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Darkness Into Light: Missionaries, Modernists and Aboriginal Education

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One of the early missionaries at Mililingimbi is said to have rounded up men from a ceremony and hosed off the sacred designs they had painted on their chests. I have often been told that story, always by Balanda¹ usually as a way of illustrating how terrible missionaries can be. All the same, other Balanda in other places were often a lot worse. Missionaries for example did not poison water holes and flour. Moreover the missionaries were not always feared or distrusted.

A Mililingimbi Yolngu woman telling memories of her childhood related how she and her sister many years ago were nearly burnt in a bush fire. Their father became very upset. That night, one of the old missionaries appeared to him in a dream, saying they should never have panicked because he was always there, looking after the children, and making sure they were safe (Mawukuwuy, 1978). In another story a

community elder attributed the nuclear destruction of Japanese cities to Allied retaliation for the capture and execution of a Mililingimbi missionary (Djawa, 1979). In that area at least, some missionaries have already become significant actors in the community histories of celebration and survival.

Old people have told me many stories of early missionaries. Most are stories of their kindly but irrational behaviour. One woman often told me how when she was a girl her parents would travel to Mililingimbi for short excursions to visit relations and to score supplies of tobacco and clothes. The missionaries would try to persuade them to settle, and show them the benefits of school, hospital, church, community work and rations. They would say you don't need clothes or tobacco, but you can have them if you settle down here. But her parents had all sorts of tricks. All they wanted were clothes and tobacco, and just when the missionaries thought they were about to settle, they would disappear again, over to the mainland and across the salt pans, the whole family smoking and dressed in Methodist style.

Nobody will tell you that Christian missionaries were always, everywhere either good or bad. Some were good, some bad; some learnt heaps,

¹ Aboriginal words used in this paper are: Yolngu – *North East Arnhemland Aboriginal*, and Balanda – *non-Aboriginal*

some learnt nothing. In looking at their work we need carefully to contextualise it in the attitudes of their era. In some parts of Arnhemland it seems, missionaries were originally sent by the government to remote areas as 'Protectors of Aborigines' protecting them from the depredations of overseas pearlers.

Looking for a moment at the widespread tendency to blame missionaries for so much misery, maybe we tend to claim that whatever cultural damage they caused was a product of their arrogance, their sureness that they were right, bringing the light of the gospel to those who were cast in darkness. To many people today this seems an enormous presumption, a sign of the evangelical's feelings of superiority and enlightenment.

But it is also true that many non-Christians who are involved in Aboriginal education today share almost exactly the same philosophy: that they are bringers of the light of truth to the backward and oppressed lives of Aboriginal people. Our Northern Territory Chief Minister for one said famously earlier this year that Aborigines are still 'centuries behind us in their culture'. Many of today's teachers would agree with him (and some Aboriginal people are being taught to think in similar ways).

'Enlightenment' has long been part of the philosophy of Aboriginal schooling. Between 1840 and 1950 and later, the government abdicated virtually all responsibility for Aboriginal schooling to the church, and teaching about God and the bible went hand in hand with teaching

reading or writing. When Welfare controlled education (in the Northern Territory roughly between 1950 and 1972), teaching work skills, healthy living, personal and domestic cleanliness and life in the modern world went hand in hand with teaching literacy. In the bilingual education era when the policies of Aboriginal self determination came in after 1973 (even though only a tiny proportion of all Aboriginal children were actually in bilingual programs), literacy itself became a widespread focus — literacy in the vernacular where feasible, and always literacy in English. Literacy was, and continues to be seen as always and everywhere a bringer of light². In fact the whole of Aboriginal education (after the Balanda took over and before the reassertion of Aboriginal control) seems to have had a lot to do with the individual attempts of white educators to change Aboriginal ignorance into some particular western form of truth: Christianity, scientism, socialism, liberal humanism, cosmopolitanism, rationalism ... you name it.

What exactly do Balanda bring with them as baggage to Aboriginal education? How much of this contributes to the ongoing (and ancient) Aboriginal work of education, and how much inhibits it? Balanda talking among themselves about their work in Aboriginal education often refer to one person or another as having 'a missionary complex' — that is, a strong feeling that Aboriginal people need to be rescued from ignorance, and that *they* will be the rescuers (if only the Aboriginal people would do things *their* way). Not all Christians are missionaries, but neither are all missionaries Christians.

² For a discussion on the significance of print literacy (as distinct from other literacies) in this enlightenment project, and the implications of alternative definitions of literacy which I think Yolngu bring with them to education, See 'Drawing the line: A history of Yolngu literacy', in David Myers (Ed.), *The Politics of Literacy*, Australian Scholastic Press, 1995.

How do we understand the 'missionary complex' and what are its alternatives? In the 1970s at Mililingimbi there always seemed to be some Yolngu ceremonial activity going on, and the singing we heard almost every night, like the moon or tides, kept building up over the days or weeks to a big climax with the whole community gathered to participate. When the climax came along many missionaries would join in and be part of the celebration and there was a general sense of encouragement between the church and the elders. At the same time, there was an active debate going on among the Christian Balanda about how traditional Yolngu ceremonial activity fitted in with a Christian view of the world: some saw it as the Yolngu celebration of God's creation, while some saw it as the work of the devil. Most people fell somewhere in between. (All the Yolngu, as far as I could see, felt they could participate at church and ceremonies equally without any clash at all.)

Twenty years later, long after most of the missionaries have returned to barracks, the same argument with respect to Aboriginal knowledge still flickers among those Balanda who are keen to reflect upon and discuss their work. The question is often asked in an extreme version: are Aboriginal ways of seeing and knowing primitive – in need of being brought into the twentieth century? Or do they embody the ancient, ecologically sound, perfectly harmonious paradise which we see our own culture as lacking?³ Both

these positions, surely, are unproductive. One says that Aborigines are ignorant and Balanda can teach them everything. The other says that Balanda are ignorant and Aborigines can teach them everything. Both positions are extreme, neither is useful (although the structure of power relations in Australia today ensures that the former position is more prevalent than the latter.) Ultimately who teaches what to whom is a balance in the middle somewhere, and needs to be negotiated moment by moment, individual by individual, context by context. Race really has nothing to do with it.

In many Aboriginal communities the church and the school are major sites where what we could call knowledge production by negotiation may take place. In the churches and the schools of Arnhemland (at least) some Balanda have always been happy to take each day as it comes, learning about, dwelling upon, and contributing to life in an Aboriginal context. Others have a sense of rightness, a sense of urgency, and a mission to inform and reform.

In the mid-1990s the churches and schools seem to be taking quite different tacks. Aboriginal Christians are engaged in developing their own theologies of the work of grace in the Aboriginal world, and Yolngu Christians have been developing and practising their own unique systems of Christian celebration and support for at least a decade⁴. The Rev. Djiniyini Gondarra,

3 These days 'missionary' arguments are often couched in Marxist rather than theological terms, but still fall to two extremes: 'How can we best help Aboriginal people to gain power within the existing Australian political and economic system?' versus 'How can we enlist Aboriginal people in our attempts to overthrow or subvert the existing power structures which oppress us? Again, not a very useful conceptualisation.

4 My experience here is very much limited to the Uniting Church in North East Arnhemland. Their experience is by no means universal.

Moderator of the Uniting Church in North Australia recently said that while he was not absolutely sure how or whether every detail of Aboriginal traditional life fitted in with the Christian experience, he was absolutely sure that it must be left entirely up to Aboriginal people themselves to decide these things. This seems to be the position of the church administration too.

Of course at the sidelines of Aboriginal Christianity there are people who are not happy with this situation at all. They strongly believe that the word of God is not open to cultural interpretation at all. They often call themselves fundamentalists. While they all profess that there is one single unified eternal God's truth to be found in the bible, they each have their own particular position on the details of this truth and seem to spend shameful amounts of time trying to bring one another into line. They are (almost) all white. I have never heard one Aboriginal Christian arguing against another's theological point of view. Yolngu Christian practice is to listen politely, say your bit, and leave it. Faith is expressed in action, not words.

Meanwhile, back in the classroom, the institutionalised negotiation between black and white which seems to have sprung up quite freely in the churches, is a lot harder to track down. Not only do white theorists, administrators and teachers have the upper hand in deciding the paths that education will take, but they continue to organise education in such a way that Aboriginal educators can really only participate on white terms. Even the current policy of 'Aboriginalisation' is normally interpreted as something which needs to happen to Aborigines rather than to white educators and white structures within education. Aboriginal people see a bitter irony in policies which attempts to 'Aboriginalise' Aborigines!

So while Aborigines have more or less taken over their own churches, the school remains a major site for Balanda missionary activity. Not Christian missionaries this time, but others with a mission of enlightenment who seldom entertain the idea that they may need to learn something themselves, or that their students bring to the learning situation a good deal of light which teacher ignorance usually presumes dead on arrival, or that Aboriginal students are only ever going to learn on their own terms. This, of course is just as true of a white teacher dealing with one or two Aboriginal kids in an otherwise all white classroom, as it is of a Balanda teacher as the only non-Aboriginal in an Aboriginal community.

One significant difference between modernist missionaries and Christian missionaries is that the modernists seem always to believe that they speak from a purely objective perspective, with none of the political, philosophical or religious bias of the Christians. Christian missionaries on the other hand always understand the religious positions they bring to their work and agree that some of their number are more 'dyed in the wool' than others. Maybe this in fact puts them in a better position to openly negotiate knowledge with Aboriginal people in, say, an educational setting, than others who arrive in an Aboriginal context assuming a privileged grasp on the handle of objective truth. Like Christian fundamentalists, modern secular missionaries have a strong sense of a mission to bring Aborigines from a state of darkness into the light. Though they profess no religious belief themselves, they harbour semi-religious assumptions about absolute truth, certain knowledge and the march of progress.

Balanda fantasies of enlightenment colonise and confound the Aboriginal work of education within schooling in two related ways: the administration of education, and the ongoing structuring of

classroom learning. The first of these two, administration, should by now be an uncontested zone of Aboriginal control in Aboriginal communities, but no. In fact the ongoing and pervasive influence of white styles of administration often stops the negotiation of classroom learning from becoming even a possibility. Balanda controlled regimes enforcing punctuality and regularity of attendance of both Aboriginal staff and students continue to undermine Aboriginal control. They are worried about and preached about and enforced with such energy by white educators that Aboriginal adults and young people can only participate effectively in education to the extent that they are willing to compromise their own responsive approach to the economy of time and capitulate to the demands of the clock and timetable.

Many Balanda educators insist that they would very much like a greater participation by Aboriginal parents and grandparents in school affairs. But aren't our semi-religious preoccupations with planning and preparation, timetabling and the regulation of planned activities what often prevent this from happening? Waiting around for someone to turn up is seen as a waste of time. Time wasting is out of the question for the teacher with a mission. Changing plans and making do spontaneously when a valuable community teacher turns up unexpectedly or an expected teacher fails to turn up, are also seen as problems rather than possibilities. Secular missionaries see their work of enlightenment in Aboriginal education as serious, responsible and difficult. It must be planned carefully and implemented rigorously, its material cut up into bite size chunks, and distributed carefully over ten years of curriculum documentation.

The second secular missionary field in Aboriginal education is the classroom itself. What happens

in the classroom is quite foreign to many Aboriginal and other children but they make meaning of it themselves. Against the background influences of the school timetable and specified curricula, the traditional work of Aboriginal education is ongoing inside and outside the classroom. In this educational practice, Aborigines have the space and time to continue in the age old negotiation of community knowledge appropriate to survival. In this practice — as with informal education everywhere — individuals have the opportunity to pool their experiences, listen to each other's point of view, and negotiate among themselves an agreed knowledge appropriate for the context and the moment.

Of course this theory and practice of negotiated knowledge production is not the exclusive domain of Aboriginal people. White people learn 'informally' too. But classroom education can easily assume an opposing theory and practice of truth which insists that facts are facts regardless of the context and the moment. White teachers teach, black children learn. It is possible for Balanda secular missionaries to gain power and prestige by insisting on the primacy of this concept of knowledge.

One way in which non-Aboriginal teachers might critically examine their mode of participation is through thinking about how they see the classroom sources of power and information. It is difficult for white teachers to think of themselves as only contributors to the authority structures of the classroom, yet it is always inevitably the case. Nevertheless, many still work hard to act almighty. It is natural for a white teacher, but so thoroughly offensive for an Aboriginal student or parent, for a teacher to say 'You didn't come this morning when we did the hard work, so now you can't come on the excursion', or 'You weren't working hard on your maths, stay inside and do it while we

go outside for sports'. What makes teachers presume they can control the right of others to regulate their own participation? Their innocent (missionary) claim is that regularity, consistency, and application (not to mention obedience) are skills of fundamental importance to the formal education experience; Aboriginal students are saying that regularity, consistency, and application are (always were, always will be) unnegotiably under the control of Aboriginal subjects⁵. What here is given, and what negotiable?

Aboriginal teachers (both 'trained' and 'untrained') are increasingly getting the chance to produce negotiated knowledges in the classroom. Aboriginal pedagogies are at last colonising the classroom territory. Sometimes this work goes on with the support of the administration, sometimes it goes on in spite of a lack of support. Some Balanda teachers are admired and respected for their contribution to this work. Others are resented for their belittling of it. Yet within this pedagogy, all non-Aboriginal teachers (whether they be fundamentalists or atheists) are seen as perfectly legitimate participants in education by Aborigines for Aborigines, as long as they acknowledge their position, listen respectfully (especially to those whose knowledge is older or wider), and work cooperatively to negotiate together. Your

knowledge is important but your mode of participation is crucial.

When the first video camera ever arrived at Milingimbi I remember a teacher wanted to make a video with his class: the new educational medium, a vehicle for teaching English. He decided to produce a short drama. He searched around for a plot and finally came up with a Maori legend which proved suitable. The post primary boys had a great time and a valuable experience videoing each other falling into the billabong. When I watched the final video I couldn't help thinking of all the local stories – myths and recent histories – which were in fact quite similar in structure, which were of tremendous local significance and interest, which all the kids knew, but which were simply unknown to the teacher. Traditions of teacher-centred, unnegotiated curriculum implementation had left the teacher without the interest or ability to go out and use community knowledge and history as the foundation of classroom life, and to work to develop his role in the classroom as the ongoing facilitator of community knowledge making. The teacher is long gone, but the Milingimbi community is still struggling to make Milingimbi knowledge and ways of making knowledge a legitimate part of their school curriculum.

⁵ It is interesting to observe how young Aboriginal kids are given significant control over their own participation rights. Whites often see this as taken to ridiculous extremes as when parents respect their infants' refusal of immunisation. Teachers routinely implement regimes of classroom control which go far beyond what the average Aboriginal parent needs, wants or feels comfortable to enforce themselves. How much of this control is actually necessary in the classroom? The only aspect of Arnhemland life which is characterised by regulation, enforcement and exclusion is the secret/sacred. Here the authority of the elders is a different order altogether and deeply respected. Aboriginal kids in NE Arnhemland who feel bossed around by white teachers often see in the teachers pathetic attempts to set themselves up (*garrwarkunhamirr*) as custodians of a worthless imitation of that which is valid and respected from their own world. This is not to say that Western learning is worthless to Aborigines, but rather that in the autocratic way in which it is presented, it is often judged useless by Aboriginal students.

This of course, does not mean that truly Aboriginalised Aboriginal education will have all Aboriginal content. For Aboriginal people everywhere, knowledge of how the wider world works and how to act successfully in non-Aboriginal contexts is crucial to ongoing Aboriginal life. The importance of what the western trained teacher (black or white) knows is obvious. The question is how do the kids in the classroom and the community best *make it their own*? Through an enlightenment? Or by careful building of new knowledge into old? It is wrong to argue that Aboriginal knowledge should be learnt in Aboriginal ways and 'white' knowledge in 'white' ways. They shouldn't and in fact can't ever be separated. The question is how can these different knowledges be best approached, appropriated, and applied by Aboriginal (and other) communities?

In some places, the two zones of secular missionary activity – educational administration and classroom knowledge production – are gradually being reappropriated by Aboriginal people for their own purposes in a range of contexts. I recently visited a number of Aboriginal schools in inner Sydney and there was evidence everywhere of cooperative projects between staff (black and white), students (black and white), and community elders to document, celebrate, and publicise 200 years of Aboriginal persistence and resistance in Redfern, La Perouse, and other urban Aboriginal communities. To me, they were signs of the vigour of Aboriginal education. The white teachers I talked with didn't see themselves as bringers of enlightenment to the down-and-out suburbs of Sydney. They spoke of themselves as enjoying the privilege of participating in Aboriginal knowledge making and through that the strengthening of contemporary Aboriginal identity, and its wider recognition. Their specialised western knowledge

(maths, standard English etc) wasn't irrelevant, it just needed a special and careful pedagogy before it could be made useful.

Teachers can no longer assume that community knowledges (regardless of which community) are of no relevance or significance to the production of classroom knowledge. The secular fundamentalist approach to Knowledge isn't going to work any longer. This implies more than just respect and decent manners. In a world where the unmediated production of so-called 'hard sciences' and technology have let us wander to the brink of social and ecological disaster, Balanda may learn as much from Aborigines about alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and making knowledge, as Aborigines may learn from Balanda about survival in the modern world. In the Yolngu world at least – always was, always will be – the core of successful ongoing education is to watch, to listen, to remember, to negotiate, and to respect. There, non-Aboriginal teachers of Aboriginal kids are in a privileged position to learn.

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