

Hamilton (1975, p.169) shows that in Maningrida, N.E.Arnhemland, there has been a very great loss of status for Aboriginal women, caused, as we have seen in other places, by white males, who are generally in positions of authority in these places, encouraging Aboriginal males to conform to white male/female relationships.

Because women were economically independent as food gatherers, the fact that men saw them as inferior but valuable objects for use in the marriage bestowal game did not upset their lives. The introduction of the cash economy, however, made women inferior in practice, not just in theory, by taking away their economic independence and importance (Hamilton, 1975, p.173). Their feeding skills became redundant when a grocery store opened or a communal kitchen. Jobs were always offered by white employers to the Aboriginal men, while women had to subsist on the child endowment which was regarded as the equivalent of the man's wage (Hamilton, 1975, p.174).

From their work in Central Australia, Bell and Ditton (1980, p.15) argue that Aboriginal women do not seek liberation as in the terms of the (white) feminist movement (which aims to break down sex role stereotyping) but wish to be able to restore and elaborate their own traditional two-sex model. In this the women are enhanced as women by their independence, responsibility and authority in their own areas. They are greatly hindered in doing this by the non-recognition of their differences from white society by the British-Australian Law. Today this law does not protect these women from non-lawful harassment and sexual abuse, cruelty towards wives, or recognise them as the real family providers. Although the old traditional law with kinship obligations gave this protection, acting on the old law may bring people into conflict with the new law. It should be noted that in these areas non-Aboriginal women are not very well protected in white society. It is in this area that women as a whole may have to stand against men as a whole. This is already happening in the development of women's refuges and rape crisis centres.

Bell (1983) explores this independence of the women at Warrabri (a government settlement in the Northern Territory) further. "In many ways, Warrabri resembled a refugee camp more than a small rural town" (p.8). Here she lived for two and a half years (1976-78). She found that the Kaytej women in particular, who were the traditional owners of the area, strongly maintained their culture. It was with this group that she eventually did most of her field work (p.28). She found that, unbeknown to non-Aboriginal male researchers, the women had great responsibilities in the religious spheres and in the care of the land. These roles were supported and appreciated by the men of that community. It is only when men are under pressure from white male bias that the importance of the women's contribution is diminished and they are relegated to the margins of the new social order (Bell in Gale, 1983, p.25).

Feminist anthropologists such as C. Berndt, Bell and Hamilton are creating a new framework for the understanding of Aboriginal society. Although Bell stresses the autonomy and independence of the women and supports their plea for dual structures (such as split welfare cheques) and separatism, when they are really left out and not consulted (Bell in Gale 1983, p.28), Berndt feels that it is very important, in the configuration, to realise that overall the traditional emphasis (between men and women) was on co-operation, and the mutual support and maintenance of their society. At present, Aboriginal solidarity is costing women their status but "...in the long run it will be up to Aboriginal women themselves to resolve it" (Berndt in Gale, 1983, p.19)

THE RE-DEFINITION OF THE ROLE OF ABORIGINAL WOMEN BY ABORIGINAL WOMEN

Today Aboriginal women are redefining their roles in all avenues of life. From Jigalong in the Western Desert, Chesson (in Gale, 1983, p.40) presents an image of co-operation and interdependence between men and women. She states that men are dependent on women for wisdom on the council, co-operation in ceremonies and rituals, in contributing food and cash to the community and in maintaining traditional ties with the land. This ensures that the younger generation thinks of Jigalong as home. It helps them to take pride in their race and their community. Although Jigalong (WA) is now a small town with most able-bodied adults involved in wage labour, the Aboriginal style of life is maintained, e.g. breakfasting in extended family groups, with one woman cooking the dampers and all sharing their goods, including a five gallon drum of tea. Chesson feels that the restoration of pride in ethnic

identity amongst "the indigenous people of this country" is of paramount importance to all Australians (Chesson, in Gale, 1983, p.42).

If we ask why, we must look at the question of identity. If people are not allowed to move in their own frame of reference, and deal with life on their own terms, they suffer identity loss and are unable to cope with the environment in which they find themselves. This disjunction then becomes apparent in several serious ways, depending on the particular person's situation: for young people perhaps failure at school, especially the non-attainment of literacy; this is followed by failure to keep out of trouble, that is, inability to obey the rules of society at large; finally, not coping with everyday life leads to alcoholism, physically mistreating friends and relatives and eventually becoming totally dependent on society in some way.

Women suffer loss of identity to some degree in all male dominated societies. It is very noticeable, however, that many Aboriginal women have very strong personalities with very strong 'ego' (Freud's term) or 'adult' (Berne's term) personalities - the great women that Eliza Kennedy speaks of. The explanation for this probably lies in the fact that Aboriginal men have suffered an enormous identity loss because of white male domination.

Boyle (in Gale, 1983, p.44) feels that this is the major problem for Aboriginal women in transition, that is, in having two opposing roles: that of being the submissive sex in the dominant white society and the dominant sex in transitional Aboriginal society. She feels that this is because there is no place in Australian society for Aboriginal men (p.46).

Women tend to be more resilient than men in general in this area. When their society is under disintegrative pressure, their identity is sustained by their nurturing role. There has always been a reason for existence for women, and that is to look after the young. The traditional male role lies in the protection of the family and the social group. Since this ability is removed when the power to make decisions concerning the safety and destiny of the group is removed, male identity loss becomes paramount. (This is shown very clearly in Nadine Gordimer's novel *July's People*.)

By speaking out rather than keeping quiet, women change their own image to themselves and to others. They generally bring their own unique perceptions to a problem and in doing so add new dimensions of understanding. On the land rights issue, Chesson (in Gale, 1983) and Watson (in Gale, 1983, pp.55-61) make it clear that land

is wanted so that the next generation can maintain their own way of life, which includes carrying on the old ways. Bell (1983) has shown how the women at Warriabri have rights and responsibilities to the land just as the men do, and that the female role in these areas is complementary and equally important to the male role. Deuschle (in Gale, 1983, p.88) confirms this. But Nganyinta Illatjari (in Gale, 1983, P.60) adds another dimension when she comments that white people and Aboriginal people, besides being afraid of each other, 'made each other very sad'.

While this sadness has been known and understood and lived with by Aboriginal people, it has yet to be poignantly felt by non-Aboriginal people in Australian society as a whole.

We do not yet fully understand how great the loss has been to humanity by the destructiveness of the impact between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways of life. The writer who has most fully recognised and embraced this as the Great Australian Tragedy is the Aboriginal writer, Colin Simpson. In his book *Dr Wooreddy's Prescription for Enduring the Ending of the World* (1983), he traces the steps of Wooreddy and his wife, Trugernanna, as they help a white missionary ('the best of a bad lot') gather up the remnants of their besieged people, in the hope of saving them from slaughter, and enabling them to live in peace on one of the outlying islands from Tasmania. Their hopes are dashed as disease and anomie take their toll. Simpson's story is based on the journals kept by the missionary, George Robinson, which record his travels through Tasmania with Truganini.

The different ways in which Wooreddy and Trugernanna cope with the drastic changes in their lives is another good example of how male and female identities respond when they are under attack.

Lorna Tennant (in Gale, 1983, p.85) crosses the generation gap by showing how both generations of women, her own and her mother's, are important for the Land Rights cause. Her mother, because of her traditional knowledge and expertise, and herself for her writing and literacy skills.

The statements by Chesson, Boyle, Ilyatjari, Watson, McDinny, Tennant, Deuschle, Koolmatrie and Kartinyeri (in Gale, 1983) all show the new definition of womanhood that Aboriginal women are carving out for themselves. No longer passive, accepting and stoical, they are becoming active politically and taking charge of their lives, in spite of the difficulties which arise from this.

Being in charge, and in control, is what these women want in their lives. Consultation is all right as far as it goes: it is good for people to listen to and try to understand each other. But, often progress goes no further. Colonial and sexual exploitation and repression continue so long as cash and power are not controlled by the people, for whom the services are provided. McDinny (in Gale, 1983, p.75) makes this point very clearly when she speaks for the Borroloola women.

Wafer (1983) shows how neo-colonialism is perpetuated in the teaching of literacy. Literacy is an essential tool needed to cope with non-Aboriginal culture, which assumes literacy. In this situation, the non-literate person is disadvantaged in all spheres of life. No teaching is value free, however, and the teaching of literacy also means the inculcation of the values and skills of the literate Western world. This is often not realised or is ignored. Not sorting out the cross-cultural problems which arise from trying to teach across disparate value systems has resulted in people just not being able to be taught. Students just cannot learn if they are placed in a frame of reference to which they cannot relate or feel comfortable. Everything associated with the assimilationist framework is rejected. Wafer's answer to this is to place the teaching of literacy within the context of Aboriginal controlled organisations. Aboriginal adults must be in control and make the decisions which affect their lives.

A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

The feminist perspective places sisterhood beyond racism. Feminism has been a response to extreme male chauvinism in white society. However, in the literature cited, there is no indictment that Aboriginal women wish to move beyond or without Aboriginal men. Neither is there any indication that they feel inferior to them.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, in white society in Australia, women have been locked into an existential struggle with men for self actualisation. Starting with the right to vote, many rights have been fought for and even today have only been partially won. The right to work outside the home, the right to birth control, the right to higher education, the right to legal abortion, the right to equal pay for equal work, the right to raise a loan without a male guarantor, are only some of the concessions that have been wrested from the male dominated system.

These tensions continue today as women still have a very small parliamentary representation, and still have a very tenuous foothold in the power structures of the governmental, industrial and

religious bureaucracies. Women still suffer from the colonial perceptions of them as either "Damned whores or God's police" (title, Summers). They are still not encouraged to have a full personality development: a creative id, a sensible strong stable ego, and a law-making superego.

Some men continue only to be able to relate to women in the terms of the St George and the Dragon myth. Either rescuing the fair maiden or slaughtering the wicked dragon/old hag/witch/ wise old woman figure.

The Aboriginal women that Bell worked with at Warrabri were well aware of the sufferings of white women and their low status in relation to men, "poor thing(s) shut inside all day, like a prisoner" (Bell, 1983, p.32). They had no desire to emulate this model. They rejected the unisex model which our society appears to be moving towards. Their own rich tapestry of life is woven around a two-sex model in which women, although moving in largely separate spheres, are equal and complementary to men. They wish white society to recognise this and restore their economic independence by having split pension cheques, recognising the actual providers for children and restoring to them the ownership of their land.

While the present situation exists, their freedom and integrity is threatened, and their status continues to be eroded as they get caught between the two cultural mores, black and white.

Perhaps if a two-sex model had been operating in white society at all levels at the turn of the century, the Aborigines Protection Board would not have been given the powers, in 1915, by the New South Wales parliament, to remove over 5000 Aboriginal children in New South Wales from their mothers in the way that Tucker, Clare and Quinlan (of others, but not herself) have described (figures from Read, 1983).

If a two-sex model was operating today in white society, then the lives of many white women would not be so lonely or so lacking in purpose. The modern nuclear family and the more recent solo family is a poor substitute for the kin relationships and obligations of a large extended family. In these lay protection against bad marriages, care and comfort for young mothers, and care and protection of the old.

The servicing of the land rather than its exploitation is a spiritual activity, and pleasurable, companionable as well as serious and religious. It perhaps would be much more satisfying activity than the club activities which structure so much of the

time of the people in white society, especially once they have retired.

The development of the *Jilimi* or 'women's houses' at Warrabri is a modern response to the pressures of a government settlement (Bell, 1983), and of the close living together of unrelated groups of people under difficult conditions, and may pave the way for a similar response to women's needs in white society.

Here the women draw strength, comfort and identity from the solidarity of the female collective. The *Jilimi* is respected by the men and never interfered with. Women are not allowed to use it in order to play games with men. They have to be serious about their life in the *Jilimi* and support its purpose. On the physical level, it provides comfort and shelter but on the spiritual level it maintains, teaches and honours the culture, especially in regard to the caring of the land.

DISCUSSION

All people living in Australia today are involved in a common post-colonial destiny. While any group remains exploited and oppressed, we are all held in the bondage caused by this oppression. Whether it is sexual, elitist or racial oppression, eventually the guilt and cruelty of the oppressors and the sullen response (either passive resistance or sabotage) of the oppressed will sap the strength of the entire community.

We are in the grip of social change today as the old conservative forces grimly hang on to the past, maintaining exploitation and resisting any moves towards sharing the riches of the land or the land itself with those who have been deprived and oppressed.

The need for Aboriginal frameworks is clearly documented. To mention a few: in the sphere of store management (Bain, Nungalinga, Occasional Bulletin Nos. 9/10); in the field of adult literacy (Wafer, 1983); in schooling (Harris, Nungalinga, OB No.3); in church organisations (Bos, OB No.5); in the playgroup system of Aboriginal Family Education Centres (Lester in Teasdale and Whitelaw, 1981, p.50); and health (Tynan in Gale, 1983, p.83, also Nathan and Japarinka, 1983).

It would be destructive to view or to think of these movements for self management as separatist movements or as anti-white movements. They are not seeking white exclusion but Aboriginal structure and control of the organisations which have been set up to serve Aboriginal people.

People need to function in society as themselves. Their identity needs to be securely held in their own frame of reference. It is only when a person's identity is firmly established and stable that a person can attempt to cross into other frames of reference without becoming lost, or suffer from soul sickness.

If the phoenix of a unified Australia is to rise from the ashes of colonialism, then it will require the Aboriginalisation of all people who make up Australian society.

If women are going to have proper recognition of their special propensities for nurturing in the areas of child care, teaching and healing, their peace keeping functions in law, and their religious contribution in both institutionalised religions and in the care of the land, then men and women must ensure that they are given status and power inside the authority and decision making structures no matter whether it is the 'unisex' model or the 'two-sex' model that is operating in each particular instance.

Women must enter the next phase of Australian social history with a determination to decolonise relationships between men and women, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

The alternative is separatism. Here there would be a danger, in that a confrontationist stance which would be required to maintain separate states, would cause the nurturing qualities of women to be relegated to a subordinate role (well analysed in Sanday, 1981).

It is up to women themselves, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, to influence the direction which Australia will take.

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(Continued p.60)

Another Native American student talked about what medical education in this new way meant to her:

Navajos think about things a lot before they do something. They weigh things a lot. For example, when someone dies in a Navajo family there is no will. Everyone gets together to discuss how things should be done. Another example is that there are chapter house meetings for tribal government. At these meetings people sit and weigh things. So sitting back and looking at problems makes sense to me. Trying to determine what is involved and what to do is just what we do in P.C.C. I see my father doing the same thing taking care of the cows when they are ill. P.C.C. fits better for me.

In Australia, Aboriginal health workers can determine the best way in which doctors should serve the Aboriginal communities. They are, therefore, best qualified to identify promising applicants to medical school. They will choose them on more important criteria than grades and tests. They will assess their compassion, flexibility, adaptability, maturity and capacity for community service. When this day comes, medical education will become more humanised for all students.

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