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BOOK REVIEW:

Thompson, D. (1982): *Bora Is Like Church : Aboriginal initiation ceremonies and the Christian Church at Lockhart River, Queensland*. Nungalinga Publications, Casuarina, N.T.

Reviewer: N. Loos

With *Bora Is Like Church*, the Rev. David Thompson has made an important contribution to the understanding of all Australian Christians.

He describes the culture of Lockhart River Aborigines who are still following their tribal life, although attuned to their late twentieth century conditions. He then shows how they express their Christian faith in ways enriched by their unique cultural experience which itself is firmly embedded in the Australian environment, in the land to which they are inextricably tied. Indeed, it may be that the emerging Aboriginal theology will be the most distinctive Christian contribution to emanate from this country. This would not be so surprising if the Christian churches in the past had not been so determined to Europeanise the Aboriginal people they were attempting to convert to Christianity.

David Thompson can write about Aboriginal life, to some extent, as an insider. He was an Anglican priest at Lockhart River for eight years and, in his third year, was initiated in the Bora ceremonies he describes. He comments that he "had the experience of following this through in the life of the community for five years" (Introduction). We would all like to know more of this if the elders at Lockhart River and Thompson believe it to be appropriate.

In Part I, Thompson describes very clearly Lockhart River society and its ceremonies, past and present. He complements his own understanding with the work of contemporary anthropologists such as Athol Chase, the Berndts, and McConnel. What emerges is a very interesting account of Lockhart life, especially the religious beliefs and practices which, in a number of areas, challenged my understanding - one being the concept that Lockhart was not animistic but pre-theistic (p.18). A picture of a dynamic culture emerges. The ritual operation of removing a tooth is no longer

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practised; the Bora site has been moved fifty kilometres to the new village site. This has become a sacred site endowed with "kunta", spiritual power, and "kincha", taboo, to the uninitiated.

Part 2 is entitled "The Bora and the Christian Church", but it is more than this. It examines the Aboriginal and Biblical world views, bringing out *essentials* of both the Old and New Testament beliefs and the sustaining values of Lockhart society.

This book is intended for those who will work among Aboriginal people and thus examines Aboriginal beliefs and practices to show how they can be validated and fulfilled by Christian faith. An urban Aboriginal might conclude that it protests too much and that Aboriginal religion does not have to be justified. This would miss the point of the publication. It is meant to teach white Christians and this it does.

The cover shows a group of Aboriginal men decorated as initiates with feather headdress, body painting, and grass skirts. Two of them are being led to their ordination as Deacons in the Anglican Church. Another photograph shows a damper that has been speared as part of the Bora initiation ceremony. A portion of it will be later used as the bread, the body of Christ, in the Eucharist. There are a number of other examples showing how Aboriginal culture and Christian faith are mutually enriching without disparagement and without syncretism.

Notwithstanding, Thompson suggests changes in Euro-Christian practices at Lockhart River to accord more closely with the socio-economic life of the Aborigines and the environment in which they live:

In general the European Anglican style of ceremony is highly verbalised, formalised and methodical. A more Aboriginal style would give a greater unity of word and action. Meaning and effect would be conveyed less by words and more by the experience of symbolic action, drama, song and dance. The Church's ceremonies would be less a slave to the clock and calendar, and more responsive to the aspirations, needs and developments in community life (p. 34).

He then details modifications which seem so sensible that one wonders why the suggestions still have to be made after almost two hundred years of Christian experience with Aboriginal people.

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