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PART 1. The Nature of the Dreaming

1. Philosophy has been defined as "the critical study of the ultimate problems raised in the search for knowledge". From this definition, it can be assumed that philosophy entails coping with the uncertainties of life. Man develops a credo that determines his pattern of behaviour. In Aboriginal Australia, this credo is known to English-speakers as the "Dreaming". It is a term which has no strict Aboriginal equivalent due to the inadequacy of language idiom in transposition. For example, an Aboriginal would not express the concept in the definite article and the copula. One tribe might use one word e.g. 'wingara' meaning 'the far past' or another tribe might describe it in a phrase e.g. 'tek Jingambata' meaning 'Black Cockatoo made or found it'. To ask a man his dreaming was to be told his group totem, or the title of the great myth and ritual into which he had been admitted. Obviously dreamings differed from group to group although some shared common totems and most groups practised the rituals but in varying forms. The purpose throughout was the same - the maintenance and regularity of the environment and man's relationship with that environment.

2. At this point it needs to be stated that philosophy is an umbrella term by which one may refer to the ontological, epistemological and axiological branches of the subject. There is no special virtue in using the general term when it is clear from Aboriginal myths that there is a tradition of thought that there is permanence, persistence and stability behind the changing face of things. This is recognizable ontological thinking, which will be demonstrated below.

3. The Dreaming is a doctrine to which it has been said "the whole corpus of Aboriginal religion vibrated." It is regarded as "the persistent highway between ancestral and living men, and, by extension, between visible and invisible life, between different types of life, between real and spiritual things, between immediately apprehended and subliminal realities, and between the Then-and-There of the Dreamtime and the Here-and-Now of today."

4. Specifically the Dreamtime describes the entry of "heroes", some in human form, some in animal form, some chameleonic, into a world without form and void. All, especially the leaders, had the power to transform the landscape or to transform themselves into natural phenomena, which then became and remained the sacramental repository of pre-existent spirits and "life-cells associated with the particular



heroic figures. For instance a great snake moved across the country "making" the river, i.e. leaving it as its track, and out of the snake came people and other creatures. Before the final disappearance from the visible plane, the heroic figures composed songs, stories and ceremonies to commemorate what had happened. The rights to these were "bequeathed to persons or groups according to an immutable plan of descent or attribution. The heavy secrets of replenishing each such place by annual, seasonal, or occasional rites, with the life-giving powers ordained for it, went each to its proper custodian, on a plan as immutable and as sacrosanct". When all this had been done "the world of labour, pain and death that men and women have known ever since came into being".

5. In this way, man and nature are brought into one moral and psychological system which determines his interpersonal behaviour and reactions to natural species and phenomena. In the same way, one will interpret the behaviour of other men, natural species and phenomena towards itself.

6. Against the interdependence of man and his environment is emphasised. Over the generations, Aborigines built up a systematic body of knowledge about the source and availability of food and of the normal cycling of the seasons. But this knowledge is systematic because the world, the tribe's universe of thought and action, is a cosmos; i.e. it is a system which can be taken for granted, while contingencies are a challenge which can be explained within the system. Therefore it can be said that, not only does the Dreaming imply a unitary principle, but one with an aspect of determination. Every creature and everything must follow the law of its own existence. Human and social necessity was defined in terms of the cosmic and spiritual necessity hence the individual had to surrender to imperatives. The importance was to know it, for anyone without a Dreaming was lost.

7. To understand the Aboriginal perspective, one must consider him in his setting. "Philosophers since Socrates have related reality to a combination of concepts in the belief that they were explaining life by reducing it to a system of abstract, logically related ideas - causation, time space, number. They viewed things within a framework. They revolted against the mythological, imaginative view of the universe and its origin, and endeavoured in a scientific, free and unprejudiced spirit to answer the problem in a rational way". It is an anachronism



to look for more than similarities in Aboriginal thought and practice. Aboriginals did not puzzle over movement and change like the Greeks or pursue knowledge of the cosmos for its own sake. The ground itself, symbolic sites, totems, totem places are not "things" but sacramental means through which man identifies himself with, and participates in the Dreaming.

8. "Life is not to think but to act. Our ideas are a reflection of the events we experience." When referring to Aboriginal culture or philosophy, one must distinguish between subject and object. When an Aboriginal identifies his clan totem and its sacred site, he is not pointing to "something" which is "out there" and external to him, but not him. He is identifying a part of his inwardness as a human being, a part of the plan of his life in society, a condition of his placement and activity in a manifold of existence in a cosmic scheme. It can be described as "intersubjective reality", made up of facts known to everybody in his community and upheld by them as public, objective, true and valid. According to the Aboriginal theory of "reality", "living and dead, human and animal beings, persons and things, persons and environment can and do compenetrate each other. In Aboriginal understanding, historical, substantial, essential and mystical links are inherent and imperishable."

## PART II. The Structure of Culture Contact

1. The history of cultural contact since 1788 has been devastating and profound in relation to Aboriginal ideology. The effects have been "played down" if not often ignored in Australian historiography. Constantly the record has been one of intensive interference and paternal control characterized by

- 1.1 the intense proselytizing zeal of Christianity;
- 1.2 an intensive concern with change in the material circumstances of life which is the basis of European civilization;
- 1.3 a conviction of superiority which was a curious mixture of Divine Providence and the law of "survival of the fittest";
- 1.4 that the nomadic lifestyle of Aboriginals did not entitle them to any rights in land according to European law;
- 1.5 that Aboriginal social organization was so different that they were not worth negotiating with;
- 1.6 since they had nothing material to offer they were never regarded as a resource and therefore useless;
- 1.7 the takeover of land without consultation made reprisals inevitable. Whites who retaliated, were criminal outcasts from their own society, and then land seekers, for whom Aboriginals represented a barrier to wealth.



2. In the initial phase, Aborigines resisted vigorously but in limited force. Their social organization was such that tribes did not organize themselves on a suitable scale to withstand the white usurpation. Hierarchical and multipurposed leadership were not a feature of Aboriginal society therefore there were no "chiefs" to organize a campaign as the American Indians did. Instead small groups engaged in a series of deliberate guerilla skirmishes with little effect since whites retaliated on a scale that was to the great cost of Aboriginal groups. Hence the continent was lost and won by local attrition. To say anything else is a travesty and yet this is so. Australian history records the Aboriginal as a passive figure. Certainly early settlers despised him as a rural pest. Little mention is made of the extreme violence which Aborigines suffered. Such activity still occurred in the 1930s in the north and northwest of Australia. Mass graves are dotted over the continent and the memories of our old people are the evidence aside from the severe population reduction of full-blood people and the vast numbers of people of varying descent.

3. With the disturbance of the ecological relationship, Aborigines were forced to seek new resources for survival. This introduced a new relationship between white and black known as "intelligent parasitism" but from the Aboriginal viewpoint, it was an adaptation for survival. At the same time it destroyed Aboriginal autonomy and social organization. This was effected in the following ways:

- 3.1 by the attractiveness of white goods and foods;
- 3.2 the ability to challenge customary law by appealing to white authority;
- 3.3 the knowledge that it was assumed that the Aboriginal would die out and that those of lesser descent would be absorbed by miscegenation and aspirations to merge into white society;
- 3.4 the removal of "near white" children into institutions to be "trained" for entry into white society i.e. to be inoffensive to whites;
- 3.5 the incarceration of Aboriginal people on reserves which were classified according to the degree of "civility" or loss of Aboriginal mores;
- 3.6 an insistence that Aboriginal names for individuals be supplanted by English names and ethnophaulisms (eg. Noserreg, Jacky-Jacky, Quart Pot Billy) and that Christianity replace the traditional spiritual life;
- 3.7 the imposition of controls in every sphere of individual and group life.



4. In short, the Aboriginal was depreciated to the extent that people in the cities had little awareness of their existence. By the 1880s a good half of the continent's 600 or more tribes, including those within the 20 inch rainfall belt, had been more or less obliterated. The justification of what was being done to them was more violent and moralistic than before or since. Anthropologists worsened the situation by their publications, which identified Aboriginals with Stone Age man. Few people doubted that men and institutions everywhere developed through a fixed sequence of stages from savagery and barbarism to civilization.

5. Until the late 1800s, the prevailing attitude of white society to Aboriginal society was one of extermination. Certainly this continued into the 1930s in some areas as mentioned earlier but the "new face" of protection was introduced at this time as political capital. In the colonial period the expressed goodwill of the British government was no deterrent to violence and few governors could or would make token gestures against the massacres. "Protection" policies were introduced in Victoria in 1860, in South Australia in 1880, in Western Australia in 1886, in Queensland in 1897, in New South Wales in 1909 and in the Commonwealth, for the Northern Territory, in 1911. On the face of it, the purpose of protection policies was to detract seeming official approval of extermination but the effects were:

- 5.1 to segregate the full blood population which might disappear in time;
- 5.2 to absorb the part Aboriginals into white society and thereby hasten the disappearance of the offensive remnant.

6. Protection required special legislation. Thus began a process of cause and effect since protective legislation is inevitably discriminatory in effect. The very attempt to protect the native British subject in such rights as are to be left to him places him at the discretion and mercy of the protecting agencies. In 1936 Protectors, Commissioners or Superintendents were appointed in states to demonstrate positive action to the public. The Aboriginal theoretically enjoyed most rights of the subject, while his land and property were taken, his person often destroyed and the basic needs for his life ignored. By 1893, no Aboriginal could sit on a jury, the ranges of his offences were wider, his penalties heavier and he was likely to be tried by a biased person. Early this year, (1976), a shooting accident occurred in which a tribal Aboriginal man was shot in the back by a white.



The Aboriginal retaliated and was tried in local court rather than in the capital city. The white man received only a token penalty which is now under dispute. Eventually the Aboriginal was gaoled and the white man absolved. The Aboriginal and part Aboriginal tended more and more to become prisoners contained through special protective laws. The overall result was that Aboriginal groups could die far more easily than adapt to the new circumstances created by physical and social isolation and personal restrictions. Of 5 states and the Northern Territory, in 1961 4 exercised controls over property, 2 required consent to marry, 4 exercised restrictions on the freedom to move, 2 maintained special conditions in the pastoral industry with Aboriginals excluded from the award wage), all but Victoria had laws against alcohol, 4 had laws to control cohabitation and 3 limited the franchise. Drinking restrictions were withdrawn in New South Wales in 1963, in Northern Territory in 1964, in South Australia in 1964-65, in Western Australia in 1964-7, and in Queensland in 1965. However, some de facto controls still exist. Until mid 60s the Aboriginal in Queensland was probably the only Australian who could be arrested for being drunk in his own bed.

7. In 1937 at the Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities, officials of 3 states (Victoria, N.S.W. and S.A.- saw their "problem" as one involving part Aboriginals and in 2 of them (Victoria, N.S.W.), it could be assumed that there would soon be few, if any, of full descent. Tasmania, of course, had no reason to be represented since all full blood Aboriginals had been massacred by a century ago. The "experts" of the N.T., Qld and W.A. formulated recommendations for full bloods which were -

- 7.1 if detribalized, they should be employed and educated but kept out of competition with whites;
- 7.2 if semi-civilized, kept on reserves and elevated to 7.1;
- 7.3 if tribalized, established on "inviolable reserves".

8. The legal restrictions on personal liberty in the settled areas reached a climax during the Great Depression preceding World War II with effects on Aboriginal attitudes that were to be profound and lasting. By this time, the official government policy was "assimilation". Also at this time Aboriginal Australia was playing a bad second to New Guinea for public resources and interest. The assimilation policy came from those who were concerned with Aboriginals through administration, study or their care. However the impulse to make radical changes had little force or product until the 1960s. But even in the early phase of the "new" policy, there was still impetus to break the bonds of reassurance between Aboriginals long before any true alternatives were open to them



for example the continuing in-group loyalty even amongst those with social and economic mobility. It was not understood that Aboriginals possessed

8.1 an enduring will to survive;

8.2 a will to come to terms with white society on their own terms.

9. Assimilation is based on a concept of "readiness before rights" and equality. It was chiefly expressed in the provision of transitional and cheap housing financed by the Aboriginal authorities rather than housing authorities. It was used to justify the personal restrictions spoken of in paragraph 6. It was eventually discredited because of the basing of practice on a common fallacy about the processes of social change - that intensive administrative and educational effort are the means. Yet there can be no doubt that the policy mobilised public opinion and clarified the issues.

10. There is now a remarkable market for all things Aboriginal yet there is no proof of any fundamental change in attitudes. It may be pessimism but the resurgence of interest is more to be regarded as the "attempt of a degenerating, rootless society reaching out for symbols and values for which it lacks equivalents."

### PART III. Ideological Transitions and Race Relations

1. The cultures of black and white Australia have always been at variance. In the setting described in Part II, the Aboriginal could do little more than play out his role in relation to the administrative tradition. In spite of the seeming hopelessness of the situation, many Aboriginals maintained a stubborn resistance that was both intellectual and material. At the same time many Aboriginals merged into the faceless multitude of white society if they were able to do so.

2. Of those not assimilated are people who may be categorized in the following way

2.1 those with a positive and independent identity;

2.2 those whose identities are the result of rejection by white society and its devaluation of their being.

3. There are a minority of Aboriginal people involved in the political sphere. Fortunately this situation is improving as people gain confidence and support from other Aboriginals and from interested whites. This lack of involvement can be attributed to:

3.1 Aboriginals had never been consulted on programs and policies for their benefit. The long period of institutional control developed dependent personalities within many Aboriginals. Institutional conditioning obviated the need for future planning nor was there any point in doing so since the



institution would continue to provide at the same minimal level for one's satisfactions, no matter what one did. Hence there was a cynical discounting of all appeals to logic or self-interest from people who had been in these circumstances for so long;

- 3.2 Aboriginals have generally been unable to establish social or self-identity comparable in terms of social value to that of the white majority. The ideal self, particularly in fringe, rural and urban areas, has been synonymous with whites. Being Aboriginal has many implications for the development of self-perceptions that are consistently reflected in lower class membership. Thus their aspirations are restricted not by the limits of need but by the limits of their hopes;
- 3.3. Aboriginal society was never characterized by recognizable leaders and to this day, has problems of legitimate leadership within local groups. Emergent leadership, especially at the national level, is often discounted as a tool of white manipulators and therefore to be distrusted. It is yet to be sufficiently realized that Aboriginal society must have internal discipline to achieve anything;
- 3.4 a profound and not unjustified disbelief in the honesty and reliability of authority. At the same time Aboriginals must learn to question this authority. This attitude stems, in part, from the failure of white society to replace the certainty and security associated with the Dreaming. When the land seemed to fail them it could be explained and accounted for but ever since they have been at the mercy of what seem arbitrary decisions;
- 3.5 an ethos within Aboriginal society of evasion of confrontation. Traditionally conflict was expressed in controlled modes. Life was a valued state of being hence serious injury rarely occurred. As vestigial behaviour, the Aboriginal is cautious in conflict;
- 3.6 the lack of wide support within Aboriginal Australia but this a lesser problem since the proliferation of Aboriginal organizations and voluntary bodies associated with Aboriginals.



4. The contemporary trend in ideological development is a reassertion of Aboriginality and blackness and a rejection of imposed definition of self and group identity. For those who choose to identify, an Aboriginal is a black Australian, descended from the original inhabitants of this continent, who identifies as such and is accepted as such by their local community. Increasingly the phrase "black is beautiful" is being voiced as people try on a new and previously denied identity or else reassert it as a statement of group unity and cohesiveness. Towards the end of the 1960s, exclusively Aboriginal groups were formed - The National Tribal Council, the Black Panther Party, the Council for Aboriginal Women, and the Aboriginal Progress Association. In addition, many young Aboriginals were advocating militancy as in the Black American model, and they were becoming adept in manipulating mass media. In March 1971 The Victorian Aboriginal Advancement League publicised the plight of Aboriginals by writing to the United Nations Organisation. In November 1971 the Council demonstrated against the Queensland government's new Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Acts in Brisbane. They held a church service with an Aboriginal pastor and then marched on the offices of the state authorities and were promptly arrested, including the pastor. In 1972, the Australian Black Panther Party was formed in Brisbane after the return of some Aboriginals from America. They issued a manifesto much of which was derivatived of the American movement and finished in 9 lines from the American Declaration of Independence. They attacked Aboriginal leaders as Uncle Toms and played on fear, manipulating the media whenever possible. They were unable to acquire guns because of the strict gun laws in Australia. The only weapon left was language of which they made the most. They eventually were forced to leave the state and move to Canberra. By 1973 the National Tribal Council had formally linked itself with the World Black Power Movement. As a result it came into conflict with other Aboriginal groups who favoured non-violence. The Council issued a manifesto and launched an international press lobby, which proved timely and embarrassing as it was prior to the Queen's visit for the Bicentenary celebrations of the first landing. These events represent the first stirring of Aboriginal consciousness and involvement. Now they are demanding their equality without loss of racial integrity. There is still much to be done and conditions at grass roots will need to improve at a fast rate if Aboriginals are to stay at even their present relative disadvantage.



5. The largest problem in race relations at present is land rights. Part I referred to the Aboriginal relationship to the land. To reiterate, land for the Aboriginal is a sacramental entity not a possession. White society does not nor ever can have any concept of this relationship. In the past whites considered that the nomadic life style of Aborigines precluded any claims to land that were made. The present argument is that land and its resources are to be exploited for the benefit of all Australians. Land has always been a largely one-sided issue but Aborigines have now taken on new tactics. In September 1963 Aborigines initiated their first confrontation with the Australian Parliament over land. The Yirrkala people in the Northern Territory sent a typed petition pasted on a bark painting which was rejected on the grounds that all the signatories would have been regarded as minors by traditional Aborigines. They had signed because they were the only members of the tribe who could write. In response the Yirrkala people sent another petition with some hundred thumbmarks. This time there was direct parliamentary action. Their initiative culminated in a challenge to the Australian Government legally for rights to their tribal lands. In May 1967 the Gurindji people also from the Territory, sent a petition for land to the Governor-General of Australia. It was rejected on the grounds that the government could not consider leasing land to Aborigines that was already leased to pastoralists. Their only offer was to make a new application for different land. The Gurindji eventually squatted on their land until some parts of their claims were recognised.

6. The climax to the land rights struggle came on the 26 January 1972 - Australia Day. The Prime Minister of the time, William McMahon, told Aborigines they would not be given land rights. The same day a small group of black militants erected a tiny tent on the lawns immediately in front of Parliament House in Canberra and proclaimed it the Aboriginal Embassy. It flew its own flag and appointed a High Commissioner. They were ready to stay until land rights were recognised. More tents were erected and could not have been more embarrassing to the Federal Government which had a SEATO Conference in full swing. In June, Australia's first Aboriginal knight, Sir Douglas Nicholls, joined them. It was a symbolic gesture to all since Aboriginal society is led by its old people and those in the tent were young. The Embassy marked a new stage in the relationship between black and white; it advertised that a revolution had occurred in the expectation of Aborigines all over Australia. It was also the beginning of a pan-Aboriginal movement.

7. The present state of developments is that the Land Rights Bill N.T. was introduced into Parliament in June. Its ratification was promised for early November. We are still waiting. A great internal struggle is being waged as vested interests lobby the government. The capital gains on land in the north are overwhelming and in usual tradition of materialism, white society is more than reluctant to give way to Aboriginal claims. Even though the Bill is a far cry from the desires of Aboriginal people in the Territory, and they realize that their bargaining position is weak, they recognize that their land claims need legal recognition. Without the land there is no spiritual or economic base and therefore no life, in their terms.

8. What will eventuate is to be seen. The picture is gloomy but Aboriginal people have two great virtues which help to cope - patience and a great sense of humour.



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