# THE ABORIGINALISATION OF THE CHURCH AT NGUKURR

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This thesis is submitted for a Doctor of Philosophy degree and is submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements for that degree.

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# DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Reverend Gumbuli and Dixie Wurramara and all the members of St Matthew's Church Ngukurr in honour of Gumbuli's twenty five years of creative and pioneering ministry at Ngukurr as an ordained priest.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| AIAS | Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies |
| AIATIS | Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies |
| ASSR | The Australian Society for the Study of Religions |
| CDEP | Community Development Employment Program. |
| CMA | Church Missionary Association |
| CMS | Church Missionary Society |
| CMS MA | Church Missionary Society, Melbourne Archives |
| MOM | Methodist Overseas Mission |
| NTGA | Northern Territory Government Archives |

# SUMMARY

This thesis is a study of Aboriginal agency in contextualising the Christian message at St Matthew's Church, Ngukurr, in Arnhem Land. The focus of the thesis is on finding an appropriate approach to understanding the relationship between Aboriginal agency and the contextualisation of the Christian message.

The members of this church have had an active involvement with the gospel since 1908 when a mission was established. They have exercised agency by contextualising the Christian message so they could be Aboriginal *and* Christian.

St Matthew's Church grew out of a mission. I therefore used missiological models for interpreting mission work to discover if they could account for Aboriginal agency and the contextualisation of the Christian message at Ngukurr. I found models of imposition and accommodation inadequate as they failed to recognise Aboriginal agency. The missionaries' failure to recognise Aboriginal agency should no longer blind us to the actual exercise of that agency in people's response to the Christian message.

Contextual models of theology recognise agency and are therefore helpful when used to gain an understanding of what is happening in a particular instance. However, contextual models do not account well for the presuppositions that agents bring to the contextualisation process from their

church background. It is important to understand the presuppositions of the agents because they influence the shape of the local theology that emerges.

The Ngukurr Christians have not consciously followed a particular model in contextualising the Christian message. I have therefore constructed a selective and composite model that incorporates the presuppositions that Ngukurr people bring to the contextualisation of the Christian message. This model has enabled me to gain a fuller understanding of the contextualization process at Ngukurr.

It is my conclusion that the suggested model would be useful for understanding the contextualisation process in other churches.

# STATEMENT OF AUTHORSHIP

Except where reference is made in the text of this thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in the thesis were approved by the relevant Ethics Committee or authorised officer as appropriate.

signed Joy Lorraine Sandefur

date July 1998

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been written without the assistance of other people in a number of ways and I wish to acknowledge their assistance.

I wish to thank the members of St Matthew's Church Ngukurr for putting up with an inquisitive White person and for all that they taught me. Without their help this thesis would never have been written, as it about their agency in interacting with the Christian message.

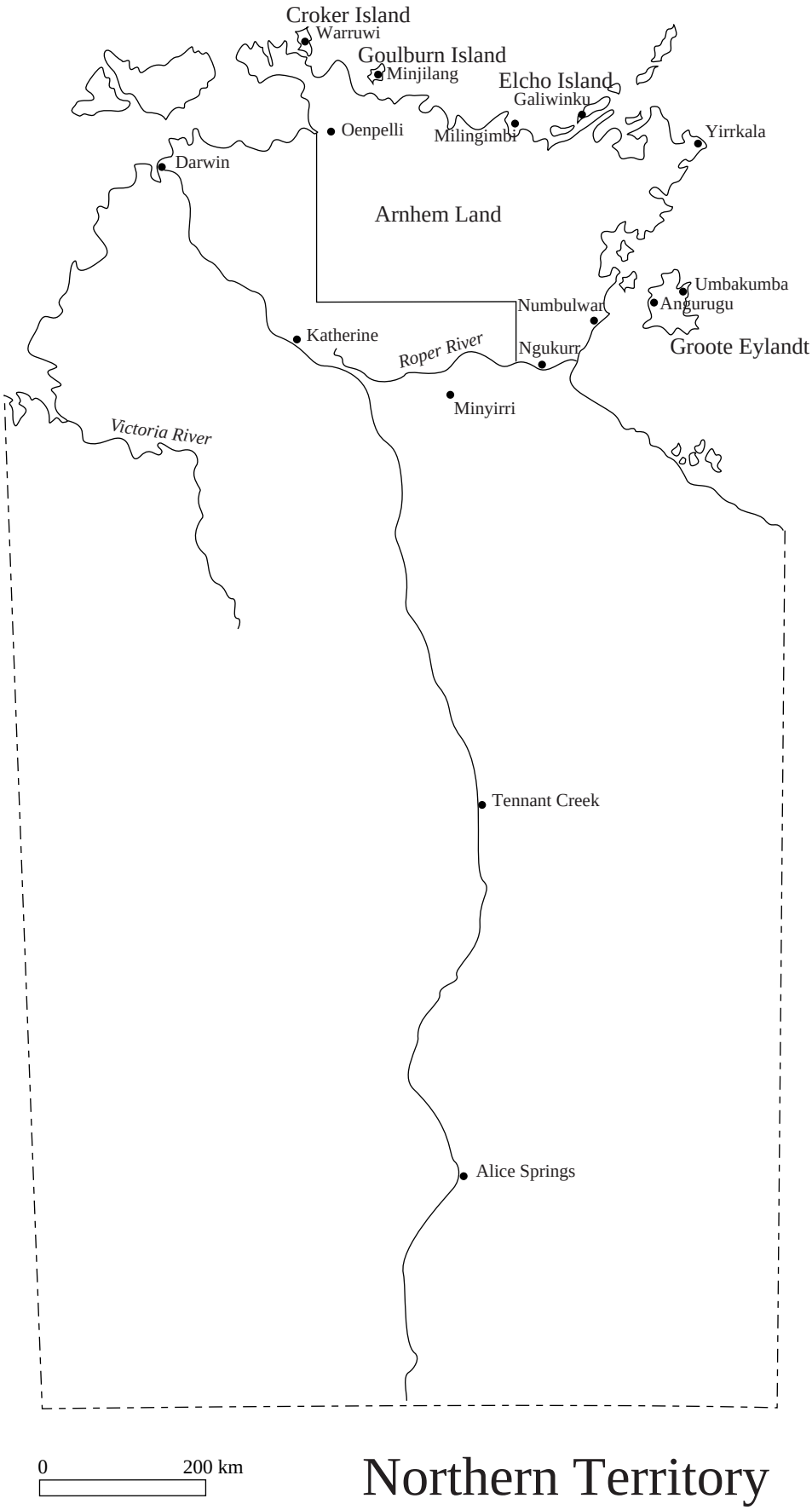
I gratefully acknowledge the guidance and encouragement of my two supervisers Dr Paul Rule, Director of the Religious Studies Program which is part of the School of Archaeological and Historical Studies, and Dr John Morton from the School of Anthropology and Social Sciences.

I wish to thank Graeme Batley, a friend who is also a postgraduate student, for those challenging and insightful disscusions about missiology and theoretical models that we had on a number of occasions. I also appreciate the many hours of profitable discussion about my material with Susanne Hagan.

I am grateful to my husband John, and children Tarsha and Michael for their patience and encouragement while I have been occupied for a number of years with this project. Their encouragement has allowed it to be completed. John has also assisted with the final layout production of the final copy. My sister-in-law, Carol Langsford, has also spent many hours at the keyboard in the last stages of this project for which, I am very appreciative.

Dr David Claydon, Federal Secretary of the Church Missionary Society of Australia granted permission for me to quote from their archival material in Darwin and Melbourne. That data has been a great help to me in writing the thesis. I would like to acknowledge Mr Alan Thorne the Archivist at the Melbourne office of the CMS who facilitated my many visits to use the archives.

Several people have read drafts of some of the chapters and offered helpful comments. These are Lance and Gwen Tremlett, Barry Butler, Carol Messer and Kerry Bland.


Croker Island
Warruwi
Goulburn Island
Minjilang
Elcho Island
Galiwinku
Oenpelli
Milingimbi
Yirrkala
Darwin
Arnhem Land
Umbakumba
Angurugu
Numbulwar
Groote Eylandt
Katherine
Roper River
Ngukurr
Minyirri
Victoria River
Tennant Creek
Alice Springs
0
200 km
Northern Territory

# Part One

Introduction

# INTRODUCTION

This thesis is a study of Aboriginal agency in contextualising the gospel. The Aboriginal church that is the subject of this study is St Matthew's Anglican Church, Ngukurr. Ngukurr is located on the Roper River in southeast Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. Members of this church, while acknowledging the role of the Church Missionary Society [CMS] in founding the Roper River Mission in 1908 and in bringing the gospel to them, have always credited James Noble (later Reverend), an Aboriginal missionary in the pioneer group of missionaries, with bringing them the gospel.

There was a core of Aborigines who responded positively to the gospel and who took the gospel to other Aborigines on nearby cattle stations and in Arnhem Land. They also worked alongside the missionaries in starting other mission stations. The Ngukurr church regards itself as the mother church of Arnhem Land, as it was the first church established in that part of Australia. This strong ownership of the gospel has existed throughout the history of the Ngukurr church, even though the church was not numerically large and was not under Aboriginal control until 1971.

In 1968 the mission was handed over to the government to be run as a settlement. In 1971, when the White chaplain was unable to return, an Aboriginal lay leader, Gumbuli Wurramara, was given responsibility for the church. Two years later he was ordained and became the parish priest for Ngukurr. He has held this position for twenty five years.

Once Aborigines were fully in control of the church, they gradually started to run the church in a way that conformed to their way of life, including making greater use of the local language.

Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians throughout my twenty one years of association with them have always maintained that they are Aboriginal *and* Christian. They are deeply offended at any suggestion that, because they are Christians, they have chosen to be like White people. Their concern to retain their Aboriginal identity is an important presupposition for them in contextualising the gospel and bringing it into their lives.

This does not mean that the Ngukurr church or community have chosen to reject social change. The pressure for change has in reality been greater since Ngukurr ceased to be a mission. With the handover to the government there was further increase in White staff, and more money spent on buildings and training. Better roads and private ownership of vehicles have meant more contact with the outside world. Television, videos, phones, sporting programs and greater access to education and training away from Ngukurr have all resulted in social change. The challenge for church members has been to retain their Aboriginal identity as Christians in the midst of so much change. While many features of a White style of living have been incorporated into their lives, the Ngukurr community and church are still identified by both members of the community and outsiders as Aboriginal People and have sought to find a way to live culturally as Aborigines in the midst of change.

The Ngukurr Christians were not passive in their response to the gospel. They wholeheartedly accepted the evangelical theology of the missionaries and have continued to do so. At the same time they resisted the accompanying message that they should assimilate into White Australian society and lose their Aboriginal identity. While most of the missionaries had a low opinion of Aboriginal culture and expected that it would eventually die out, Aboriginal Christians saw no reason to abandon their culture. The safe haven provided by the commencement of the Roper River Mission, rather than assimilating them into White society, actually provided Aborigines with an opportunity to preserve what was left of their culture after the violent invasion of their area by White Australians. Those who accepted Christianity also chose to retain much of their culture and have been active in incorporating Christianity into their way of life. This process is best described as one that has been slowly occurring over many years. It has accelerated over the last twenty seven years with Aboriginal control of the church and a large amount of Scripture available in Kriol, the language of the community. The church is known for its emphasis on the Scriptures and its referral to them when discussing how Christians should behave in a particular situation. The question of how Christians should live culturally is an ongoing one in a situation where rapid cultural change is occurring.

The focus of this thesis is to find an appropriate model to explain the relationship between Aboriginal agency and the contextualization of the gospel. St Matthew's church at Ngukurr has grown out of a mission, so I decided to use missiological models for interpreting mission work to discover if they would give an understanding of how Aboriginal agency was functioning. Models of imposition and accommodation are, I suggest, inadequate, as they do not sufficiently recognise Aboriginal agency. The missionaries' failure to recognise Aboriginal agency in what was happening should no longer blind us to the actual exercise of that agency in people's responses to the missionaries and their message.

I maintain that contextual models are much more helpful. They recognise the local agents as being the most appropriate persons to contextualise the gospel, as they know their own situation best. Such models provide valuable insight into the role of the local agent in contextualising the gospel. One difficulty that I find with contextual models is that they do not account well for the presuppositions that local agents bring to the contextualising of the gospel. Another challenge is that the church at Ngukurr has not consciously followed any model in contextualising the gospel. For this reason I feel it is important to understand the presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians have brought to contextualisation. In what follows I construct a modified contextual model that allows for seven presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians hold.

Presuppositions are important because in contextualising the gospel the presuppositions a person holds affects outcomes. The presuppositions that I identify are specific to St Matthew's Church, Ngukurr. Another Aboriginal church will not necessarily have the same presuppositions. The presuppositions that each church brings to the contextualisation of the gospel will be influenced by its unique cultural and denominational background. However, in each case the way people contextualise the gospel will be influenced by the presuppositions that they bring to the task.

My involvement with the Ngukurr church spans twenty one years. I resided at Ngukurr from 1976 to 1989. During this time I was a member of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and was involved in the Kriol Bible Translation Project, which required me to learn the language and gain an understanding of the culture before becoming involved in the translation work. As a wife and the

mother of two children, I was able to form strong relationships with the Aboriginal women who graciously became my friends.

Since returning to Melbourne in 1990 I have returned to Ngukurr three times: once for the *Kriol Baibul* dedication and twice to collect material for this study. On several occasions when friends from Ngukurr have visited Melbourne, they have stayed with me. Relationships have also been maintained by means of phone calls. This continuing contact has assisted me in keeping abreast of what has changed at Ngukurr since I left, and has allowed me to keep a check on my data.

My methodology was ethnographic. It involved studying the everyday context of the church members at Ngukurr. The data came from a observations and informal conversations. Some of this data was collected in an unstructured way while I lived at Ngukurr and my main involvement was with the Kriol Bible Translation Project. While living at Ngukurr I participated regularly in church activities, but I was not in any position of leadership, remaining a lay member. A lot of time was spent socialising with people, listening and observing what was happening. Some of my empirical material comes from what people taught me during those thirteen years even though I was not focused on collecting material for this thesis. Reflecting on my experience after I left Ngukurr, I realised that, while people were not consciously following any model, they were actually contextualising the gospel and assimilating it to their way of life. They were the principal agents in the process, with only occasional input from outside theologians.

Some of the data was gathered from interviews of people associated with St Matthew's Church at Ngukurr. This was done with the agreement of the priest, Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara and each individual interviewed. The interviews took place during two visits to Ngukurr in 1995 and 1996. An informal approach to the interviews was used as direct questioning is considered bad etiquette. My use of unstructured interviews for the type of material that I wanted to collect was approved by the University's Ethics Committee. I requested people to tell me stories about their association with the mission and church or anything that they regarded as important in their commitment to Christianity. Questions of clarification were asked and some discussion often followed about Aboriginal identity and Christianity. With the exception of two people, everyone interviewed agreed that I could use their names in this study. Those who were happy to talk but did not want their names used have not been identified. During these two visits I was able to observe and discuss some new developments in how people were contextualising the gospel. Wherever people were happy for me to record the interview, which was the case with most interviews, I did so. These were then ananlysed and confirmation of the information sought fromother intervies. Many things were clarified on the second field trip.

Archival research was used to establish if the records gave any support to the idea that Aborigines at Ngukurr were active agents in contextualising the gospel. The archives were also used to gain a deeper understanding of the history of the mission, the context that the missionaries came from and the conditions that they lived and worked in. They also contained material relevant to the claims of Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr that they were active in taking the Gospel to other Aborigines in Arnhem Land and nearby cattle stations. I was able to search the records of the Roper River Mission that had been placed by the CMS in the Northern Territory Government Archives in Darwin. The Archives of the Melbourne CMS have also been a valuable source of material for this study.

My own presuppositions in using the above approach, were that : speaking Kriol fluently allowed me to be confident that I was understanding what people said and aware when something was not clearly stated. Living in the community for a long period of time gave me a framework in which to assess

inovations and to observe what became established and what was rejected. While it is impossible not to be influenced by one's own background, I have endeavoured to be as objective as possible. My own bias is one that is strongly in support of using Aboriginal languages wherever possible and that Aborigines are far from passive when interacting with the White community whether they are dealing with education, political issues or the christian faith. My own theological background is evangelical and I am a member of the Anglican Church.

The material presented is not a full account of the contextualisation of the gospel into all aspects of life at Ngukurr, as that is a larger task than the size of this thesis permits. I have dealt with those aspects of life that are both significant and that I have adequate data to deal with.

Throughout this study derogatory terminology, such as 'half-caste', has been avoided, except where it appears in quotations or where discussion of a particular historical context requires its use.

This thesis is divided into five parts:

Part One is the introduction.

Part Two presents the background to the study. Chapter one explores the claim of the Aboriginal church at Ngukurr that it is the mother church of Arnhem Land. It presents the story of the mission and church from an Aboriginal perspective. The chapter also explores the view of Ngukurr people about how the gospel came, their role in taking the gospel to other Aborigines and their active involvement with the church that grew out of the mission. This sets the scene for the rest of the thesis, as the study is concerned with the role of Aboriginal agency in contextualising the gospel at Ngukurr.

The second chapter is concerned with the CMS and its part in events. While this thesis is concerned with the Aboriginal perspective and the role of Ngukurr people in indigenising the church, the local church has never denied the important part that the missionaries had in founding the mission and bringing the gospel. The chapter gives a brief account of the history of White contact prior to the start of the mission. There is a brief history of the mission from when it started in 1908 to when it was handed over to the government in 1968, followed by a discussion of CMS policy and the Roper River Mission under the categories of protection, evangelisation and the intention to 'civilise' the Aborigines.

The third chapter gives a brief account of the current situation at Ngukurr as this represents the context in which contextualization of the gospel is occurring today.

Part Three deals with missionary attitudes and missiological theory and models. Chapter four discusses the historical context from which many missionary attitudes arose and gives consideration to the question of why context is now an important consideration in missiology and contextual theology.

In chapter five I explore missiological theory and examine various models that describe missionary work. Models of imposition, accommodation and contextualization are presented and examined in order to discover the importance (or lack thereof) that they attach to Aboriginal agency and identity. The discussion concludes that models of imposition and accommodation give insufficient emphasis to Aboriginal agency and culture, whereas contextual models recognise the importance of Aboriginal agency and culture. The latter models are more appropriate in accounting for what is happening at

Ngukurr. I conclude by suggesting a new contextual model that I regard as most appropriate for understanding contextualization of the gospel at Ngukurr.

Part Four presents much of the empirical data in relation to the contextualization of the gospel at Ngukurr. In chapter six I describe in greater detail the context into which the gospel is being contextualised. I do this by presenting a general sketch of how people at Ngukurr perceive the world around them and by discussing the cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions that Ngukurr people make about life.

This provides the background for a discussion in chapter seven of how Ngukurr Christians are contextualising the gospel in their daily lives. Their claim that they are Aboriginal and Christian rather than imitation White Christians, is handled by examining the domains of illness, death, social relationships, ceremonies and the spirit world, and how they relate to the discourse of Christianity at Ngukurr.

Chapter eight examines Aboriginal agency and contextualisation with regards to the activities of St Matthew's Church at Ngukurr. Sunday services, fellowship meetings, Bible studies and Bible camp are examined to discover what changes have resulted from Aboriginal control of the church and whether those changes reflect an Aboriginal way of doing things. The move from English to Kriol in church activities, as well as the role of Kriol in contextualising the gospel at Ngukurr, are examined.

Chapter nine deals with how the Ngukurr church is doing contextual theology and taking account of the relationship between culture, gospel, social change, the wider church and Aboriginal agency. I examine the local theological understanding of God, sin, redemption, the moral code, peace, death and the afterlife, the spirit world, and power. I then look at people's response to God in the sacraments, worship and discipleship, following this with an examination of the seven presuppositions that Ngukurr Aborigines bring to contextualisation and the practice of theology.

Part Five presents the conclusion to this study. In the first section I discuss why my proposed model is the most suitable for understanding the relationship between Aboriginal agency and contextualisation of the gospel at Ngukurr. The importance of identifying presuppositions is discussed, with each of the seven presuppositions that I have identified being considered. The role of local agents in contextualising the gospel is then discussed, using the five criteria proposed by Robert Schreiter to judge as Christian the local theology that is the product of the contextualisation at Ngukurr. In the second section of the conclusion I discuss ten concepts that can be taken from this study and used in the study of other Aboriginal churches. I conclude that my model is useful for understanding the relationship between agency and contextualisation of the gospel.

# Part Two

Chapter 1: Ngukurr, The Mother Church of Arnhem Land

Chapter 2: The Church Missionary Society and The Roper River Mission

Chapter 3: Ngukurr

## Chapter One

# NGUKURR, THE MOTHER CHURCH OF ARNHEM LAND

St Matthew's Church at Ngukurr, in south east Arnhem Land maintains that it is the mother church of Arnhem Land, and that its members were responsible for the spread of the gospel in Arnhem Land and nearby areas. Whenever I heard them talking about the founding missionaries, it was James Noble, an Aboriginal missionary, whom they credited with bringing them the gospel. This chapter examines their version of events and their claim to be the mother church of Arnhem Land.

The chapter commences with Agnes Stanley's Captain Cook story of how strangers came to the Roper River area of the Northern Territory and the consequences of this invasion for the Aboriginal residents. Agnes was a child in 1908 when the mission commenced. Then there is an account of 'King Bob' and his role in encouraging Aborigines to go to the mission. Next Reverend Wurramara tells the story of how Aborigines spread the gospel in Arnhem Land and to nearby cattle stations. He came to Ngukurr in 1952 from Groote Eylandt, making it his new home and was ordained an Anglican Priest in 1973. He has been the local minister since then. The rest of the chapter examines the available evidence to discover if his claims are substantiated.

### AGNES STANLEY'S CAPTAIN COOK STORY

> *One day some people in England were fishing at the seaside. They saw a large bushfire here in Australia. They went and told the king. He said: 'All right. I want you to go and find it. Maybe there is a large country there.' This took place during the wild time.*
>
> *The first time he sent Captain Cook. He and his men travelled day and night. First he called in at Victoria. Next he travelled north around the coast to Darwin. Then he returned to England. He told the king that the bushfire was in a large country. He asked the king: 'What do you want to do?'*
>
> *'I want you and others to go and discover what kind of country it is.' It was King George who told them to go.*
>
> *The king sent many people. They came from England and Scotland. The king sent English and Irish people. Chinese, Greek and Malay people and some others. They all came to Australia.*
>
> *It was the wild time. You people don't know about that time. I know and understand what happened during the wild time as I have a good mind. I know how Captain Cook and all those people started to come here.*

*They came to Australia in lots of large ships. Aboriginal people were shocked. I was just a small child. I was born before all the people came. My mother used to run away with me and all of my sisters and brothers.*

*The people came to the North, to Roper River. They had to do a lot of damage because they wanted quiet Aborigines. The Aborigines were made to be quiet by those people.*

*After that the missionaries came to the North. Old Joynt and three of his mates came.*[1] *Before they came people came to erect poles for the telegraph line. Aborigines were not quiet then. People had not stopped yet. Before the missionaries came there were policemen at Roper Bar. And the boat* Young Australian *had been wrecked. It was wrecked not far from Roper Bar Police Station.*

*People mustered up from everywhere to look at that boat. They did not do anything or kill anybody. That happened later. The boat wreck is still there. Later the mission boat came.*

*When the mission boat came it started at the mouth of the Roper. Aboriginal people had not settled down yet. We had not pushed up from Old St. Vidgeons yet, which is my country and where I come from. We pushed up from there and came here.*

*My father was shot in the shoulder. He was not doing anything to harm White people. He was harmless. All of his children were scattered. We did not understand White people. White people did not understand us. Well all of his children were scattered. My father was not shot by a White man. He was shot by a Queensland Aborigine who had been picked up by people travelling to this area.*

*The mission boat landed on the other side to where we were. All of us, including my mother and father ran away. Later we called out to those people on the other side of the river. Someone called out 'Hello.' He sent a dingy over for us and took us across the river. The missionaries were all there by that old tree.*[2] *They were having a church service there. My mother said 'Hello.' My mother had a good mind and she knew Pidgin English. She said to them: 'My husband has been shot.' My mother was Mordecai's oldest sister.*

*The missionary said: 'I will give you some medicine. All of you sit down and wait. They were having a church service.'*

*The missionary had medicine. He was like a sort of a doctor. He was a doctor and at the same time he was a missionary and at the same time a minister.*[3] *He removed the bullet out of my father's shoulder and gave him some medicine. He told my*

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[1] The pioneering missionary party consisted of three Aboriginal missionaries and three White missionaries. James and Angelina Noble and Horace Reid were the Aboriginal missionaries. The three White missionaries were the Reverend J. F. G. Huthnance, Rex Joynt and Charles Sharp.

[2] This refers to the Coolabah tree under which the first church service was held.

[3] This was most likely the the Reverend J. F. G. Huthnance as he was the only ordained member in the group of pioneer missionaries. It could also be Rex Joynt who stayed for twenty years and was ordained ten years later while still working at the Roper River Mission.

*father to stay at the mission until he was better. Then he could return to his own country. My father did not speak pidgin. Only my mother spoke it.*

*They stayed at the mission. My mother had a bad heart. We were waiting for people to settle down everywhere. The missionary gave medicine to my father and his wound healed.*

*The king still allowed people to do damage. Then the king spoke. He said 'Stop it.' Then they stopped. They were all over Australia. The king stopped it permanently. We were right there with Joynt. He had a wireless.*[4]

*The End.*

Agnes's story is important as it is a construction of the past as viewed from the present.[5] It seeks to account for how colonisation affected Aborigines. Agnes has used her experience and what she had been told, to construct an explanation of how 'wild Aborigines' became 'quiet'.

Her use of 'wild time' refers to Aborigines and how they lived before colonisation. [6] 'Quiet Aborigines' refers to those who had adjusted to a new settled lifestyle on cattle stations or missions following colonisation.

Agnes's reference to people arriving by ship probably refers to the number of boats that came up the Roper to deliver supplies for the Telegraph line in 1871 and 1872. Large and small ships plied the river at this time. The *Young Australian*, a paddle wheeler, was wrecked near Roper Bar 1872 and its remains are still visible today.[7] The magnitude of this sudden invasion of the river would have astounded Aborigines.

The shooting of Agnes's father is well substantiated by other Aborigines and he was known for having learnt to throw his spear with his left arm. White contact in the area was characterised by violence and is discussed later in this chapter.

Agnes refers to people coming to the Northern Territory from many countries. Many people did come from the United Kingdom and Greece, and the Chinese presence in the Territory was substantial in the late 1880s.[8]

It is unclear what Agnes is referring to when she refers to the radio message that Rex Joynt received from the king. However Traeger's pedal radio had been invented before Joynt finished his twenty years of work at Roper.[9] The king's command to stop fighting could refer to the signing of the

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[4] This is a free translation of part of her life story that Agnes Stanley recorded for me in 1979.

[5] This approach to oral history is discussed in Howard Morphy and Frances Morphy, 'The "Myths" of Ngalakan History: Ideology and Images of the Past in Northern Australia', in *Man* (N.S.) 1984, 19.3, pp. 459-78.

[6] I am in agreement here with Howard and Frances Morphy and their understanding of the 'wild Aborigine' as referring to Aborigines prior to colonisation. Morphy and Morphy, ibid., pp. 459-78.

[7] Alfred Searcy, *In Australian Tropics*, George Robertson and Co, London, 1909, p. 105.

[8] Alan Powell, *Far Country: A Short History of the Northern Territory*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1982, pp. 96-7.

[9] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4. The *Gleaner*, November 1926, mentions the presence of a radio on Groote Eylandt that was not very satisfactory. It received morse code signals from Thursday Island and passing ships, but had not received any voice signals. It is possible that there was a radio at Roper at this time. Traeger and Flynn had just evolved their pedal radio in 1927 (Glenville Pike, *Frontier Territory*, Adventure Publications, Darwin, n.d, p. 212).

Armistice at the end of World War One. King George V reigned from 1910 to 1936 and was followed by King George VI.[10]

While some details in the above story such as the king fishing, do not match the historical account of Captain Cook, the story is still important as it gives an account of events that changed life permanently for Aborigines in the Roper area.

**KING BOB AND THE ROPER RIVER MISSION**

The reason for the early success of the mission in attracting Aborigines was due to the support of a respected Aboriginal elder. Gajiyuma, nicknamed 'King Bob', appears to have been responsible for Aborigines deciding to come to the mission when it was first established in 1908. He was an elder of the Mara people and respected throughout the area. Gajiyuma seems to have realised that his people were in danger of being annihilated and decided that the new mission could provide a safe haven. He spent the last months of his life encouraging the remnants of the various tribes to go to the mission.[11] Dinah Garradji, the daughter of one of the families who moved to the mission and who was later ordained a deaconess, describes what happened.

> *My mother and her brothers and all the others went to the mission. That old man, Bob, was the one who told them. Everyone was still afraid of the white men and they were unsure of the missionaries - perhaps they, too were going to shoot them!*
>
> *But that old man said, 'It's all right. They aren't going to shoot everyone! They are just school teachers! They will look after the children. All the children will be safe there.'*
>
> *Then he told my father's family and everybody else, too. He walked and walked everywhere. He told people that they did not have to be afraid any more. They all came to the old mission. A very big mob - in fact, everybody came.*[12]

'King Bob' was the first recorded convert to Christianity at the mission. The Reverend Huthnance wrote to the CMA in February 1909 that 'King Bob' had died a Christian.[13] Horace Reid reports that when the missionaries held a church service they would tell him about God and he would tell his people in their own language.[14]

Gajiyuma's acceptance of the mission and of the gospel played an important role in other Aborigines deciding to come to the mission and in the establishment of the church there. His endorsement of the missionaries and their message was a significant contribution towards the start of the new mission. It also shows that right from the start there were some Aborigines who responded to new ideas in the gospel and encouraged others to do so. Ngukurr Christians have continued this tradition throughout the ninety years since the mission was established.

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[10] *The World Book Encyclopedia*, Word Book International, London, 1996 vol. 8, p. 100.
[11] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985, p. 64; John Harris, *One Blood*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1990, pp. 700-1.
[12] Recorded in Harris, ibid., p. 701.
[13] Keith Cole, *Mission to Church*, p. 64. Keith Cole, in endnote 35 on page 64, suggests that King Bob was the same person as Old Bob the pilot who was involved in choosing a site for the mission. This is probably correct.
[14] E. R. Gribble, *Forty Years with the Aborigines*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1930, p. 116; Geoff Higgins, *James Noble of Yarrabah*, Mission Publications, Lawson, 1981, p. 23.

## ABORIGINAL MISSIONARIES

Three of the six missionaries that founded the Roper River Mission were Aborigines from Yarrabah in Queensland. [They were James and Angelina Noble, and Horace Reid.] The three of them were people of ability and highly respected at Yarrabah. They had an evangelistic zeal and volunteered to go with the White missionaries from Melbourne. At their farewell service at Yarrabah one of them said,

> *We go, not for money, but for God. People live, eat, die, and don't know there is a God. We have light; shall we keep it to ourselves? We do not want to leave Yarrabah, yet glad to go, to tell our people of Jesus.*[15]

When Aborigines at Ngukurr talked with me about the pioneering missionaries at Roper it was James Noble whom they regarded as being responsible for founding the Mission. From the way he was referred to, it was obvious that he was highly respected and that it was significant that he was an Aborigine. James was regarded as more significant than any of the White missionaries and made a lasting impression during the two years he was there.[16] He would have stayed longer if ill health had not caused him and his family to return home to Yarrabah.[17]

Before coming to Roper River James was an acknowledged leader. In 1905 Yarrabah had nine outstations. Bukki, the largest of these had about thirty people and James was responsible for the affairs of that community. He was also the lay reader for Bukki community. James was already developing into a speaker and teacher. In June 1908 he had accompanied Earnest Gribble to Brisbane for a lecturing tour and spoke at a number of meetings. Later in 1925 he would go on a speaking tour throughout the states of Australia.[18] James had worked as a stockman before moving to Yarrabah to live. He was skilled at tracking and a man of many practical abilities. Later at Forrest River Mission, as the need arose, he was community barber, dentist and doctor. He taught the men how to make mud bricks and trained the stockmen.[19] Grant Ngabidji who met James Noble at Forrest River said of him: '*The boss was an old bishop sort of black like me; he was not a gardia (white person)*'.[20]

James and Angelina were a remarkable couple and involved in the work of four other missions, including Yarrabah. In 1904 James and Angelina had accompanied missionaries to Mitchell River in Queensland, travelling there by horse. In 1914 they went to work at Oomboolgarri (Forrest River Mission) staying there until 1932. Finally they worked on Palm Island in Queensland before returning to Yarrabah.

In 1925 James Noble was the first Aborigine ordained to the first of the three Anglican orders of deacon, priest and bishop. Sadly he was never ordained a priest. James's ordination was a recognition of his outstanding Christian leadership and work.[21]

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[15] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, Annual report 1908, p. 35.
[16] This is also commented on in John Sandefur, A Language Coming of Age, MA thesis University of Western Australia, 1984, p. 245; and Harris, ibid., p. 855.
[17] Keith Cole, *A History of the Church Missionary Society of Australia*, Church Missionary Historical Publications, Victoria, 1971a, p. 176.
[18] Higgins, ibid., pp. 12-13, 19, 46.
[19] Neville Green, *The Forrest River Massacres*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, South Fremantle, 1995, p. 170.
[20] B. Shaw and G. Ngabidji, *My Country of the Pelican Dreaming*, AIAS, Canberra, 1981, p. 108.
[21] Gribble, ibid., pp. 135, 152, 157; Neville Green, *The Forrest River Massacres*, pp. 103, 107-8; Higgins, ibid., pp. 17, 25-39, 50-1; John Harris, *One Blood*, p. 855.

Angelina Noble was a woman of considerable ability. As a young girl she had been kidnapped by a stockman and brought up like a boy. Somehow the police had found out she was a girl and sent her to Yarrabah. From such a troubled start in life she became one of the foremost girls at Yarrabah. Eventually she became matron of the Yarrabah hospital. Angelina was married to James when she was very young. The church at Yarrabah voted unanimously for her to accompany James to Roper River.[22]

Angelina was a gifted linguist. Mrs Leftwich, reports that Angelina was an expert at languages and that while living at the Forrest River Mission, she interpreted at a court case, following a massacre in the area, for the people from the mission.[23]

Angelina was no shrinking violet.

> *Here is the half-caste wife of the lay preacher, who can ride and shoot better than most men. Sent out with the girls to bogey (bathe) a native from the bush dashes into the water, seizes a promising looking girl, and 'scoots'. Does the lady in charge sit down and shriek? Not much. She wades into the water up to her middle and sends so many revolver shots hurtling around the ears of the would be bridegroom that with a yell he drops the unwilling bride and clears out quickly.*[24]

Not as much is known about Horace Reid. He volunteered along with James to go to Roper River. Horace must have been a man of some literary and academic ability as in 1908 he had won the Bishop's prize for the highest marks in the Diocesan Sunday School examinations.[25] He did write a letter from Roper to a friend named Reynald. As the letter gives a picture of the early days of the mission I have quoted most of it below.

> *My dear Reynald,*
>
> *Just a few lines to let you know how I am getting on here. It is very hot here. We have bought about fifty goats. Mr. Huthnance bought them from the police station, not far from our own station.*
>
> *I haven't seen Bet-bet yet, but old Gogoli is dead, so the blackfellows told me. I have a present from Mrs Gunn. Everyone here is frightened of 'melong'. They think the dead man's melong will run them. I suppose you haven't forgotten that word Reynald. The people here are not frightened to work, although they are myalls in many ways.*
>
> *We have six horses, and every morning one or two boys go first thing in the morning and fetch them out to our place.*
>
> *One morning a man named Laurence went out for the horses. He nearly got speared by some other blacks from another place. Laurence was the first man we had to stay at the mission for good. The others come and work for a month or two and then go away again to the bush.*

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[22] Higgins, ibid., pp. 16, 19.
[23] ibid., p. 37; Green ibid., p. 107.
[24] Quoted from the Australian Board of Missions Review, 1922, in Green, ibid., p. 108.
[25] Higgins, ibid., p. 17; Gribble, ibid., pp. 116-17.

*When they finish the tobacco they got when they were working, they soon return here again to us. One night they had a big growl in the night—saltwater blacks against the inland blacks. They made a big fire and they stood with their fighting nullas, spears, boomerangs and lots of other things ready for the fight. Then old King Bob stood in the middle and stopped them growling. King Bob is now dead. We were very sorry for him but he knows about the loving Saviour. Just before he died he said to Mr Sharp, 'Im Jesus bin talk to me last night'. Two days after he died, and we buried him. When he wanted to go anywhere he used to come up to our house and ask us to have a short prayer with him before he started. He was a dear old soul, and we miss him very much.*

*We used to, at service time, tell him about the Almighty. Then he used to tell his people in his own language so the others could understand what we were talking about.*

*Four people got speared since we've been here. One died. One of them is alright. One of them is very sick and he is with us now. He got speared just below the heart, and the end of the spear came out near the back. Nearly all his stomach came out. Mr Joynt had a job trying to put it back. But it is all in again now. The man is very bad yet, and he won't recover for some months yet.*

*He had three wives. The enemy took two of them away. He only has one now. That's all they spear a man for, to take his wives away from him.*

*A man here has as many wives as he likes. Some have five. Some four. Some three. And so on. They marry the girls when they are as big as May Burnett (about 12 years of age).*

*Isn't it funny. I was much surprised to see a little half-caste girl here in the camp. At Mapoon there was any amount of them. Mapoon is a very nice place. I am going for another trip there in the Francis Pritt, to see them all again. I have been there once. I suppose you know all about that.*

*I must close now.*

*I remain your true old friend,*

*Horace*[26]

The fact that half the original missionaries were Aborigines made a significant impact on the Roper people. Aborigines have always been more interested in Christianity when it is introduced to them by other Aborigines.[27] It is significant that Roper people say it was James Noble who brought them the gospel. They got their initial understanding of the gospel from another Aborigine and responded positively to the new ideas he presented. Coming from another Aborigine demonstrated that the gospel was not something that was only for White people.

[26] Recorded in Higgins, ibid., pp. 21-4. The reference to Mrs Gunn, is to A. Gunn, the author of *We of the Never Never*.

[27] I discuss this in chapter five.

The example of these early Aboriginal missionaries in taking the gospel to other Aborigines most likely contributed to the interest that Roper Christians have had in taking the gospel to other Aborigines.

## REVEREND GUMBULI WURRAMARA'S ACCOUNT OF THE GOSPEL IN ARNHEM LAND

The Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara has lived at Ngukurr since 1952 and has been the ordained priest of St Matthew's Church since 1973. Under his leadership many changes have taken place that represent a more Aboriginal way of doing things. There has also been much thought given to how Aborigines contextualise the gospel in their lives. The following is his account of the gospel in the Roper River area.

> *When the missionaries came to Roper, people were still wild. From the day the missionaries arrived and held that first service under that coolabah tree the gospel has kept rolling. It never stopped until the 1940 flood that destroyed the old mission. Even that did not stop the missionaries or the gospel. The gospel still went on. They kept on in spite of food shortages and other difficulties. They moved the mission to Ngukurr using only man power.*
>
> *People helped the missionaries with the gospel at old mission. The missionaries taught them the gospel and they taught it to other Aborigines. Christian Aborigines went from here to start a new mission at Emerald River on Groote Eylandt. Missionaries took Christian Aboriginal men with them and those men taught the people. The men who went were those who were always working with the missionaries. Men like Joshua, Dan, James Japanma, Mordacai and Caleb Roberts. As people learnt about God the gospel goes on. Later the half-caste people like Gweneth and Constance and those who were part of that group started to help the missionaries too.*
>
> *It was mainly Aborigines who spread the gospel. They got the torch from the missionaries. Sometimes they went with the missionary and other times they went by themselves. People used to walk from the mission to cattle stations. They walked to Nutwood, Hodgson Downs and Roper Valley cattle stations.*
>
> *When I came to Ngukurr in 1952 there were ten or twelve Christian old people who were supporting the missionaries. Those older people taught people like me who were interested in following Jesus, how to teach Sunday School and take Religious Instruction at the school. James Japanma, Barnabas Roberts and Joshua were preaching. They were lay readers. When Joshua went from here to East Arm Leprosarium he was still doing missionary work. A lot of people at East Arm became followers of Jesus because of his work. Joshua and his wife Elizabeth were both strong Christian leaders, and they taught all their children. Old Dan and Deborah were also strong Christians. Some of the younger Christian men were myself, Silas Roberts, Dennis and Douglas Daniels and Alexander Thomson.*
>
> *When the last chaplain Ben Moore was unable to return in 1971 because of ill health the church people chose me to be the church leader. I was chosen by the old people to be the leader and later their minister. I was not chosen by White people. The people*

*who chose me included Mordacai, Douglas Daniels, Barnabas Roberts, Wallace Dennis, Dennis Daniels, Sam Thompson. The older women were involved in choosing me. They were Kathleen Rami, Una Thompson and those who are part of that group, (Dorothy Dennis, Maud Thompson, the Joshua sisters, Agnes Stanley, Elsie Joshua were all part of that group).*

*I was a worker priest for many years and was in charge of the workshop for the community. I did many short courses in order to train to be a minister. Of the group of Anglican Aborigines who were known as the Arnhem Seven and who took part in the church leader training I'm the only one to be ordained.*[28]

*The work of the gospel is continuing today at Ngukurr. James Noble, an Aborigine, was one of the pioneering missionaries and today the work is still going on. I have four licensed pastoral care workers to assist me in a voluntary capacity. They are Ishmael Andrews, Maureen Thompson, Rosie Roberts, and Dixie Wurramara. The two deaconesses, are now retired. There is a CMS couple, Lance and Gwen Tremlett, who are co-ordinating the Kriol translation project. They work under me and I am their boss.*

*I still travel a lot. I visit the Numbulwar church and the two churches on Groote Eylandt as they are all without a minister just now. I also encourage the minister at Minyirri Church which I had a major role in bringing into existence. Many requests come to me to take funerals both for Anglicans and others. They like the message that I preach at funerals.*

*Now I am looking for someone to train to take my place.*[29]

Rev Gumbuli Wurramara's view is that while Aboriginal and White missionaries brought the gospel to Roper River, the spread of the gospel is due to Roper Aborigines who worked with the missionaries in starting new missions and taking the gospel to Aborigines on cattle stations and relatives elsewhere. It was Aborigines who trained the next generation of Christians, who preached and interpreted sermons, taught in the Sunday School and Religious Instruction classes. It was the older Aboriginal Christians who taught him everything and then chose him to be their Christian leader and minister.

It is my opinion that most missionaries would agree with him. In many ways they facilitated the establishment of the church by their hard work in a harsh and difficult environment, establishing a mission, church, teaching the gospel and then allowing Aborigines to do what they could do more effectively, that is communicate the gospel to other Aborigines. It was always their dream that Aborigines would accept the gospel they believed in and teach it to other Aborigines. [30]

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[28] They were dubbed the Arnhem Seven by the Reverend Ben Moore. Gumbali Wurramara was from Ngukurr. Angurugu was represented by Murabuda Wurramaraba, Aringari Wurramara and Laurence Jaragba. Peter Gundu and Mungayana Nundhirribala were from Numbulwar. Gumbuli Wurramara was ordained in 1973 and Aringari Wurramara in 1985.

[29]The Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara recorded this history for me. The text is my edited, free translation from the Kriol interview with him. Joy Sandefur 1995, Field Tape no. 1.

[30] An example of this is found in NTGA NTRS1102/P1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River, vol. 1, June 1936. There is a favourable comment made about Guminjan evangelising Rose River Aborigines and that this is a far better way than the gospel coming from 'White lips'.

In the following paragraphs I will demonstrate that the records do support the Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara's view that Aborigines spread the gospel in Arnhem Land and that the church which started at the old mission in 1908 is the mother church of Arnhem Land, particularly in relation to the work of the CMS. I will do this by discussing their role in the commencement of other missions and the Minyirri church, evangelistic trips to cattle stations and Aboriginal participation in church services.

## COMMENCEMENT OF OTHER MISSIONS

Only two mission societies have worked in Arnhem Land. These are the CMS who commenced their work in 1908 and the Methodist Overseas Mission (MOM and now the Uniting Church) who started their work in 1916 at Warruwi. The aims of the two missions were similar, each having a clear evangelical stance. A close bond of friendship existed between the missionaries of both societies. The principle of mission comity existed between them, whereby they agreed not to work in each other's territory. The MOM was responsible for Croker Island (Minjilang), Goulbourn Island (Warruwi), Millingimbi, Elcho Island (Galiwinku) and Yirrkala and for the chaplaincy at the government settlement Manningrida. The CMS was responsible for Roper River (Ngukurr), Rose River (Numbulwar), Groote Eylandt, (Emerald River, Umbakumba and Anurugu), and Oenpelli (Kunbarllanjnja).

In practice and policy both missions were similar. They aimed to evangelize the Aborigines, established permanent mission stations, accepted assimilation policies and in their later years both received large welfare subsidies. Some MOM leaders had a deeper awareness of the need for an anthropological understanding of Aboriginal people and their culture than the CMS leaders. One difference between the two was the employment by the MOM of Fijian and Tongan converts on their missions. These were well received by Aborigines.[31]

The Ngukurr Aborigines are correct when they say they are the mother church of Arnhem Land as the first church in Arnhem land was at Roper River Mission. The other CMS missions were started from there. However, their claim is largely applicable to the former CMS Missions as the MOM work was started independently of CMS. Interestingly I have heard the Uniting Church Aborigines claim that the Warruwi church is the mother church of Arnhem Land, and that was true for the MOM work. Both claims to be the mother church of Arnhem Land, suggest that in both cases, Aborigines are making a claim for being responsible for spreading the gospel in Arnhem Land.

### Groote Eylandt

Roper River Aborigines accompanied the CMS missionaries on their exploratory trips to Groote Eylandt and when the construction of a mission there was commenced in 1921. On the first trip to Groote Eylandt in 1916, the Aborigines who went with Warren and Joynt were, Umbariri (Joshua), Saltwater Jack and Dennie Bourke.[32] On the Second trip later in 1916, Warren reports that the Aborigines with him and Alf Dyer on this trip were Daniel (Dan) and Joshua and Alec.[33] The third

[31] For a fuller discussion of the two missions in Arnhem Land see Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, pp. 149-51 and Keith Cole, *The Aborigines of Arnhem Land*, Rigby, Sydney, 1979, p. 85.
[32] Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, Church Missionary Historical Publications, Victoria, 1971b, p. 21.
[33] H. E. Warren, 'A Missionary Trip in the *Evangel*', in *The Farthest Coast*, edited by C. C. MacKnight, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1969, p. 188.

trip was made in August and September 1917. Warren and Rex Joynt were accompanied by Joshua, Milawarra, Dennie Bourke and Jack Crosbie.[34]

The second trip was not without its dangers. Later the Groote Eylandters told Dyer that when they first saw Warren they made up their minds to kill him. When they saw that he was unarmed and later spoke to him and learnt what kind of a person he was they changed their minds.[35]

In 1921 the construction of the mission at Emerald River was commenced. From 1924-35 it was a mission for children of 'mixed heritage'. Joshua was in charge of the Aboriginal men who accompanied the missionaries. He had been baptised on Whit Sunday the same year.[36] During the years that the mission owned a boat there were plenty of opportunities for Aborigines to travel back and forth to Groote Eylandt from Roper. Today this is done by plane.

in 1935 the Emerald River Mission became a mission for the local people until a new mission commenced at Angurugu in 1943 for work among the Aboriginal population of Groote Eylandt. This mission continued to 1978 when it was handed over to the Angurugu council. Umbakumba was a settlement on Groote Eylandt started by Fred Gray and it was handed over to CMS in 1958. The Welfare Branch took over from CMS in 1966.[37]

**Numbulwar**

From an early date the Roper River Mission had contacts with people from the Rose River area, later known as Numbulwar. After Warren visited Rose River on his three exploration trips to Groote Eylandt he recommended that missions be started at Rose River and Groote Eylandt. The CMS planned to start a mission at Rose River in 1918, then decided against it. Instead the Dyers were relocated to Groote Eylandt.[38]

The plans to start a mission were not forgotten. During the next thirty years, mission boats often put in there on their way to and from Groote Eylandt. The start of a mission was prevented by the poor situation of the Roper Mission at the end of the 1920s and during early 1930s,[39] the Depression, the advent of World War Two, and the coming of the war to the North when Darwin was bombed in 1942.[40]

After the war attention was again focused on starting a mission at Numbulwar. The CMS Report of the Aborigines Committee for May 1947, by the Reverend Montgomerie states:

> *Approval was granted for six of the Roper River Natives to visit the Rose River tribe, with a view to living with them and teaching them the Gospel, but as yet no definite plans have been made. Grace, Joshua and James, three of the natives interested in this work have written, 'We want to spread God's Word to the young*

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[34] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, *Gleaner*, 30th November 1917, p. 574; and Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, p. 27.

[35] Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, p. 26; Warren's Journal account of this trip is published in *The Furthest Coast*, pp. 186-203.

[36] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Gleaner*, August 31st 1921.

[37] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, pp. 86-109.

[38] Cole, ibid., p. 111. I have not found the reason for this but it was probably related to the decision to start the mission at Groote Eylandt and insufficient staff to start a mission at Numbulwar at the same time.

[39] Discussed earlier in this chapter.

[40] Keith Cole, *A History of Numbulwar*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1982, p. 22.

*and to those in darkness outside…' these folk at Rose River have long been waiting for a mission to be established there.*[41]

In his November 1947 report, the Reverend Montgomerie, who was the Regional Secretary for Aborigines wrote:

*At Roper River there is a definite longing on the part of some of the experienced Christians to launch out into a tour of evangelism. They want to be allowed to go forth as Evangelists to their own people and to reach [sic] the Word to them in their native tongue. There are tribes in Arnhem land still in their wild native existence and it is to the Rose River tribe that Phillip and Grace are anxious to go…*[42]

I have found no report of Roper Aborigines accompanying the missionaries to start Numbulwar mission. However, there had been long contact between the missionaries and the people from Numbulwar. A number of the Nunggubuyu and others, who were camped at Roper Mission, moved back to Numbulwar when the mission started. Since the mission started there has been frequent contact between Numbulwar and Ngukurr. Today the journey by road takes only three hours.

The station reports contain references to people from the Numbulwar Area visiting the Roper Mission and sermons being translated into their language. Some examples of this can be found in the station reports of Mr and Mrs Port in the 1930s and 1940s.[43] In September and October 1936 James and Joshua left for a visit to Rose River and their intention was to preach to people on the way.[44]

The Numbulwar mission was started with the encouragement of Aborigines from that area. In April 1947 when Grace, her husband and family went to visit her people at Numbulwar, she told the missionaries at Ngukurr that;

*I will have to tell them to be patient a bit longer, and if it is the will of God, he will send a missionary to them.*[45]

Between 1944 and 1946 Len Harris was at Ngukurr and he translated into Nunggubuyu the Gospel of Mark. He told me the story of how he read it over a number of nights to the people from Numbulwar. Madi a leader of the group then walked overland to Rose River. He returned with several canoe loads of his people to hear the Gospel of Mark read in their language. It was Madi who later asked once again for a mission at Numbulwar.[46]

On August 14, 1952, sixty five Nunggubuyu men, women and children left the Roper River Mission on the mission boat *Curtis* and work-boat, *Arabia,* to start a new mission at Numbulwar. A number of dogs went with them and the problem of where they should travel was solved by giving them a berth in one of the canoes the boats were towing.[47]

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[41] ibid., pp. 24-5.Grace and Joshua were Nunggubuyu speakers who had lived at Roper for a number of years. Both had worked with Len Harris on the translation of Mark's Gospel into Nunggubuyu. Thus people at Ngukurr were familiar with what was involved in bible translation thirty years before the Kriol Bible Translation commenced.
[42] ibid., p. 25
[43] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River 1936-1973, vol. 1, June 1936 to 1952.
[44] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, ibid., September and October 1936.
[45] NTGA NTRS/1102 P1, ibid., April 1947.
[46] Keith Cole, *A History of Numbulwar,* p.28.
[47] ibid.

The records do show that there was a long involvement between Aborigines from Roper and the Numbulwar area from very early in the history of the mission. This long contact and the desire that a number of them had to share the gospel with people from the Numbulwar area supports Gumbuli's view that they shared the gospel with the Numbulwar people.

**Minyirri**

This is an Aboriginal community on Hodgson Downs Station. It is outside the Arnhem Land area, west south west of Ngukurr. Today there is a church there and Nathanael Farrell is their minister. There is no doubt that this church was started from Ngukurr. While missionaries visited Aborigines on cattle stations whenever possible, the people at Minyirri were visited many times by Aborigines.[48] Many times Barnabas Roberts, Mordacai Skewthorpe, James Japanma, Gumbuli Wurramara and others went there to teach the gospel to Minyirri people. In the 1980s before Minyirri had its own ordained minister, the Christians in the community often drove to Ngukurr on Sunday Morning, a two hour drive, to attend church. There are also a number of references in the records referring to Aboriginal Christians from Roper visiting Minyirri.[49]

I have found no reference in the Roper River records that I have seen, referring to Aborigines from Roper going to help start the mission at Oenpelli in 1925.[50] However the claim by Gumbuli that Christian Aborigines from the Roper area spread the gospel and played an important role in starting new missions on Groote Eylandt at Numbulwar as well as the Minyirri church are well substantiated. They were actively involved in all that went on, and without them the work of the missionaries would have been extremely difficult.

**Aboriginal involvement in conducting church services**

There is a long tradition of Aborigines at Ngukurr being involved in taking church services. Most likely the first Aborigine to take part in a church service was James Noble. James came from Yarrabah, where he was a licensed lay reader, and was a member of the founding group of Missionaries. James was later ordained in Perth on September 13, 1925, as a deacon for the Anglican church.[51] It would be surprising if he had not preached and led worship at the Roper Mission, especially as he is credited with being the missionary who brought the gospel. The earliest reference to Aboriginal participation in a service that I have found is 1919 when it is reported that Johanna gave a commentary on lantern pictures at a Christmas service in 1918.[52] Reverend Warren wrote in 1919 that James Japanma had been leading informal 'services' at Roper Bar. [53]

Two Aborigines, Timothy and Sarah Hampton, were married at the Roper River Mission in January 1924.[54] Shortly afterwards they were employed as Native Assistant Missionaries for a number of

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[48] Don Bone, a lay missionary from Katherine, made many visits to Minyirri to minister to the people there. Personal communication from Barry Butler.

[49] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, 1962-1970. Many visits have been made since Gumbuli became rector in 1972.

[50] Oenpelli had been run as a pastoral lease by Paddy Cahill from 1906. In 1925 the government handed it over to CMS to run as a mission. There were a number of Aborigines camped there when the Dyers arrived.

[51] Higgins, ibid., p. 50.

[52] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, *Gleaner*, May 1919,

[53] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, *Gleaner*, January 1919.

[54] CMS MA, Series 98, Box 22, Letter from R. Joynt describing the occasion in the Harry Leslie Perriman Papers, 1921.

years.[55] Later that year Timothy Hampton conducted Evensong and was reported to be the first local Aboriginal to conduct a service on the mission.[56]

In November 1936 Mr Port refers to James and Barney volunteering to lead the morning services and doing it well.[57] The mission report of December 1944 refers to Joshua preaching.[58] Grace preached every day for a week in July, 1947.[59] The report for March 1954 refers to Silas Roberts, Barnabas Roberts and James Japanma speaking at services.[60] In 1955 Davis wrote to the mission indicating that he would like to become a minister.[61] The June 1956 report refers to regular meetings for the four Lay Readers to assist them in their preparation to take services. In the early 1960s Jacob Roberts studied at Moore College in Sydney, but was not ordained.[62] In 1972 Aborigines became fully responsible for the church at Ngukurr when the White chaplain was unable to return. Gumbuli Wurramara was commissioned as Church Leader by Bishop Kenneth Mason on January 12, 1972. He was ordained a priest on November 4, 1973. Two Aboriginal women, Dinah Garradji and Betty Roberts, both daughters of Joshua, were ordained as deaconesses on May 12, 1984 after spending four years at Nungalinya College.

There are many other references in the register of services, chaplains reports and mission reports, to the active participation of Aborigines in conducting church services. I have only chosen a few. Aborigines were actively involved in conducting church services even though ordination was denied to them for the sixty years that CMS worked in the area.

## ABORIGINAL ACTIVITY IN TAKING THE GOSPEL TO OTHER ABORIGINES IN ARNHEM LAND AND ON CATTLE STATIONS

Cattle station ministry was an integral part of the church's ministry. From as early as the 1940s on there seem to have been regular trips at least once or twice a year by Aborigines. Barry Butler was one missionary who regularly accompanied Ngukurr Aborigines in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1941, when James Japanma was no longer required to teach in the school, he was free to do itinerant evangelism among Aborigines living on the surrounding cattle stations.[63] The finance for this was provided by a CMS supporter. James was also the leading lay reader at Ngukurr and frequently conducted services.[64] Barnabas Roberts was also known for the trips he made to teach the gospel to Aborigines on cattle stations. Gumbuli Wurramara has continued this work. A number of Roper Aborigines came from areas which were taken over by cattle stations. They have maintained contact with their relatives who live on the Mainoru, Bulman, Urapunga, Roper Valley, Elsey, Moroak, Hodgson Downs, Hodgson River and Nutwood Downs cattle stations.

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[55] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5,*Gleaner*, May 1924, p. 16.
[56] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 72.
[57] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, vol. 1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River 1936-1973, November 1936.
[58] ibid., December 1944.
[59] ibid., July 1947.
[60] ibid., April 1954.
[61] ibid., vol. 2, March 1955.
[62] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, Church Minute Book, 5th May 1964; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 82.
[63] There is a report of James, in 1936, going to a camp seventy five miles from the mission and planning to present the gospel while there. This was possibly a cattle station camp. NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River 1936-1973, vol. 1, June 1936.
[64] ibid., p. 77.

The Mission Report and Station Council Minute Book, Vol. 1, contains a number of references to Aborigines visiting the Roper River Mission. They came from Borroloola, Calendon Bay, Rose River Area and cattle stations.[65] The gospel was taught to them by Roper Aborigines and missionaries. In the same book there are also a number of references to people asking to borrow a set of Bible pictures to take with them on 'walkabout' so that they could explain the gospel to their relatives.[66]

These records support Reverend Wurramara when he says that Aborigines took the gospel to people in the surrounding area. Most of this appears to have been at their own initiative and unaccompanied by a missionary.

## ABORIGINES AND THE CHURCH AFTER THE MISSIONARIES LEFT

Most of the missionaries left in 1968 or shortly thereafter when the mission was handed over to the Welfare branch of the NT Government. Exceptions were the chaplain and the nursing sisters and a few people who were employed in secular jobs by the Welfare Branch for a time. The last chaplain left in 1971 and Aborigines have been responsible for the church and ministry since then. During this time all of the Christians who had participated in the early days of the mission have died as well as a good number of the next generation. Today there is an Aboriginal minister, four lay pastoral care workers, a church council, Sunday School teachers and two retired deaconesses. While the church has had some difficult times, they have maintained a ministry to their own community and to others outside the community. It is now twenty seven years since a non-Aboriginal was in charge of the church. Its continued existence and activities, as well as its acceptance by the rest of the community, strongly suggests, that it has continued because Aborigines wish it to.

The church has strong support from the local people and most of the expense of paying the minister and the expenses of the church are raised locally. The local community does meet some of Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara's wage as a recognition of his caring ministry, which is identified as a counselling role, and the care he gives to grieving relatives dealing with the death of a loved one. The rest of his salary comes from church offerings. The Church is also able to rent out some accommodation which helps to meet their expenses and maintain their buildings. The fact that the church is functioning well in Aboriginal hands thirty years after the mission closed demonstrates an active ongoing commitment to Christianity.

Church members, have over the last twenty-seven years, changed many of the ways the church operates. These changes reflect a move to doing things in an Aboriginal way and are a major theme of this thesis. They are discussed in chapters five, six, and seven.

## CONCLUSION

I have shown in this chapter that St Matthew's claim to be the mother church of Arnhem Land and that its members were responsible for spreading the gospel is correct. Roper River Mission was the first mission established in Arnhem Land and the MOM commenced its work eight years later. The

[65] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, ibid. Examples are June 1936, February 1937 and May 1941.
[66] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River 1936-1973, vol. 2. Examples are September 1936 and March 1941.

other CMS mission stations[67] were started by missionaries from the Ropier River Mission. The first mission on Groote Eylandt was started with the assistance of Aborigines from Roper. The Ngukurr people have a long history of interacting with Nuggubuyu speakers from the Numbulwar area with some of them settling permanently at Ngukurr. There was always a concern to share the gospel with other Nunggubuyu speakers. Christians from Ngukurr have had a long involvement in evangelism of cattle station Aborigines. All of this demonstrates that there were some Ngukurr Aborigines who actively accepted Christianity. It was not a passive acceptance of pleasing the missionaries. As the missionaries practised mainly adult baptism, and demanded a period of two years of a high standard of 'Christian living' before they baptised anyone, a strong commitment was required. Not all who believed the gospel chose to be baptised. The concern of Roper Christians over a long period of time, to evangelise other Aborigines and to contextualise the gospel into their lives, demonstrates an active commitment to the Christian faith. It is now important to examine the CMS and its work in relation to the Roper River Mission.

[67] While Aborigines from Roper do not appear to have been involved in starting the Oenpelli Mission, the first missionaries were Alf and Mary dyer who had served at Roper and Groote Eylandt. Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985, p. 122.

## Chapter Two

# THE CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY AND THE ROPER RIVER MISSION

In chapter two I turn to the involvement of the CMS in the Roper River area. While the focus of this thesis is on Aborigines and their involvement with the gospel, the CMS and their policies, along with the mission station that they had at Roper River, are an important part of what has emerged. Accordingly the chapter gives a brief history of the mission. The approaches that the mission brought to its work and their outcomes are discussed under the headings of civilising, protection and evangelisation of the Aborigines. In order to understand the situation in which the Roper River Mission commenced, a brief overview of the contact between Aborigines and Whites prior to the commencement of the mission is presented first.

### CONTACT HISTORY

Explorers are the first Whites documented, to have had contact with Aborigines in the Roper Valley. Ludwig Leichhardt was the first of these. He named the Roper River after John Roper, a member of his expedition, on October 19th 1845.[68] Leichhardt had travelled overland from Moreton Bay, Queensland. He reached Port Essington (Darwin) in December 1845. While Leichhardt's expedition had little impact on the Aborigines, his overland route around the Gulf of Carpentaria to the Roper River and then a north west trek overland to Port Essington, opened up a route that was later used to drove cattle to the Territory and the Kimberleys, as well as by men anxious to reach the goldfields, and that did have a large impact on Aborigines.

Augustus Gregory and his exploration party were in the area in 1856 and J. McDouall Stuart in June 1862.[69]

The intrusion from which the Aborigines never recovered was the establishment of a supply base for the Overland Telegraph at Roper Bar in 1871-72. Several hundred men were camped there and at the depots during the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line. The river became a major supply route, with many ships bringing supplies. The first ships delivered 150 packhorses. Charles Todd, who was in charge of the construction of the telegraph line, had loaded up the *Omeo, Tatarua,* and a small paddlewheeler *Young Australian* to deliver the first supplies.[70] The magnitude of this sudden influx of ships, men and pack animals must have amazed the Aborigines.

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[68] Ludwig Leichhardt, *Journal of an Overland Expedition in Australia from Morton Bay to Port Essington A Distance of Upwards of 3000 miles During the Years 1844-1845,* T. & W Boone, London, 1847, p. 443.

[69] J. H. L. Cumpston, *Augustus Gregory and the Inland Sea,* Canberra, A Roebuck Book, 1972, p. 46-7; J. M. McDouall Stuart, *Explorations Across the Continent of Australia With Charts, 1861-62,* F. F. Bailliere Publisher in Ordinary to the Victorian Government, Melbourne, 1863, pp. 39-41.

[70] F.H. Bauer, *Historical Geography of White Settlement in Part of Northern Australia, Part 2, The Katherine Darwin Region, Canberra,* CSIRO Division of Land Research and Regional Survey, Divisional Report no. 64/1,

From that time on there was a constant stream of people passing through the area. In 1886 Alfred Searcy, a customs officer, travelled to Roper Bar on the *S.S. Ellengowan* and gave this description of Roper Bar.

> *A constant stream of overlanders, comprising good honest men, brumby hunters, cattle duffers, horse thieves, and nondescript outlaws, were passing through, it being in the height of the Kimberly rush.*[71]

The discovery of gold following the construction of the Overland Telegraph Line, resulted in men following Leichhardt's route to reach the goldfields at Yam Creek, Pine Creek and at Hall's Creek in the Kimberleys.

The 1880s saw a sustained influx of Europeans associated with the cattle industry into the Roper Valley. Ross Duncan, in his book *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910,* reports that in 1882, 1884 and 1885, 63,940 cattle were exported from Queensland to the Territory and the vast majority of those followed Leichhardt's route.[72] Most of the cattle were destined for the Ord and Victoria River cattle stations, but some had the new cattle stations in the Roper area as their goal. Elsey Station was established in 1882, Valley of the Springs and Hodgson Downs in 1884, Florida in 1885 and Nutwood Downs after 1890.[73]

The construction of the telegraph line brought large numbers of Whites into the area for the first time. It opened the way for the cattle industry and miners to make use of Leichhardt's route to travel into the Territory, until a more southerly route was discovered in 1886.[74] This resulted in considerable disruption to Aboriginal life.

The interaction between Aborigines and Whites was a violent one. Aborigines did spear many cattle and this contributed to the difficulties the cattle industry experienced. They killed some Whites, but the numbers were few. The only White known to be killed in the Roper Bar area was Charley Johnston, who was speared. The violence visited on Aborigines was extensive and left them greatly reduced in numbers. In 1903 the Eastern African Cold Storage Company decided to carve out a pastoral empire in Arnhem Land and to solve the problem of Aborigines spearing cattle by destroying the Aboriginal population. Bauer reports that it was commonly said of this area that Aborigines 'hunted out the cattle.' Of this he says:

> *This was probably one of the few authenticated instances in which the Aborigines were systematically hunted. For a time the company employed 2 gangs of 10 to 14 blacks headed by a white man or half-caste to hunt and shoot the wild blacks on sight. George Conway, a long-term resident of the Mataranka district and still living there, accompanied one of these parties on several sorties.*[75]

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April 1964, pp.73-7; Ernestine Hill, *The Territory*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1951, pp. 112-16; and John Bern, Blackfella Business Whitefella Law, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1974, pp. 72-4.

[71] Alfred Searcy, 'The Last Voyage of S.S. *Ellengowan*', in *The Farthest Coast*, edited by C. C. MacKnight, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1969, pp. 160-8. See also F. H. Bauer, ibid., 1964, p. 75.

[72] Ross Duncan, *The Northern Territory Pastoral Industry 1863-1910*, Melbourne, University Press, Melbourne, 1967, p. 38. I understand this figure to refer to the total amount exported for the three years.

[73] ibid., p. 161.

[74] ibid., p. 38.

[75] Bauer, ibid., p. 157.

They were by no means the only ones to kill Aborigines. John Harris in his PhD thesis has gone to considerable trouble to document the violence against Aborigines in the Roper and surrounding areas. Other writers have reached the same conclusion.[76] By the time the CMS started the Roper River Mission there had been more than a quarter of a century of violent conflict and the Aboriginal population had been greatly reduced. The same year that the mission commenced, the Eastern and African Cold Storage Company went into liquidation. The violence did ease about this time, but there was still enough violent treatment of Aborigines for Rex Joynt, one of the pioneering missionaries, to argue ten years later that Aborigines still needed protecting from violent Whites.[77]

Aborigines at Ngukurr believe that the coming of the missionaries reduced the killing in the area. Howard and Frances Morphy report that Aborigines at Urapunga, a nearby cattle station, hold the same belief.[78]

The missionaries arrived at a time when the violence was decreasing but had not ceased entirely. The establishment of the mission sent a strong message that there was a group of people who were prepared to offer protection and care to the Aborigines. H & F Morphy also support the view that the establishment of the mission was a factor that led to the reduction in the killing of the Aborigines throughout a wider area.[79]

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE ROPER RIVER MISSION

As the history of CMS at Ngukurr has been well documented, I will not repeat it beyond a brief description. The history can be found in the writings of Keith Cole and in particular *A Short History of the CMS Roper River Mission, 1908 - 1968, From Mission to Church, The Aborigines of Arnhem Land, Groote Eylandt Pioneer* and *Perriman in Arnhem Land*. R. Joynt one of the early Pioneers wrote a short history *Ten Years Work at the Roper River Missions Station, Northern Territory, Australia August 1908 to August 1918*. There is also an account of the first five years of the mission in *The Story of the CMA* by H.R. Holmes, (CMA stands for the Church Missionary Association, an earlier name for the CMS). John Harris has dealt with it in his book *One Blood* and in his PhD thesis *Language contact: Pidgins and the Emergence of Kriol in the Northern Territor:y Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*. Gilbert White gives an account of the selection of the mission site in *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia.* John Sandefur also discusses the history and background of the area in his MA Thesis *A Language Coming of Age.*

The area in which the mission was commenced was one where Aborigines had been dispossessed from their land, massacred and further reduced in numbers by exposure to new illnesses. In 1906 at

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[76] John Harris, Language Contact, Pidgins and the Emergence of Kriol in the Northern Territory, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1984, chapters 7 & 8; Francesca Merlan, '"Making People Quiet" in the Pastoral North: Reminiscences of Elsey Station', *Aboriginal History*, 2:70-106; Howard and Frances Morphy, *Yutpundji-Djindiwirritj Land Claim*, Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1981, p. 4-15; Nandjiwara Amagula (I) and Silas Roberts (II), 'The Northern Territory: "Aboriginal Opinions"', in *Aboriginal Progress A New Era?*, edited by D. E. Hutchison, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 1969, pp. 138-40; Luise Hercus and Peter Sutton, *This is What Happened*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, pp. 63-8; and John Bern, Blackfella Business Whitefella Law, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1984.

[77] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, R. Joynt, 'Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission Station, Northern Territory, Australia August 1908 to August 1918', in the *Gleaner*, vol. 2, no. 48.

[78] Howard and Frances Morphy, *Yutpundji-Djindiwirritj Land Claim*, Northern Land Council, Darwin, 1981, p. 15.

[79] ibid., p. 15.

the Church Congress in Melbourne, Dr Frodsham, the Bishop of North Queensland, in his call for more mission stations to be established, said:

> *A previous speaker at this Congress has said that the British were put by God into Australia to preach the gospel to the heathen. I have never heard a more complete condemnation of the stewardship of the Australian people. We have developed the country, and we have civilised it, but we have certainly done very little to preach the gospel to the people we have dispossessed. The blacks have been shot and poisoned while they were wild and dangerous, they are now left to kill themselves with white vices where they have been 'tamed' — to quote a Queensland expression— but very few have received at our hands either justice or consideration.*[80]

The speech by Bishop Frodsham was one of two things that resulted in the establishment of the Roper River Mission according to R.H. Holmes, who wrote a history of the work of the CMA in Victoria in 1913. The CMA met with Bishop Frodsham about the possibility of starting a mission in northern Australia. He wired the Bishop of Carpentaria who replied in the affirmative suggesting the Roper River area.[81]

The second was the visit of Sir George Le Hunte, Governor of South Australia in 1905 to the Northern Territory. It was his conclusion that almost nothing was being done for the Aborigines and there was a need for missions to be established.[82] The South Australian Government was then responsible for the Northern Territory.

The Annual report of the CMA for 1906 referring to the decision to establish a mission in the Northern Territory refers to Bishop Frodsham as summarising the position as follows:

> *I regard this question as being not merely a Missionary one, but a national one. Granting that the provocation for severe treatment by whites has been great, we have been guilty of abominable cruelty to the original people of this continent. We have driven them like kangaroos into some gully and shot remorselessly men, women and children. We have poisoned those that came to us and asked for food; we have robbed them of their land and their primitive social system; we have taught them to drink; we have wounded them with disease; and in a few years we shall have 'improved' them off the continent. It seems to me highly probable that the date is not far distant when the last blackfellow will have passed away; but at the present time there is a great opportunity for us to give them the fair chance.*[83]

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[80] H. R. Holmes, *The Story of the C.M.A. Being a Brief History of the Victorian Church Missionary Association*, NP, Melbourne, 1913, pp. 37-8.

[81] CMA MA, Series 7, Box 30, CMA-V appended to to the General Committee Minutes of 6 December 1906; Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985, pp. 58-9; J. A. Ingoldsby suggests that the CMA-V made the decision to start a mission because the Church Congress was held in Melbourne. Keith Cole refutes this saying the response was due to the spiritual sensitivity of the Victorian committee. Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 59, points out that the CMA-NSW was invited to share in the venture. They later declined. J. A. Ingoldsby, 'Labourers Together with God': CMS Missionaries in Northern Australia 1908-1934, BA (Hons) thesis, Australian National University, p. 7.

[82] Holmes, ibid., p 37.

[83] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, CMA of Victoria Annual Report for 1906, p. 24.

The same annual report stated that the Government of South Australia welcomed the proposal for a mission in the Northern Territory and offered all possible assistance.

Following the decision to start a mission, the secretary of the CMS, Reverend A. R. Ebb, and the Bishop of Carpentaria, Gilbert White made an exploratory trip to select a site. A site was chosen 70 miles from the coast on the Roper River. They were assisted by the local Police officer Mr Macaulay and several Aborigines that included Old Bob the Pilot and his son Bob the Pilot.[84] Other Aborigines associated with this trip, who subsequently had a long involvement with the mission, were James Japanma, Mordecai's relatives, and Geoff Bugala.[85] Two hundred square miles of land was granted to the mission as an 'Inviolable Reserve' for the sole use of the Aborigines.[86]

The first missionaries arrived by boat at the site of the new mission. They had been farewelled in Melbourne on 13 July 1908 and after a long journey by sea, they arrived at the end of August. On the way they visited the Australian Board of Missions station at Yarrabah. Here three Aborigines volunteered to join them. They were James and Angelina Noble and Horace Reid.[87] At Thursday Island the missionaries were licensed by the Bishop of Carpentaria for their work.

During the first two years seven acres of land was cleared, fenced and some of it planted because the mission needed to be self supporting as supplies only came by boat every six months. Three substantial buildings were erected, a school was started and a number of huts erected for Aborigines. They had commenced working towards the goals of making Aborigines self-supporting.[88]

On average, there were seventy Aborigines at the mission, with the number reaching two hundred on occasions. John Huthnance was also able to travel over a great deal of the country.[89]

The next few years were difficult. Reverend Huthnance felt it was unwise to bring his wife and family north, and resigned in January 1910. In May, James and Angelina Noble and their family returned to Yarrabah due to ill health. Later Horace Reid left for Katherine. Charles Sharp resigned late in 1910 leaving Rex Joynt to carry on alone. No reason is given for the last two departures. The situation was relieved when four new missionaries arrived in May 1911 and two more in November.[90] During the next year Aborigines frequently chose, for their own reasons, to leave the mission at very short notice to go walkabout.[91] While this made it difficult for the missionaries to carry out their plans for developing the mission and educating the children, it demonstrated that it was now safe for Aborigines to move freely in the surrounding area. The mission could not be developed as a settled community unless the Aborigines chose to stay there.

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[84] This expedition is described in chapter twelve of Gilbert White, *Thirty Years in Tropical Australia*, The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, London, 1918.

[85] This is detailed in a typed document under the painting *The Coming of the Missionaries* that used to hang in St Matthew's Church, Ngukurr.

[86] Holmes, ibid., p. 38.

[87] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, Annual Report, 1908, p. 35.

[88] ibid., Annual Report, pp. 8-9, 36.

[89] ibid., Annual Report, 1909, pp. 8-9.

[90] ibid., Annual Report, 1911, p.6.

[91] Keith Cole, *A Short History of the CMS Roper River Mission, 1906-1968*, The Church Missionary Historical Publication Trust (Victoria), 1968, p. 8. Most likely the reasons they left were for seasonal hunting and food gathering as well as attending ceremonies. Furthermore many of them still followed a nomadic lifestyle. This would have been frustrating for the missionaries who planned to establish an institution that required people to adopt a settled life style.

Reverend Hubert Warren, a person with many practical skills, was appointed to the mission in 1913. He was responsible for stabilising the work at Roper. Warren was an engineer and had worked at sea before entering the Anglican ministry. He made many trips on the 18 foot mission boat, *Evangel,* and was responsible for the mission acquiring its first car.[92]

A flood in 1916 caused severe damage to the mission but no lives were lost. Later that year Warren visited Rose River Aborigines and made the first visit to Groote Eylandt. The same year Bishop Newton visited the mission and spoke highly of the work he saw there.[93] In 1918 St Catherine's Chapel, built by Warren, was dedicated.[94] Under Warren's leadership the work expanded. 1921 saw the establishment of a mission on Groote Eylandt for children of mixed heritage and at Oenpelli in 1925.

The first baptisms occurred in 1913 when three men were baptised.[95] Baptism at Roper is usually by immersion. The first confirmations at Roper were in 1922.[96] A very high standard was expected for adult baptisms. Warren wrote:

> *Our standard for baptism is very high–two years probably–each lapse into sin sets the candidate back.*[97]

In 1924 a couple of mixed heritage, Timothy and Sarah Hampton, were married in St Catherine's Church at Roper and were employed as members of staff at Groote Eylandt and then at Roper for a number of years. Later that year Timothy Hampton was the first Aboriginal to conduct a service at the mission when he took Evensong.[98]

1928-1932 were difficult years for the mission. Staff shortages, and tensions between the staff resulted in the mission becoming run-down.[99] Misunderstandings between some missionaries and the CMS Victorian Committee which was responsible for the mission, further contributed to low morale. At this point in time, CMS mission work was still rigidly administered from Melbourne. On occasions this resulted in misunderstandings despite visits of officials from Melbourne to the missions.[100] There was also ill feeling that too many resources were devoted to the work with the

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[92] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church,* p. 68.
[93] Keith Cole, *A Short History of the CMS Roper River Mission,* p. 9.
[94] ibid., p. 9.
[95] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 3, *Gleaner*, December 1913; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 66. See also Report of visit to Oenpelli, Groote Eylandt and Roper River Mission Station by Archdeacon Barrett, December 1943, p. 10, CMS MA, Series 66, Box 69, Working Papers CMS in North Australia 1908-1984, folder, Aborigines Reports.
[96] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Church Missionary Outlook*, December 1922, p. 3.
[97] ibid., p. 3.
[98] CMS MA, Series 98, Box 22, Letter from R. Joynt describing the occasion in the Harry Leslie Perriman Papers, 1921-1993; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, 1985, p. 72.
[99] J. W. Bleakley, Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland who was writing a report on Aborigines in the Northern Territory for the Commonwealth Government, comments that when he visited the mission it was rundown due to the failure of the CMS to obtain suitable staff. A newly appointed married couple had refused to stay. The absence of the Superintendent in the south and on business at Thursday Island during the last year, and that Mr Joynt besides being in poor health had been 'practically alone at Roper River'. J.W. Bleakley, 'The Aboriginal and Half-Castes of Central and North Australia', in *The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1929, vol. 21.
[100] Keith Cole, 'A Critical Appraisal of Anglican Mission Policy and Practice in Arnhem Land, 1908-1939', in R. M. Berndt (ed), *Aborigines and Change: Australia in the 70s*, AIAS, Canberra, 1977, pp. 177-98. In 1937 the newly

children of mixed heritage on Groote Eylandt and not enough to the work at Roper River. At this point both missions came under the same superintendent which, combined with staff shortages, created problems.

When Warren had returned north in 1928, he was accompanied by the new General Secretary of the Victorian CMS Reverend F. T. Thornburgh, who subsequently submitted a negative report which resulted in Warren being recalled to Melbourne. Thornburgh was an unfortunate choice to present such a report as he was unfamiliar with the difficulties of life in the Outback. Warren made a solid defence of the work, refuting much of what Thornburgh had said and pointing out that he had constantly requested more staff and that it was almost impossible to run two stations and crew a boat with only six missionaries and two Aborigines of mixed descent. He also referred to the excellent report that Bishop Davies gave the work at Groote and referred to Mr Bleakley's report on the two missions.[101]

Reverend C. H. Nash accompanied the Warrens on their return in 1930 to enquire into the problems the mission was experiencing. Among other things he recommended that the two missions should be administered separately and that the Roper mission should move to a better location, but this was not acted upon.[102] The continued indecision by the Victorian General Committee of CMS and uncertainty about the mission resulted in a consideration in 1934 to abandon the mission, as a government board of enquiry into the mission had recommended that it close.[103] In response to this government recommendation 200 Ropier Aborigines signed a petition requesting that the mission stay open.[104] While this was happening the CMS had become involved with its Peace Expedition to Arnhem Land, and had decided not to hurry in closing the mission. In 1939 the new government minister for Interior, John McEwen saw no reason why the mission should close and that it was reasonable for the CMS to receive a proper lease.[105]

CMS were reluctant to close the Ropier River Mission, as it would probably result in it being leased to the cattle industry, which would mean '*the beginning of the end for the blacks in that district*'. The Committee also realised that they needed a base on the mainland for the work on Groote Eylandt.[106]

Keith Langford-Smith's pioneering work at this time showed the advantage of using an aeroplane for communication, medical work and travel in Arnhem land.[107]

When the Victorian General Secretary of CMS visited Roper in 1937, he found things much improved.

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formed CMS Committee for Aborigines took over the responsibility for administering the Aboriginal missions from the Victorian and NSW branches. The committee was based in Sydney. In 1962 a Field Council was formed in Darwin which gave missionaries on the field a greater say in the direction of the work. See Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church,* pp. 42-6.

[101] Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer,* pp. 63-75.

[102] Keith Cole ibid., p. 75 and *From Mission to Church,* p.73.

[103] Australian Archives, Canberra, CRS/F1 1938/534. Mr. J. A. Carrodes, Secretary of the Departement of the Interior, to Administrator 10/1/1934.

[104] Australian Archives, Canberra, CRS A452/106.

[105] australian Archives, canberra, CRS F1 Abbot to Director Native Affairs, 4/10/1939.

[106] CMS MA, Series 7, Box 11, CMS-V Special Committee Minutes of 10th March 1931.

[107] Keith Langford-Smith, *Sky Pilot in Arnhem Land,* 2nd edition, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1935; and *Sky Pilot's Last Flight,* Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1936.

> *Roper shows a remarkable transformation from its condition four years ago. Every vestige of the old dilapidated buildings has now been removed, some new ones erected, and the substantial mission house so improved that it is now a well-laid out neat and attractive Station… The leadership and example of some well-trained half-castes such as Marie and Constance — grown women now must be a great help to Mr and Mrs Port…* [108]

In 1933 and 1934 the CMS played a reconciling role through its Peace Expedition following several killings in the Calendon Bay area culminating in the death of Constable McColl. The killings and their sequel are identified by Professor Elkin as contributing to a much greater interest by the public in Aboriginal affairs.[109] The CMS had a significant role in this. They convinced the government to reject a punitive expedition and instead send an unarmed peace expedition of experienced missionaries led by Warren to talk with the Calendon Bay people. One of them, Tuckiar (Dhakiyera) claimed to have killed Constable McColl in order to protect his wife. the missionaries convinced Tuckiar that he would be treated fairly if he went to Darwin. The expedition itself was a success but the trials in Darwin were a disaster and resulted in much outcry in the south. The publicity that surrounded the proposed punitive expedition, the peace expedition, the trials, their judgements and Tuckiar's disappearance afterwards brought to the attention of Australians the injustices suffered by the Aborigines.[110]

Mr Long, the Victorian General Secretary, gives us a glimpse of the mission just prior to the January 1940 flood which completely destroyed it.

> *On the station there are 75 Aborigines, mostly children, young people and 18 half-castes: so constant endeavour must be made to grow as much foodstuffs as possible. In addition to the produce of the garden it must be remembered that there are over one thousand head of cattle, besides some hundreds of goats (for meat and milk) and other live stock including horses, pigs, and fowls.*[111]

The disastrous flood of 1940[112] resulted in the mission being rebuilt at Ngukurr, about ten kilometres upstream. James Japanma who was the leading Aboriginal Christian and the head 'jungkayi'

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[108] CMS MA, Series 7, Box 30, CMS-V Report of R. C. M. Long to GC on 8 Nov 1937, p. 186, Minute Book.
[109] A. P.Elkin, 1944, *Citizenship for the Aborigines. A National Aboriginal Policy*, Australasian Publishing Company Co, Sydney, 1944, pp. 16-17.
[110] Keith, Cole, *Mission to Church*, ibid., p. 94; and Elkin, ibid., 1944, p. 16. For further reading on the Caledon Bay killings and the events that followed, see Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, pp. 41, 74, 93-4,126, 150; *Fred Gray of Umbakumba*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1984, pp 29-53; *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, CMS, Historical Publications, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 84-101; *Oenpelli Pioneer*, CMS, Historical Publications, Melbourne, 1972, pp. 76-91; *The Aborigines of Arnhem Land*, Rigby Adelaide, 1979, pp. 210-12; Berndt, *Arnhem Land*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne, pp. 133ff; John Harris, *One Blood*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1990; Donald H. Fowler, *Guns or God*, np, Melbourne, 1984; A. J. Dyer, *Unarmed* Combat, CMS, Sydney, nd; and Mickey Dewar, *The 'Black War' in Arnhem Land. Missionaries and the Yolngu 1908-1940*, Australian National University Northern Research Unit, Darwin, 1992.
[111] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 111, *Open Door*, November 1939, pp. 6-7.
[112] For a comprehensive account of the flood, see Keith Cole, *Perriman in Arnhem Land*, Church Missionary Historical Publications, Victoria, 1973, p. 86-9. There is a typed report in the NTGA NTRS 1102/61, vol. 1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River 1936-1973. See also 'The Great Roper Flood, 1940', in *Northern Territory Affairs*, vol. 9, no. 2, 1975, Department of the Northern Territory.

(manager)[113] for Ngukurr area gave permission for the mission to move to Ngukurr. He also freed the land on which the church is built, so that it was no longer a sacred site.[114] In deciding to rebuild at the Ngukurr location, the CMS chose to continue the institutional approach. They did consider the nomadic approach of a missionary travelling and living with Aborigines, as advocated by Donald Thomson, but decided that the station approach was necessary to give stability to their work.[115]

The work of the missions was interrupted when Japan bombed Darwin. All female missionaries, their children, as well as about forty women and children of mixed descent were evacuated south and cared for by the CMS at Mulgoa.[116] During the war a number of long serving missionaries resigned, leaving the missionary ranks badly depleted. Dick Harris and his wife filled the gap. In the late 1940s new missionaries arrived including, Sister E. Dupen a triple certificated nurse and Mr W. R. Palmer a qualified school teacher.

The 1950s saw the full implementation of the government's assimilation policy. This resulted in an increase in staff, new buildings and subsidies. A serious drought from 1952-1954, during which the river turned salty, prevented the growth of any garden produce and affected the health of Aborigines and missionaries. In 1957 the mission experienced a severe flood which washed the garden away. During the fifties and sixties the medical and educational work expanded and Aborigines were encouraged to receive training in a variety of skills. A modern engineering workshop provided training in carpentry and mechanics. Cattle work was another source of training.

In 1964 CMS Federal Council concluded that while the CMS had been right to work on institutional lines, as no other way would have been feasible, the demands of assimilation were such that the government should assume responsibility for the missions and that the CMS should concentrate on the pastoral care of the parsish, evangelism and educational work.[117]

In 1968 the mission was handed over to the government to be run as a settlement. The CMS had found it increasingly difficult to supply enough suitable staff and funds for the proper development of the work. In negotiating the handover, the mission was successful in its desire to hand the equity in the shop over to the local people by transferring it to a Citzens Club.[118] It did not succeed in getting the lease over two hundred square miles of country transferred to the local population. All property and equipment were handed over to the government, with the exception of the church and two houses that became part of a diocesan lease. When the mission was handed over, the residents were operating on a cash economy and purchasing their own food and necessities.

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[113] *Junkayi* have a major role in the organisation and performance of ceremonies. They are seen as custodians and workers but not as owners. Their role in relation to land is an extension of their ceremonial role. For a discussion of the roles see Frances Morphy and Howard Morphy, 'Owners, Managers and Ideology, A comparative Analysis', in L. R. Hiatt (ed), *Aboriginal Landowners*, Oceania Monograph no. 27, University of Sydney, 1984, pp. 46-66.
[114] I have heard this statement made a number of times over the years. There are also statements supporting this on my 1995 Field Tape no. 5, Side 2 and Tape no. 6, Side 1.
[115] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 76.
[116] ibid., p. 77.
[117] NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 16 1d.
[118] Bern, ibid., pp. 99, 315.

## THE CMS APPROACH TO MISSION AT ROPER RIVER

When the CMS missionaries arrived on the banks of the Roper River on 27 August 1908[119] to establish a mission it was clear what CMS expected them to achieve. Their goals were humanitarian and evangelisation. This was made clear in the 'Instructions' given to the missionaries when they were farewelled.

> *You are being set apart for the specific work of proclaiming the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Aborigines of North Australia and more particularly to those living in the vicinity of the Roper River…*
>
> *One of the most sacred obligations resting upon the people of this Commonwealth is to give the original possessors of this Continent — the Aborigines — the benefits of our Christianity and civilisation… You are going to a service of great urgency. The Aboriginals need to be properly protected, properly taught various industries, and adequately cared for.*[120]

The mission was to be institutional in nature as it had been agreed that the mission should be industrial, agricultural, educational, spiritual and provided a place where Aborigines were safe.[121] Upon their arrival, the missionaries set about clearing land for agriculture, constructing buildings, starting a school, taking care of medical needs and teaching the gospel.[122]

In 1913 the CMS approach was further outlined in the instructions given to two new missionaries, the Reverend H. E. Warren and Mr. W.G. Vizard on the 11th of March. As well as the spiritual work, the work of the mission was to be agricultural and industrial in order:

> *… to train the Aborigines 'to live independently': You are to give yourselves … to this branch [agricultural] of the Mission, which we repeat, must be specially developed… and we wish most earnestly to warn you against the fatal mistake of doing the work yourselves instead of training the Aborigines to do it… the Committee… is convinced of the absolute necessity of encouraging the industrial work amongst the members of child races [sic] such as the Aborigines of Australia… so that men and women connected with the mission may soon be placed in their own homes and upon their own plots of ground, and be so taught that they shall eventually be able to live independently of material help from the Association…* [123]

It is clear that an institutional approach had been chosen and that they intended to evangelise, protect and civilise the Aborigines. Their approach to this is discussed below.

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[119] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, Seventeenth Annual Report of the CMA for the State of Victoria, 1908, p 35, Committee of the Association Annual Reports 1893-1913. However, Mr. Joynt, one of the pioneer missionaries, gives the date as August 29th in his 'Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission Station, Northern Territory, Australia August 1908 to August 1918', in the Gleaner, vol. 2, no. 48, CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5.

[120] CMS MA, Series 7, Box 30, CMA-V Sub-Committee Minutes, 10th July 1909; *Gleaner*, June 1908, p. 1015; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, 1985, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985, p. 61.

[121] Keith Cole, *A Short History of the CMS Roper River Mission, 1908-1968*, np, Melbourne , 1968, p. 5.

[122] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, Annual Report for 1908, pp. 35-6; and Annual Report for 1909, pp. 8-9; and R. Joynt 1918, pp. 96, 98 & 100.

[123] CMS MA, Series 7, Box 11, Committee of the Association, June 1882-1915, G. C. Minutes March 1913.

**The expectation of civilising the Aborigines**

When the mission was founded, the intention of the Missionaries was to evangelise, civilise and protect the Aborigines of the Roper River area.[124] They believed that the best way for Aborigines to become civilised was for them to become Christians as their evangelical belief was that the change God would bring into their lives at conversion would make it easier for them to adopt a civilised life and discard heathen ways. Thus their approach to civilising the Aborigines had two parts. One, Aborigines needed to learn to live a settled, civilised way of life; and two, that this would be more readily adopted if they chose to convert to Christianity. As an evangelical mission, conversions were a matter of individual choice, and the missionaries expected to see a marked change in lives before they baptised and confirmed new believers.

The annual report of 1912 states that the two-fold aim of the mission was spiritual and industrial.

> *Our Missionaries have always been ready to endeavour to carry out the Committee's determination respecting work amongst child races [sic]—namely, that there is to be a twofold development going on side by side, the spiritual and the industrial. We are convinced that the work of character building entrusted to us will be best accomplished in this manner.*[125]

The use of the phrase 'child races' in this statement, and elsewhere, reveals that while the CMS was prepared to defend Aborigines as humans, when others regarded them as less than human, at this point in time they still saw them as inferior and needing to be uplifted by Christianity and western civilisation with all its benefits. This meant that Aborigines needed to be evangelised and converted, taught the benefits of a civilised lifestyle and protected so that they would survive to experience what the missionaries had to offer.[126]

By the term 'industrial' they meant to civilise the Aborigines by teaching them the skills needed to live like White people. When Reverend Holmes wrote of the Ropier Mission in 1913 he stated:

> *It has been recognised from the first that if the Mission is to succeed, if the black is to become indeed a new man in Christ Jesus, it must be by teaching him the 'gospel of work' along with the good news of salvation from sin. The black must be taught decent habits of life, and he must learn in time to take an intelligent interest and part in the world in which he lives. The Mission, then, must be industrial, as well as for the purpose of carrying on Bible teaching and book learning…* [127]

It is clear that the missionaries did see themselves as agents of change and that they intended to 'civilise' the Roper Aborigines where possible. The phrase 'gospel of work' appears to reflect the attitude that Aborigines needed to work for a living, in the same way as White people, if they were to become civilised. The Aboriginal lifestyle of a hunter and gatherer was regarded as inferior. With many Aborigines dispossessed from their land by cattle stations, the missionaries regarded the Aborigines as having little choice but to adopt a new lifestyle if they were to survive.

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[124] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, CMV Sub-Committee Minutes, 10th July 1909; *Gleaner* 1908, p. 101; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church,* p. 61.
[125] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, Annual Report 1912, p. 5; Committee of the Association, Annual Reports, 1893-1913; Annual Report 1909, p. 33.
[126] R. Joynt, 1918, pp. 94-102.
[127] Holmes, ibid., pp. 38-9; Joynt, ibid., 1918, p. 97.

Huthnance, the leader of the pioneer missionaries, reported that at the end of 1908, four months after their arrival, there was a village of twelve houses for the natives, a temporary storehouse that also served as church and school, and a house for the missionaries was fairly complete. He reports that the natives were learning orderliness of work and that there was progress in the spiritual work with good attendances at church services and people acquiring some understanding of God.[128]

Five years later Mr. Birch, a missionary, highlights what had been accomplished in five years by contrasting the Aborigines camp near the mission with the children living at the mission.

> *'The 'blacks' camp must be seen,' writes Mr. Birch, 'to get a fair conception of its filth; the natives covered with grease and dirt, and drinking out of the same vessels made use of by their dogs. But the children at the Mission are clean-skinned, clothed, happy and very lovable… '*[129]

In the early years agriculture, medical work, school and dormitories were used to introduce Aborigines to the benefits of a civilised way of life.

Joynt, writing in 1918, has a high regard for the ability of the Roper Aborigines to survive in the bush as well as learning the skills the mission is teaching them. To highlight progress in civilising the Aborigines he quotes a journalist who visited their work:

> *When he first saw the camp natives he wrote 'They are a race the lowest and most miserable of all God's creatures, creatures with an ugliness of feature that is nauseous, a human face that is a caricature, and with habits and customs that are filthy and unhuman. Human beings in shape, but animals in every other respect.' But when he was greeted at our station by scores of clean, bright-eyed, and intelligent children, he wrote: 'The Society has not wasted one penny of its money in sending Missionaries to the Aborigines of the North.'*[130]

The policy of civilising the Aborigines was to continue for some time. The annual report for 1923-24 states:

> *A mission such as is carried on among Aborigines of the Northern Territory must necessarily be largely industrial in character and that they were fortunate to have a man like Warren in charge as the mission needed to be industrial in order to maintain itself in its isolated situation and to teach Aborigines the skills needed to lead a settled life.*[131]

The belief that Aborigines could be best civilised through the influence of the gospel was maintained in the 1930s. The concluding paragraph of a comprehensive report on the work of the Roper River Mission dated June 1936 states:

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[128] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 12, Annual Report for 1908, pp. 35-6.

[129] Holmes, ibid., p 40.

[130] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, R. D. Joynt, 'Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission Station', *Gleaner*, November 1918, p 98. It is not clear whether the camp natives are mission camp natives or camp natives on cattle stations. The journalist is most likely Mr. T. J. McMahon of the Brisbane Newspaper Company who visited the Roper River Mission in 1917. See First Annual Report of the CMS of Australia and Tasmania, 1917, p. 31, CMS MA, Series 8, Box 13.

[131] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 13, Eighth Report of the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania, 1923-24, pp. 20-1.

> *That the Christian Teaching and influence of the Missions are potent factors in the building of native character is evidenced by the comparison of the morals of stock station natives as well as of those living in the vicinity of townships along the railways with that of the Mission-trained aborigines. Stock station managers and townfolk cannot be expected to be interested in their moral welfare. The depths of degradation to which the Darwin natives have sunk — gambling, drink, opium smoking, etc.— demonstrates the futility of a system of Government protectorship which is not based upon the principles of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is only the power of redeeming Love that can lift these people…* [132]

Early in 1940 the old Roper River Mission was destroyed by a catastrophic flood, and some thought was given to what to do before work commenced on building a new mission at Ngukurr. After considering the Bleakly report of 1929 that supported the establishment of missions and the Thomson report of 1936 that advocated that missionaries should go to places where Aborigines were and move around with them,[133] CMS chose to continue with the institutional approach.[134] However in their 1944 statement of policy they also stated:

> *Where staffing is adequate, contact with the Aborigines shall be made by regular itinerations during the dry season, with a view to reaching the people in their own tribal areas and camps.*[135]

It is clear they were not actively trying to civilise all Aborigines in their area, only those who chose to live at the mission. Joynt reports in 1918 that there were three to four hundred Aborigines in the area.[136]

In the 1930s, Professor Elkin worked for a change of government policy, from a negative approach of protection and care, to a positive one. He argued that as long as governments and missions were concerned with protecting Aborigines from abuse and helping the aged and the sick they were not thinking of a future for Aborigines.[137]

Elkin reports that in late 1933 the National Missionary Council of Australia held a conference in Sydney. They issued a pamphlet, *A National Policy for the Protection, Education, Health, Control, and Better Government of the Aborigines*, that was endorsed by the full Missionary Council. Elkin regarded this as containing a number of advances, one of which was;

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[132] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 13, 'The Sword of the Lord': Being the Report of the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania for the period January 1936 - June 1937, p. 15.
[133] J. W. Bleakley, 'The Aboriginal and Half-Castes of Central and North Australia', in *The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1929, vol. 21, pp. 1159-226, and in particular, p. 1182; Donald Thomson, 'Recommendations of Policy in Native Affairs in the Northern Territory of Australia,' in *The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1937; Donald Thomson, *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land*, compiled and introduced by Nicholas Peterson, Curry O'Neil, Melbourne, 1983, p. 80.
[134] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, pp. 29-31.
[135] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, second file of correspondence. See 3a of Document to Federal Council of the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania May 1944, Missions to Australian Aborigines, Administered by the Aborigines Committee appointed by the Federal Council as a regional Committee of the Society.
[136] Joynt, 1918, p. 97.
[137] A. P. Elkin, 1944 *Citizenship for the Aborigines A National Aboriginal Policy*, Australasian Publishing Co, Sydney, 1944, pp. 10-15.

*that in any scheme for the uplifting of the Aborigines, provision should be made to train them to become a capable, industrious and self-reliant people*[138]

This was an assimilation view and one that CMS had worked towards from the commencement of the mission. Aborigines needed to become self-reliant in order to live and work in White society.

In 1940 when CMS chose to rebuild the mission at Ngukurr they were in effect continuing the policy of helping the Aborigines to become civilised.

The 1944 constitution reiterated this view under the heading: *The Basis of the Work of the Mission*

*The Society further recognises:*

*(c) that they [Aborigines] are capable of such development as will enable them to take their place in our civilised communities without injury to themselves…*

*(f) that a necessary stage in their complete development will be the creation of independent, self-supporting communities in Arnhem Land…*[139]

In the 1950s the Federal Government adopted a policy of assimilation of Aborigines. It applied to all Aborigines, whether of full tribal descent or mixed heritage. For the Roper River Mission this meant an influx of staff and government subsidies that would help develop the work that they had tried to achieve on a shoe-string budget. Physical hardships, shortages of staff, insufficient funds and an environment that made agriculture difficult had hindered their goal of equipping Aborigines to live in White society. The benefits of extra staff and buildings enabled the work to expand and provide more and better training opportunities for Aborigines.

On the 1 October 1968 the Mission was handed over to the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory Administration to be run as a settlement. The work of preparing Aborigines to assimilate into Australian society had become too big, both financially and in terms of finding suitable staff. Now that the government accepted that Aborigines could be assimilated and were prepared to fund it, there was no need for the CMS to carry the burden.

By 1973 it was becoming obvious that most Aborigines did not want to be assimilated by White society. The missions were beginning to question the policy of assimilation and advocating a policy of integration. When the federal government introduced that year a policy of self-determination for Aborigines, the CMS and other missions supported it.

The policy of civilising the Aborigines was broadly assimilationist. The end result would be that Aborigines would become part of White society. The early missionaries were adamant that they did not wish to spend their time training cheap labour for the surrounding cattle stations.[140] If Aborigines were to survive, they had to fit into the wider society. When the mission first started, the plan was to have Aborigines farming their own plot and living in their own houses. This never came to pass. The north is not well suited to agriculture and, as Aborigines came and went as they pleased, training programs were difficult. Many times the mission was understaffed and, in order to survive, all available energy went into producing fruit and vegetables, taking care of cattle and goats, maintaining

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[138] Elkin, ibid., p. 15.

[139] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, second file of correspondence. See also Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Document to Federal Council, p. 43.

[140] James. D. Ingoldsby, 'Labourers Together with God', BA Honours thesis, Australian National University, p. 15.

buildings and educating the children. Providing for the children, the workers and themselves was a major task, as for many years supplies only came by boat every six months. There was little time left for equipping Aborigines for a civilised life which became a long range goal.

The policy of assimilation probably had a less harmful effect on isolated missions like the Roper River Mission than it had elsewhere. On these missions the Aborigines were in the majority and were more concerned with preserving their Aboriginality than assimilating into White society. The interesting thing is that while Aborigines did acculturate something of the White way of life, they also chose to maintain many of their Aboriginal values and ways of life. One factor contributing to their being able to do this was the isolation mission. Interaction with other Whites was minimal.

However, the Roper River Mission did produce a number of people who were bi-cultural. Silas and Philip Roberts were outstanding examples of those who were able to operate in both Aboriginal and White culture. John Bern reports that by the 1960s '*there was a sizable group of Ngukurr men who lived or had lived in Darwin*'. In 1966 four men were officers in the Northern Territory Public Service and another was an organiser in the North Australia Workers Union. [141] These people had not denied their Aboriginal identity but had chosen to become bi-cultural.

The CMS, by adopting an approach of civilising the Aborigines, was like most other missions at that time working from a position of paternalism and cultural superiority.[142] A policy that Aborigines should become part of the dominant culture inevitably resulted in Aboriginal culture being regarded as inferior. It is often said that the missionaries destroyed the culture. This is incorrect, even though many of the missionaries regarded Aboriginal culture as inferior.[143] At the Roper River Mission the culture of the Aborigines had already suffered immense damage before the mission started. It should also be remembered that up until the 1960s the numbers of Aborigines living permanently at the mission was small,[144] as many others came and went as they pleased.

In providing a situation where Aborigines would be safe and missionaries could evangelise and civilise them, the missionaries actually provided a place where Aborigines were able to maintain much of their culture. This unintended consequence undermined their intention to 'civilise' them, but is not one that CMS regrets today.

The policy to civilise the Aborigines only had as much success as the Aborigines chose to give it. They chose to respond to the new religious ideas that the missionaries brought and to resist becoming civilised. It was important to them to maintain their Aboriginality and take only what they wanted from the White people's lifestyle. This different outcome from what the missionaries intended demonstrates that the Aborigines were far from passive in how they responded to the missionaries and their message.

**Protection of Aborigines**

The Roper River Mission was established to provide a place of safety and protection for Aborigines from the violence that was being done to them by White people and this resulted in a great reduction

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[141] Bern, ibid., p. 323.

[142] Missionary paternalism and cultural superiority are discussed in chapter four.

[143] The attitude of missionaries to Aboriginal culture at the Roper River Mission is discussed in chapter nine.

[144] Keith Cole, A Critical Appraisal of Anglican Mission Policy and Practice in Arnhem Land, 1908-1939, p. 192 and *From Mission to Church*, p. 158.

in their numbers. While the government did appoint Aboriginal protectors, the Aborigines were not experiencing physical protection from the violence.

The first missionaries were told that there was a need to protect the Aborigines.[145] Reverend Huthnance, the leader of the pioneer party, was appointed a sub-protector of Aborigines by the South Australian Government.[146] The establishment of the mission station provided a safe haven for Aborigines and in the early years there were at times up to 200 there.[147] The isolation of the Roper River Mission strengthened the policy of protection. The mission had the power to keep undesirable Whites away from their 200 square mile lease and the reduction of detrimental contacts with Whites was part of the reason that the government declared all of Arnhem Land an inviolable reserve in 1931.

In 1918 R. D. Joynt, a pioneer missionary argued that missions were still needed to protect Aborigines. He wrote that missions were badly needed:

> *To protect the Aborigines from being—(1) Exploited. (2) Demoralised. (3) Killed*

and argued that they needed protection because of the way they had been treated:

> *There are many deeds of shame and cruelty that could be recorded against the white man. In years gone by the natives have been shot down like game, and hundreds killed in a spirit of revenge. I have met men that boast of shooting the poor, unprotected black, 'just for fun.' These deeds of shame happened in the early days, but even during the last ten years some deeds have been perpetrated that make a man that has any feeling utterly disgusted.*
>
> *One of the many deeds that the Great Judge will bring men to account for will suffice. A boy received a flogging for running away. He was punished so severely that he succumbed. For fear of detection, the white man tied the body to a tree stump in a river for the alligators to remove all traces of the crime.*[148]

In 1931 the CMS decided to keep the Roper River Mission, as Aborigines still needed protection.[149] Later that year Arnhem Land was proclaimed a reserve. Some saw this as a way of protecting Aboriginal culture and allowing it to survive. Others like the CMS saw it as giving Aborigines protection from violence and exploitation while at the same time providing a place where Aborigines could be prepared to take their place in life outside the reserve.[150] Professor Elkin, in 1944, argued that reserves must be for more than protection. He saw reserves as preparation bases. They must prepare, train and equip Aborigines to go out to meet civilisation and successfully accommodate themselves to modern conditions.[151]

The plans for a punitive expedition following the Calendon Bay murder of Constable McColl and five Japanese trepangers in 1933 demonstrates that there was still a mentality that the best way to deal

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[145] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, *Gleaner*, June 1908, p. 1015.
[146] Ingoldsby, ibid., p. 13.
[147] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, *Gleaner*, July 1908, p. 1025.
[148] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, R. D. Joynt, 'Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission Station', in *Gleaner*, November 1918, p. 96.
[149] CMS MA, Series 7, Box 11, Minute Book CMA-V Special Committee Minutes of 10th March 1931.
[150] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, pp. 156, 159-60.
[151] Elkin, ibid., p. 38.

with violence from Aborigines was to kill as many as possible. It is clear from the CMS concern to prevent the bloodshed, that would have resulted from a punitive expedition, that they were still very concerned with protecting Aborigines.[152]

During the 1930s a lot of work was done by Elkin, mission societies, and humanitarian organisations to encourage the government to adopt a positive policy in regards to Aborigines. This was coming to fruition when the advent of the Second World War caused it to be put aside. The case was again taken up after the war and came to fruition in the 1952 policy of assimilation. While this approach failed to respect Aboriginal culture it did have the one positive impact of saying that the government now viewed Aborigines in remote areas as being able to take their place in society. Thus the focus shifted from protecting Aborigines to how they could become part of Australian society. With Aborigines acknowledged by the government as having the right to be part of society the issue of protection gradually faded away.

Given the large scale destruction of Aborigines at the time the mission commenced, missionaries had little choice but to protect Aborigines, if they were interested in the welfare of Aborigines.[153] The establishment of the mission sent a message that a group of people were genuinely interested in protecting Aborigines. On a number of occasions Agnes Stanley, one of the first Aborigines at the mission, when reminiscing about the old days, would often finish her stories by saying:

> *If the missionaries had not come here there would not be any of us left. We were being killed by the White man and we were killing each other.*

The protection offered by the mission created a space where Aborigines were able to assess what had happened to them, preserve what they could of their culture and choose what they wanted to accept from the attempts to civilise them.

**Evangelisation**

Evangelisation of the Aborigines was of great importance to the CMS. Above everything else, they desired that Aborigines would become Christians and that a church would be formed. As an evangelical mission society, this was the outcome that they most desired. They firmly believed that Aborigines could become Christians before they were civilised.[154] An example of this is the conversion of King Bob, their first convert, who died in 1909 a few months after the mission commenced. He said he was no longer frightened to die as Jesus had told him not to be frightened.[155] However, there was a tension between their humanitarian and evangelistic goals. The humanitarian needs of sufficient food, clothing, medicine and education were things that needed to be addressed at once. This was time consuming and together with the struggle to survive in such an isolated place, as well as weakness from illness, they were often left with little time to evangelise and attend to spiritual needs. Burridge has discussed this dilemma for missionaries in general in his book *In the Way*,

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[152] A. Dyer, *Unarmed Combat*, CMS, Sydney, nd, p. 54.

[153] Donald Thomson, 'Recommendations of Policy in Native Affairs in the Northern Territory of Australia', in *The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia*, 1937, pp. 805-12; Donald Thomson in *Donald Thomson in Arnhem Land* reports that by the 1930s the valley of the Roper River that had once had a very dense population was now heavily depopulated, p. 77.

[154] A discussion of whether or not indigenous people should be civilised before you could evangelise them is in chapter four.

[155] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, R. D. Joynt, 'Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission Station', *Gleaner*, November 1918, p. 100.

where he writes about the tension that missionaries feel between the secular and spiritual sides of their work.[156]

The concern with the evangelisation of the Aborigines is consistent throughout the history of the mission. It is in the instructions to the first missionaries in 1908:

> *You are being set apart for the specific work of proclaiming the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to the Aborigines of North Australia and more particularly to those living in the vicinity of the Roper River…* [157]

Five years later the instructions to Warren and Vizard said that primary evangelism is to be carried out alongside of training Aborigines in agriculture and industry.[158]

It is present in the history of the mission written by Rex Joynt after ten years residence at the Roper Mission as a pioneer missionary. He makes reference to some Aborigines who had become Christians and some who have been baptised, and the change he believes this has made to their lives.[159] In 1921 Reverend Hubert Warren reports that seven adults and one infant were baptised, and that many more were waiting to be prepared for baptism.[160] The first confirmation took place in 1922, when six were confirmed.[161] The *Gleaner* reported in 1924 that many Aborigines came to the mission for Christmas and that '*Many do believe the message, but it is hard for them to change*'.[162] In the 1930s and 1940s, Mr and Mrs Port and others report opportunities for evangelism when Aborigines visited the mission from as far away as Calendon Bay (they were looking for Tuckiar) Rose River and Boroloola and of Aborigines evangelising their own people.[163] The new constitution of 1944 clearly regards evangelism as a priority.

> Under the Heading General Policy and Methods, it states:
>
> *1(a) The central aim of the Mission is to win the Aborigines and Half-Castes to a saving knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ…*
>
> *(d) Direct evangelism must always be the central and fundamental method of work.*[164]

There is no doubt that the CMS missionaries consistently saw the evangelisation of the Aborigines as an important part of their work in spite of all the difficulties that they met in trying to carry it out.

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[156] Kenelm Burridge, *In the Way*, UBC Press, Vancouver.
[157] CMS MA, Series 7, Box 30, CMA-V Sub-Committee Minutes, 10th July 1909; CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, *Gleaner*, June 1908, p. 101; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, 1985, p. 61.
[158] Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, 1971, p. 9.
[159] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 5, R. D. Joynt, 'Ten Years Work at the Roper River Mission Station', *Gleaner*, November 1918, pp. 97-100.
[160] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Gleaner*, August 1921, p. 260.
[161] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Gleaner*, December 1922, p. 4.
[162] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Gleaner*, December 1942, p. 5.
[163] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, vol. 1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River, 1936-1973. See Station Reports, June 1936, July 1936, February, 1937, January 1941, March 1941, May 1941, August 1941, February 1944 and September 1944. The people from Calendon Bay were searching for Tuckiar who had disappeared after being released from Jail, following the quashing of his sentence for the murder of Sergeant McColl.
[164] The constitution is quoted at length in Keith Cole, *From Mission To Church*, pp. 42-44.

Their desire to evangelise is seen in the exploratory trips that they made in search of suitable locations for new missions stations so that the gospel could be taken to other Aborigines. Calendon Bay, Groote Eylandt and Numbulwar were all considered.

The desire to evangelise was evident in the expressed desire from early in the mission to have someone who could devote themselves to such an activity. Mr Thomas wrote in 1912, that there was a need to have someone devoted full time to evangelising the Aborigines in the area surrounding the mission.[165] There were clergy among the missionaries, but until the 1950s when fulltime chaplains were appointed to the missions, they always had a multitude of other tasks to attend to. Reverend H. Warren a man of vision, worked with CMS from 1913-1931. He had good contacts with Aborigines throughout Arnhem Land, as his leadership of an unarmed peace expedition demonstrated. However he was unable to devote himself fully to evangelism and the spiritual care of the mission as his many practical skills were constantly needed. Huthnance, the leader of the pioneer missionaries, was an ordained clergyman but establishing a mission in such isolated and difficult terrain consumed most of his time. Rex Joynt was ordained in 1921 while still a serving missionary, but his other skills were much in demand. The missionaries themselves took whatever opportunities they found in their daily rounds to share the gospel.

The appointment of full time chaplains in the 1950s focused attention on the churches and the spiritual needs of the people. Reverend Barry Butler who was chaplain at Roper during the fifties and early sixties, saw the chaplain's role as building a church and not a mission.[166] Full time Chaplains were able to devote all of their time to the pastoral care and spiritual needs of the their congregation and, did not have to spend their time in assisting in the day to day operation of the mission as earlier chaplains had had to do. They were able to train Aborigines in church leadership and expand their knowledge of doctrine and biblical teaching. A number of training courses were held at the different missions and some in co-operation with the Methodist Missions in Arnhem Land.[167] Serious efforts were made by the chaplains to understand Aboriginal religion and culture and to listen to what Aborigines had to say.[168]

Another factor that made extensive evangelisation difficult was that most of the missionaries were restricted to the use of English which few Aborigines spoke fluently. With nine different languages spoken at the mission, staff could find no language to learn that was understood by all. Many of the missionaries refused to use the emerging Kriol regarding it as bad English. This left them dependent on Aboriginal Christians to do most of the evangelisation.

One of the interesting things that arose from this situation was that the early converts did most of the evangelising. There are many references in the station reports, annual reports and mission publications of Aborigines interpreting sermons, preaching in the local language and sharing the gospel message on visits to relatives and making evangelistic trips. This has been discussed in chapter one.

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[165] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Gleaner*, April 1912, p. 1381.

[166] Personal communication from Barry Butler.

[167] A Church Workers Course was held from October 20th to November 30th 1966 and was organised by the CMS, the Methodists, Baptists and Aborigines Inland Mission. Information paper, NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 16.

[168] The conferences to discuss ceremonies in 1968 and 1969 were an example of this. They were run by the Aborigines.

A further interesting difference between the Aborigines and the missionaries is that while many of the missionaries expected that conversions to Christianity would result in Aborigines adopting a White way of life, the Aborigines did not see it that way. The Aboriginal converts did not deny their Aboriginal identity and started to contextualise the gospel into their lives. They took on the task of discovering how to live culturally as Christians.

The CMS missionaries acknowledged that Aborigines doing the evangelisation was the best way for it to happen. They always viewed such actions on the part of Aborigines in a positive fashion. The CMS was always, and still is, a firm believer in indigenous churches. They subscribed to the idea of churches being self governing, self supporting and self extending[169] and expected that local indigenous churches would be established. Initially it was expected that these churches would resemble the ones that the missionaries came from, and for many years they did. Under Aboriginal leadership they have taken on a character of their own that reflects Aboriginal ways of doings things.

Four years before the Roper River Mission was handed over to the government, CMS policy stated that the CMS '*Now believes that its resources should be concentrated on the pastoral, evangelistic and educational work*'.[170]

As each mission was handed over, a few missionaries remained in the medical work, and other key positions for a time, as well as a chaplain. The chaplains had all been replaced by Aboriginal clergy by 17 February 1985. CMS has since focused on training Aboriginal clergy, empowering Aborigines to run their own churches and Bible translation to foster a better understanding of the Scriptures.

For many years Aborigines were involved in the Ngukurr church in a number of ways. They led services and preached, though they did not have control of the church. No Aborigine at Roper was ordained until 1973, sixty-five years after the mission was commenced and five years after it was handed over to the government.

Keith Cole, the first principal of Nungalinya college, which trains Aborigines for ordination, gives a number of reasons why ordination for Anglican Aborigines took so long in North Australia. Before the 1940s the communities were very small and it was not until the 1960s that the last of the semi-nomadic Aborigines settled. Even then the communities were made up of diverse tribal groups as in the case of Ngukurr, or of diverse clan groups in the case of the other CMS missions. As these tribes and clans had little social interaction with each other, it posed some problems for the development of an Aboriginal ministry.[171]

For many years CMS had an approach of civilising Aborigines with a view to their eventual assimilation into White society. Their intention was that Aborigines would be raised to the level of White society and that Aboriginal clergy and churches would be much the same as White churches.

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[169] CMS MA, Series 5, Box 4, *Gleaner*, December 1924, p. 6. Henry Venn had written: 'The object of the Church Missionary Society's Missions viewed in their ecclesiastical aspect, is the development of the native churches with a view to their ultimate settlement upon a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-extending system.'

[170] Quoted in Federal Council Minutes, July 1964, quoting a minute from Federal Council in July 1964: NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 16, Folder 1d. The government was now seen as accepting responsibility for the secular training of Aborigines to take their place in Australian society. Also the missions were growing rapidly and becoming more like small towns and were an enormous drain on the staff resources of CMS. See also Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 80.

[171] Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 198.

Thus for many years there was no real notion of an Aboriginal ministry and an indigenous church.[172] There was an inadequate idea of Aboriginal ministry based on a Western model at this time.

The large influx of White mission and Welfare staff in the 1950s and 1960s resulted in pressure for the continuation of Western-style services in English. Many staff thought ordained Aboriginal clergy would not be able to function or minister effectively. Life would have been very difficult for Aboriginal clergy. An Aboriginal clergy has now emerged in a situation where White staff numbers have been reduced and the policy of self-determination has flowed into the church.[173]

The ecclesiastical tensions between the 'high church' bishop and the evangelical CMS also contributed to the delay in ordaining Aboriginal clergy. This resulted in the CMS considering the creatiion of a CMS diocese in 1944.[174] In 1953 the bishop chose four Ngukurr men, James Japanma, Barnabas and Silas Roberts and Dennis Daniels, as possible ordinands. He stipulated that they needed six years of training at a college on Thursday Island away from Arnhem Land and it would have to be in high church ways. If they had undertaken the training and returned to Arnhem Land, their high church ways would not have been acceptable to the evangelical CMS missionaries or the Aboriginal Church. Ordination was the responsibility of the bishop of the diocese and he ordained priests on his terms.[175] Aborigines were also reluctant to be ordained perceiving it as requiring a lot of skills they did not have. It took a lot of encouragement in the 1970s and 1980s for Aborigines to agree to ordination.[176] The resulting absence of Aboriginal clergy delayed Aborigines obtaining full control of their churches.

While the missionaries had a consistent policy to evangelise Aborigines, however, circumstances often worked against them devoting a lot of time to it. The absence of a full time clergy, the demands of running a mission station, shortages of staff, and the difficulties of the language situation restricted them. In the long run this was to the good of the emerging church, as converts became the ones who did the evangelising and in doing this owned the gospel. It also demonstrates that Aboriginal Christians were far from passive about their new faith.

## CONCLUSION

CMS was consistent in its desire to evangelise, civilise and protect the Aborigines for the sixty years that the mission existed. These policies certainly did shape the way the mission was run. It had to be a permanent settlement if they intended to civilise the Aborigines. Protection was necessary in the Roper River context if the Aborigines were to survive. Furthermore no indigenous church would have emerged without evangelism. The missionaries who implemented these approaches were compassionate people. They were there to do what they could for Aborigines. They worked and lived alongside Aborigines in very basic and difficult conditions and for a pittance of a wage. Those who stayed for a number of years and got to know the people are remembered with affection.

What is fascinating about the above policies is the unintended consequences that emerged from the way the missionaries approached their work. From today's perspective it would have been much better if instead of attempting to civilise Aborigines, they had encouraged to contextualisation of the

[172] ibid., p. 198.
[173] ibid., p. 199.
[174] ibid., p. 199.
[175] ibid., pp. 199-200, 79-80.
[176] Personal communication from Barry Butler.

gospel. However, the unexpected outcome of the attempt to civilise Aborigines was that Aborigines made a distinction between the gospel and the missionaries' way of life, whereas the missionaries equated the two. Aborigines who became Christians retained their Aboriginal identity and slowly started to contextualise the gospel. This is discussed at length in chapters seven to nine.

The policy of protection resulted in the establishment of a safe haven for Aborigines. The mission buildings only occupied a small part of the two hundred square miles lease, and Aborigines were free to roam safely within the whole area. The creation of a large area where Aborigines were safe prior to the proclamation of the Arnhem Land Reserve, provided a space where they could maintain what was left of their culture. As well as providing protection from exploitation, demoralisation and death, the unintended outcome of the policy was preservation of what was left of a culture, which many of the missionaries had regarded as inferior.[177] While Ngukurr today shows signs of acculturation of many material aspects of White society it is also very much an Aboriginal community.

The policy of evangelisation aimed to establish churches that were like the ones the missionaries came from and whose members behaved much like White Australians. A church was established but the unintended outcome was a church that today conducts all of its affairs in a modern Aboriginal language, Kriol, instead of English; whose members are proud of their Aboriginal identity; and which is run on Aboriginal notions of how to do things. This is discussed at some length in chapter eight.

These unintended outcomes of mission work in the Roper River area are results that CMS today is satisfied with. The outcomes demonstrate that the missionaries were not the only actors in the situation. Aborigines were also very actively involved and this largely contributed to the outcomes with which Aborigines are also satisfied. This active involvement of Ngukurr Aborigines with Christianity is a major theme of this thesis.

To complete the background material for Part Two of this thesis, I will give an overview in chapter three of the current situation at Ngukurr, as this is the context in which the contextualisation of the gospel is occurring today.

[177] The attitude of the missionaries to culture is discussed in chapter nine.

## Chapter Three

# NGUKURR

This chapter gives a brief account of the current situation at Ngukurr, as this represents the context in which contextualisation of the gospel is occurring today. Ngukurr has grown out of the mission that CMS commenced in 1908. I will describe the town as it is today, discuss the various social groups that people form themselves into at different times, and discuss how Aborigines are maintaining many of their traditions, as well as functioning within institutions that have come from White society.

### NGUKURR

Ngukurr is a small town located on the Roper River in the south-eastern part of Arnhem Land. It is approximately three hundred kilometres by road from Katherine and six hundred from Darwin. It is located on the northern bank of the river, one hundred and twenty kilometres upstream from the mouth of the river and thirty kilometres downstream from the Roper Bar crossing. Ngukurr became the name of the town when it was handed over to the government in 1968. During the thirteen years I lived at Ngukurr, I was consistently told that Ngukurr was the name of the ridge the town is built on. Today people will often say that Ngukurr means ‘place of many stones’.

Physically the town resembles many small Australian towns. The town includes a school, clinic, municipal offices, church, shop, women’s centre, creche, police station, swimming pool, basketball courts, football oval, park and houses laid out in streets. The town has sewerage and reticulated electricity and water. The majority of the housing is of a modern design and only a few substandard shacks exist in the area known as Silver City. These were built for people visiting from outstations but are now permanently occupied.

In many ways the life style also resembles that of other Australian towns. Children go to school, adults to work, people purchase food and a variety of items from the local store, play sport, attend discos, own cars and in many ways follow a modern lifestyle. However, traditions arising from a pre-contact time are still strong. Traditional ceremonies are held, boys are initiated, mortuary rites attended to, kinship rules of behaviour observed, loyalty to one’s family is strong and an Aboriginal way of perceiving the world is still evident.

There is no viable local industry to build an economy on, and most of the jobs available are related to servicing a population of one thousand. Nor is it easy for people to move to Katherine or Darwin in order to obtain work. Often they don’t have the skills or experience needed for jobs that are available there. It is difficult to find accommodation in these towns, and they feel like outsiders. Homesickness is often a problem when they have to cope with the difficulties of living and trying to find work in a place without family support.

The population today is around one thousand. In June 1967, one year before CMS handed the mission over to the government, the population was two hundred and twenty seven.[178] A number of factors have contributed to the population increase; a healthy birth rate; people move to Ngukurr because they have relatives there or to marry; when award wages were granted and the cattle industry mechanised in the 1970s, stockmen no longer had work on cattle stations.

For the past twenty years the White population has stayed at around twenty. This is a result of the desire by the council to keep the number of White staff to a minimum. Whites work as police, nurses, advisers to the school and Community Development Employment Program, (CDEP) and for the town council. There are two facilitators for the Kriol Bible Translation Project and the shop is operated by White entrepreneurs.

The isolation that made life so difficult for the missionaries has been alleviated today. The upgrading of the road from Mataranka to Ngukurr has made access by road easy, except during the wet season when the Roper and Wilton Rivers become impassable. A sealed airstrip was completed in the late 1970's and has made travel possible all year round. The airstrip is the main emergency airstrip on the flight path from Mt. Isa to Darwin. In 1989 modern telephones replaced radios and radio telephone, resulting in much improved communication with the outside world.

The original Roper River Mission was described by a visiting journalist in 1917, Mr. T. J. McMahon, as one of the three most isolated mission stations in the world.[179] The journey from Sydney could take six weeks whether one sailed to Thursday Island and then by mission boat across the Gulf of Carpentaria and upriver to the mission, or sailed to Darwin and took a boat round the Top End, into the Gulf, and then up the Roper River. An alternative method of travel was boat to Darwin and then a hard overland journey by horse and buggy. When the train line was extended to Birdum 1929[180] a person could travel from Darwin to Mataranka by train and then by car or horse to the mission. Sometimes the last thirty kilometres from Roper Bar were made by row boat.[181] A six weekly mail service was available from 1911 but was very irregular[182].

The isolation had advantages for both Aborigines and missionaries. For Aborigines it meant that they remained numerically dominant and came and went from the actual mission site as they chose. The mission lease covered two hundred square miles and was a safe haven.[183] There was a small permanent population at the mission from early in its history. It was not until 1956 that most people settled permanently at Ngukurr[184].[185]

The proclamation of the Arnhem Land reserve in 1931 greatly extended the safe area. Aborigines, especially those who came from north of the river, were able to retain control over their lives and

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[178] Steven Thiele, *YUGUL An Arnhem Land Cattle Station*, The Australian National University North Australia Research Unit, Darwin, Monograph, 1982, p. 11; and Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Bendigo, Keith Cole Publications, 1985, p. 81

[179] CMS MA, Series 8, Box 13, Annual Report of the CMS 1917. Mr MacMahon was a journalist with the Brisbane Newspaper Company, pp. 31-2.

[180] Glenville Pike, *Frontier Territory*, Adventure Publications, Casuarina, NT, nd, p. 188.

[181] Keith Langford-Smith, *Sky Pilot*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1935, pp. 37-53.

[182] CMS MA, G. C. Minutes of September 1913; also in Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, p. 65.

[183] H.R. Holmes, *The Story of the CMA*: *Being a Brief History of the Victorian Church Missionary Association*, NP, Melbourne, 1913, pp. 37-8.

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[185] Thiele, ibid., p. 12.

choose how much contact they had with the mission or other Whites. Those who came from the south side of the river, where the cattle stations were, needed permission from the northern Aborigines to roam and hunt in their country.

The isolation suited the missionaries' approach of protecting, civilising and evangelising the Aborigines. Much of the earlier missionary work in Australia had come to nought as a result of Aborigines being exploited by Whites, dying from introduced diseases and vices, as well as farmers and pastoralists wanting the mission land.[186]

The Church Missionary Society handed over the management of the mission station at Ngukurr to the Northern Territory Administration in 1968. The only properties retained were the church and two houses on the church lease built entirely with CMS funds and handed over to Anglican diocese of the Northern Territory and the shop which was handed over to the Citizens Club to operate.[187] In 1972-1973 the Federal Government reformed the system of Aboriginal administration. The residents took full control of the settlement through the Ngukurr Community Council, now called the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council.[188] Full control was not in fact a reality as bureaucrats in Darwin had the final say on how money was to be spent.

Members of nine different language/tribal groups have settled at Ngukurr. Those who came from the north were the Rembarranga, Ritharrngu, Nunggubuyu, Ngandi, Ngalakan and Wandarrang. The Mangarrai, Alawa and Mara were from south of the river. These nine different groups formed seven groups. The Mara and Wandarrang are commonly referred to as Mara and the Rembarranga are usually included with the Ngalakan. Two representatives are elected from each of the seven groups to the Yugul Mangi Community Government Council.

The most widely spoken languages in the community are Kriol, English and Ritharrangu. The nine languages mentioned above are highly divergent languages[189] and the only common language was Pidgin English. This became the common language of the children who creolised it into a mother tongue called Kriol which today has fifth generation mother tongue speakers.[190] The recognition of Kriol as a modern Aboriginal Language spoken by twenty thousand Aborigines across the north of Australia has bolstered the self-esteem of Ngukurr people who used to feel that they had no Aboriginal language when Kriol was constantly put down as bad English.

Today Ngukurr is a centre for cultural revival. The two major religious cults that are performed at Ngukurr are the Kunapipi and the Yabaduruwa. These two cults complement one another. Ownership of the Gunabibi is limited to the Dhuwa Moiety. Members of the Yirritja moiety are managers for the Gunabibi. The position is reversed for the Yabaduruwa with the Yirritja moiety being the owners and members of the Dhuwa moiety the managers. The two cults allow every

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[186] John Harris, *One Blood*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, NSW, 1990, chapters 1-3.

[187] John Bern has a detailed discussion of the shop being handed over to the Citizens Club and the events that followed in his thesis, Blackfella Business, Whitefella Law: Political Struggle and Competition in a Southeast Arnhem Land Aboriginal Community, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1974.

[188] *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, AIATIS, Canberra, 1994, vol. 2, p. 789.

[189] Geoffrey Heath, *Basic Material in Mara: Grammar and Texts and Dictionary, Pacific Linguistics*, C 60, 1961, p. 4.

[190] John Sandefur, A Language Come of Age: Kriol of North Australia, MA thesis University of Western Australia, 1985.

participant to be a manager for one and an owner for the other.[191] Mortuary rites and initiations are usually performed in conjunction with these two major ceremonies. Two other religious cults, the Madaian and the Balgin, are performed at nearby centres.[192]

In recent years older people have commented that the ceremonies were not performed as frequently in the past as they are today.

The frequency of the ceremonies today is due to a number of factors. Ngukurr is the largest community in the area and has become a centre for ceremonies. Modern transport and communication mean that it is easy for people to travel to Ngukurr for the climax of a ceremony, or for a particular section of it. The recognition of land rights has encouraged people to demonstrate their ongoing spiritual connection with their land. This is especially so for people whose land is outside of Arnhem Land.

While ceremonies are performed frequently, this does not mean that the whole community participates. It is a concern to those involved in organising the ceremonies that while young people like to watch the ceremonies many of them do not wish to go through the rigours of being fully initiated into them. They are more interested in sport, bands, discos and videos. Ceremonies are frequently disrupted by drinking bouts which results in endless accusations and threats of payback.[193] Some Ngukurr people wonder how long the current revival of interest in ceremonies will last, with many young people choosing not to go right through the ceremonies and drunken behaviour by some participants disrupting them.

Today the Ritharrngu people are regarded as the most knowledgable of Ngukurr people when it comes to ceremonies. With the recent upsurge in the performance of ceremonies the Ritharrngu people, who as recent immigrants in the 1940s were regarded as outsiders, have risen to a position of acceptance and respectability. Their knowledge of traditional ways is now highly respected. A number of years ago, a prominent Ngandi ceremonial man handed his ceremonial responsibilities over to a Ritharrngu man, as he regarded his sons as having insufficient interest in them.

The emergence in the last fifteen years of a Ngukurr school of painters is an exciting cultural development. Their unique style of painting has been widely recognised and is represented in most major Australian galleries.[194] In 1997 at the National Art Gallery in Melbourne there was a major exhibition, a ten year retrospective of Ginger Riley's work. This was an outstanding honour for a man who has only been painting for ten years. At the same time the gallery held an exhibition of the work of other prominent Ngukurr artists which included the work of Willie and Moima Gudubi, Jambu Burraburra, Amy Johnston, Holly Daniels and others.

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[191] Kenneth Maddock, *The Australian Aborigines*, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1974, pp. 100-1; and John Bern, Blackfella Business, Whitefella Law: Political Struggle and Competition in a Southeast Arnhem Land Aboriginal Community, PhD thesis, Macquarie University, 1974, p.217. For more information on the Gunabibi, see R. M. Berndt, *Kunapipi*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1951. On the Yabaduruwa, see Kenneth Maddock, *The* Yabaduruwa, PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 1969; and A. P. Elkin, 'The Yabaduruwa', *Oceania*, vol. 31, no. 3.

[192] Bern, ibid., pp. 130-1. For more information on the *Madaiin*, refer to A. P. Elkin, 'Maraian at Mainaru, 1949', *Oceania* , vol. 3 no. 4 and vol. 32, no. 1, 1961. On the *Balgian*, see Bern, pp. 278-300 and appendix 1.

[193] Bern ibid., pp. 198, 280, 282 has also noted this use of sorcery.

[194] *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, vol. 2, AIATIS, Canberra, 1994, p. 789.

Outstations have been established in the area since 1979. Today Ngukurr is the main supply centre for ten permanent or temporary outstations. These are Nalawan, Wanmarri, Mumbo-mumbo, Boomerang Lagoon, Namilirri, Costello, Turkey Lagoon, Budawarrka, Weyakiba and Burinju.

Ngukurr Aborigines are distinguished from those elsewhere in Arnhem Land by their use of non-Aboriginal Christian names and surnames. Elsewhere Aborigines maintained their Aboriginal names and used their clan names as surnames. At Ngukurr surnames have been acquired in two ways. Biblical names taken at baptism became a surname for the next generation. The Joshua's are examples of this. Others already had surnames, such as Skewthorpe, as a result of their association with cattle stations. Today all children are given a Christian name at birth and usually take their father's surname.

The descendants of the 'old mission mob' have been active in the politics of running the community, thus a member of the Daniel or Joshua families have most often been president of the local council. There has been much inter-marriage between the 'old mission' families like the Daniel's, Joshua's, Roger's, Geoffrey's, and Thompson's. This has blurred the lines of loyalty. An example of this was when Mrs Holly Daniel was principal of the school. She was married to a Daniel but was the youngest daughter of Joshua.

There is a sense of 'Ngukurrness' shared by the residents of Ngukurr. By 'Ngukurrness' I mean a common sense of community identity. Steven Thiele defined their common sense of identity as coming from two things. Firstly from their shared dependency on CMS and the settlement. Secondly it was derived from their opposition to European domination.[195] I regard it as coming from a shared experience of living at Ngukurr. It is most apparent when they are defining themselves in relation to others, whether Black or White. On these occasions they are identifying themselves in relation to other schools, churches, sporting teams, towns and Aboriginal communities. Furthermore, Ngukurr is the only place that many people have lived and thus they have a strong sense of identity with Ngukurr. This is not to say that the community at Ngukurr is homogenous.

## SOCIAL GROUPINGS

Internally Ngukurr is far from homogenous; the community divides itself into different traditional and social groupings depending on what the situation is.

### Traditional groupings

Ngukurr originally belonged to the Yugul people who no longer exist. They were massacred during the period of violent contact with Whites as discussed in chapter two. This has caused many debates over who are the traditional owners of the Yugul country today. Each of the seven tribal groups elects two members to the council. This results in people often, but not always being more concerned with looking after their own group than the community as a whole. No matter which group the president of the council comes from, he is accused of nepotism.

Recently clan groupings came into prominence when under the Community Development Employment Programme participants identified twenty clans in the community. One clan was formed by outsiders.[196] Each clan relates to the CDEP as an entity in regards to work that needs to be carried out.

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[195] Thiele, ibid., p. 14.

[196] This is discussed later in this chapter. See footnote 22 for a list of the twenty clans.

Traditional classificatory kinship structures are strong and the eight subsection system is used by the whole community. The word 'skin' is usually used when talking about subsections. People are often addressed by a relationship term as defined by their 'skin' which is the name of their subsection group. The social rules of etiquette and behaviour of the 'skin' system are observed and taught to children from an early age. Skin groups also define many rules of behaviour such as who has authority over a person, whom the person can work with and whom she or he can have a relaxed relationship with. When the last Department of Aboriginal Affairs Superintendent left in 1976, one of the first things the local council did was reorganise the work gangs on the basis of kinship relationships so that people were working alongside of people with whom it was appropriate for them to work.

Family relationships are important and people have strong loyalties to their immediate families. They are the first people called on in a time of crisis. Grief is experienced when these relationships are not harmonious. Uncles, aunts and grandparents all have important roles in the family. For example a nephew should obey his uncle, (mother's brother) in all things. A difficult situation arises when a man is in charge of the school or another work situation and he has to tell his uncle what to do.

Ngukurr also has traditional social divisions based on the Yirritja and Dhuwa moieties that apply to the conduct of the religious cults and the management of land. These divisions define who is an owner or worker for a ceremony as well as relation to land. Today it is still important that a person marries a person who is from the opposite moiety even if they do not marry someone from the most acceptable sub-section.

**Other groupings**

Bern identified four main age and sex groupings at Ngukurr in 1977. These were women, young men, middle-aged men and the 'old mission mob.[197] Today in 1998 only a handful of the 'old mission mob', those who grew up as residents at the old mission, are still alive. They no longer constitute a strong social grouping.

The women often voice their opinions at community meetings. They will oppose the men on a particular issue, especially if their freedom or safety is threatened. They have been a strong voice in advocating that Ngukurr be a dry community, as the social problems and violence they have experienced from drunkenness when the community is not dry are horrendous.

John Bern reports that twice in 1970 the men decided to move the people outside the settlement boundary. The women opposed it on both occasions. The reasons they gave were that they would lose the amenities of the settlement and so life would be less tolerable, and the men would have had greater independence in directing community activities. The first occasion was a Yabaduruwa ceremony and, if the move had taken place, the women would have been under considerable pressure to become active participants. The second occasion was a tactic in relation to a strike:

> *and in this case the general concern over increased male domination was added to by the fear that the women would lose control of their pension and child endowment cheques to the men and also be required to spend considerable time in gathering bush food.*[198]

[197] Bern, ibid., p. 136.
[198] Bern, ibid., p. 140.

The women have a growing political awareness and today operate a women's centre. They are most politically active when their freedom is threatened. The local council is all male but the women have gained roles in bookkeeping and in management of the CDEP program.

The young men today show a greater sophistication in regards to White society than their parents, are very keen on sport, physical fitness and tend to marry young. They do not appear to be a strong political force.

The middle aged men today seem to have the political power and these were the politically active young men when John Bern undertook his study. These are the men who are elected to the council, are leaders of the different family groups, spokespersons for the community, occupy the jobs with the most influence and some of these men are also active in ceremonies.

Bern also divides the community into a core group and outsiders.[199] The core group consists of the dominant families who go back to the early days of the mission. The outsiders are the more recent immigrants from northern and eastern Arnhem Land who came in the 1940s and 1950s, and those who have married Ngukurr people. The dominant families that make up the core group are still prominent in the affairs of the community.

Sometimes the community divides on a social issue such as, should the drinking of alcohol be allowed in the community. Here the division may be along the lines of what people think, rather than family or other loyalties. I have seen brother and sister publicly oppose each other over whether the community should be alcohol free.

The many different groups that exist demonstrate that the community is far from homogenous. However, this does not rule out the sense of 'Ngukurrness' discussed above, as this operates when a commonly shared identity is appropriate in the sense of belonging and relating to outside entities.

**Ngukurr and institutions that have their origins in White traditions**

While a number of institutions in the town, such as the school, clinic, council, CDEP and the church, have their origins in White society, they are now operated by Aborigines for Aborigines and should be viewed as being Aboriginal.

Ngukurr people value these institutions. It is important to them that there is a school for their children. Aborigines in the area have sent their children to school since the first school started in 1908. They purchase food at the shop, go to the clinic when ill, have a town council and participate in the CDEP. Most of them firmly believe that the CDEP is better for young people than receiving unemployment benefits.

As Ngukurr people have acquired more control over their affairs and more confidence operating the above institutions, they have made some interesting innovations.

Local people want good housing and accept that paying rent, a White way of doing things, is one way to achieve this. More than ten years ago they decided that everyone who is paid or receives a pension would pay rent regardless of how many people lived in that house. This has worked well and housing has been constantly maintained, upgraded and new houses built for a number of years.

[199] Bern, ibid., chapter four.

Before the advent of electricity meters that operate from a card that is purchased locally, people with an income paid a certain amount each week for electricity.

Using the same system, a large amount was raised to install a swimming pool for the community and they received a grant for the balance. Those who use it pay a fee of two dollars so that it can be maintained. A swimming pool was regarded as a necessity as the increase in the number of crocodiles had made the river unsafe for swimming.

The Community Development Employment Programme, where people work for a number of hours instead of receiving the unemployment benefit, is important to the local community. Some interesting innovations have taken place in this programme. Today the community is divided into twenty clans and each clan is responsible for fulfilling a contract to provide a service, such as garbage collection, or for working on developing a business such as fish breeding or subsistence cattle work. Each clan has chosen a manager and a bookkeeper who are being trained in these skills. Some very able middle aged Aborigines have the oversight of the whole programme and they are assisted by a Maori supervisor.[200]

The local primary school's classroom teachers have been Aboriginal since 1979. During the holidays at the start of that year the school was vandalised. This occurred during a time of great social disruption from excessive drinking at the local club. The council effectively closed the school by refusing to issue permits for White teachers. Two reasons given locally for this were: that people had lost respect for the teachers and that mothers needed to be punished so that they would teach their children how to behave.

A consequence of the school's closure was that people were free to move away from the community and start outstations. For most people this was a return to their land while some obtained permission to start an outstation on land owned by other Aborigines. It provided an opportunity to escape from the disruption and violence that was associated with the consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol.

The closure of the school and its reopening with an Aboriginal principal, teachers and trainee teachers, all of whom were local people, coincided with the graduation of three local Aborigines as trained school teachers the year before. When the school reopened there were three White staff to support the Aboriginal principal and the two other qualified Aboriginal teachers, as well as train the trainee teachers. This approach reduced the number of Whites living in the community and their housing was made available to Aboriginal teachers. It also reflects a long held view of the council to reduce the number of White staff wherever possible.

When the school re-opened half way through 1979 the classes were based on extended families and were in effect a number of one teacher schools within a school. After a few years the teachers decided that it was easier to teach a class where everyone was at the same level and they reverted to that system.

[200] The twenty clans are known as Numumurmardidi, Nulawan, Boomerang Lagoon, Mumu Mumbu, Numbarloori, Rose River Hill, Willagarra, Ruin City, Nunggarrgalu, Castelo, Urapanga, Willagarra, Wanmarie, Bringung, Yellow Water, Bardawarrka, Awunbunji, TurkeyLagoon, Mara and Bongakan. (Spelling as supplied by CDEP at Ngukurr).

The shop today is the most important source of food and goods in what has become a cash economy. Wages and pensions are paid electronically into bank accounts in Katherine or Darwin and accessed by EFTPOS (Electronic Funds Transfer Point of Sale) at the shop. The shop was started by the CMS in 1956 and is today leased and operated by a White entrepreneur.

The church is another example of how once Aborigines have control of an institution, they will, over time, operate it in a way that they regard as appropriate. This is the subject of chapters six, seven, eight and nine in this thesis.

**Living culturally**

One way of describing what is happening at Ngukurr today would be to say that there is a dichotomy between the traditional Aboriginal and the traditional White way of doing things. This is too rigid a distinction to account for how Aborigines do things at Ngukurr. It does not allow for changes to the traditional way of doing things such as having the finale of a ceremony on a weekend to suit those who work, using bulldozers to clear the ceremony ground, travelling to the ceremony in cars, and using phones to summon people to a ceremony. Nor does it allow for changes that are taking place in marriage arrangements. In practice the traditional marriage arrangements have changed from arranged marriages that strengthened alliances between families and ensured that partners were in a correct relationship, to a system where young people usually choose their own partner as long as they are from the opposite moiety.

Nor do Aborigines operate within the traditional White institutions in a manner that is fully consistent with a White way of doing things. Where they regard it as appropriate they will modify the way things are done in these institutions to suit the way they think they should be done. Examples of this is the re-arranging of the work gangs to ensure that people working together are in the right relationships and for a few years, the arranging of school classes into family groups.

A better way to account for how Ngukurr people are living with traditional Aboriginal and traditional White ways of doing things is to follow Ingold's suggestion that people live culturally rather than live in cultures.[201]

Ingold argues that culture is an abstract notion and not something that we expect to encounter on the ground. Instead what we find is that people's lives take them on a journey through space and time in environments that to them are significant. They use words and material artefacts to get things done and create ever-expanding networks of symbolic significance.

> *What we do not find are neatly bounded and mutually exclusive bodies of thought and custom, perfectly shared by all who subscribe to them, and in which their lives and work are fully encapsulated. The idea that humanity as a whole can be parcelled up into a multitude of discrete cultural capsules, each the potential object of disinterested anthropological scrutiny, has been laid to rest at the same time as we have to recognise the fact of the interconnectedness of the world's peoples, not just in the era of modern transport and communications, but throughout history. The isolated culture has been revealed as a figment of the Western anthropological*

[201] Tim Ingold, 'Introduction to Culture', in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Tim Ingold, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 330.

> *imagination. It might be more realistic, then, to say that people live culturally rather than that they live in cultures.*[202]

Ingold's suggestion that people live culturally rather than in cultures is appropriate for Ngukurr. It does away with the idea that culture is static and seamless. Ngukurr people are adamant that they live in an Aboriginal way and do not regard themselves as living in a community that is divided into Aboriginal and White ways of doing things. It is all part of the fabric of their lives and they interact with it in ways that they regard as appropriate at the time. By describing them as living culturally one accounts for the dynamics of life as it is lived, and does not have to try and account for how they live in two different worlds. Describing people as living culturally accounts for the reality of what is happening and why people say they are living in an Aboriginal way. Living culturally is discussed more fully in chapter six.

It is now appropriate to move on to Part Three where I will discuss the historical context from which many missionary attitudes arose and why context is now an important concern in missionary and contextual theology. I will also examine a number of theoretical models and then suggest a model that is appropriate for the study of contextualisation of the gospel of Ngukurr.

[202] ibid., p. 330.

# Part Three

Chapter 4: Contextualisation and Non-contextualisation

Chapter 5: Models Describing Missionary Work

## Chapter Four

# CONTEXTUALISATION AND NON-CONTEXTUALISATION

In this chapter I will be concerned with gaining an understanding of the context in which missionaries to the Aborigines worked. I will do this by discussing the hostile attitude of most people at the time to Aborigines, and the rapid decline of the Aboriginal population whenever settlers moved into an area. As part of the context I will also examine the attitude of missionaries to Aboriginal culture. The ideas that influenced the missionaries are discussed undere the headings non-contextualisation and contextualisation.

The period of time in which I am particularly interested in for the purpose of this thesis is from 1900 to the present. The Ropier River Mission was founded in 1908 and today is known as Ngukurr. There is an Anglican Church firmly established in this community and it has had its own Aboriginal minister the Reverend Gumboil Wurramara, since 1973. The church is also the only local community group at Ngukurr that is fully funded by its residents.

### THE CONTEXT OF MISSIONARY WORK AMONG ABORIGINES

One of the discouraging aspects of missionary work amongst Aborigines was that the number who accepted Christianity was for a long time very small. Elsewhere in the Pacific, missionaries had far greater success. The Aborigines were unresponsive in comparison. It was commonly said that the Aborigines were the hardest mission field in the world. This view was still common in 1973 when I commenced my seventeen years of living and working in Aboriginal communities. Missionaries from a number of places told me how hard and discouraging the work was, and constantly wondered why? Colin Reid, the Principal of the Church Missionary Society Missionary Training College, told me in June 1995, that he has seen more heart-broken and discouraged missionaries return home from North Australia than any other area in which the CMS worked.

In the past twenty five years I have observed a marked change in the situation. The number of missionaries has declined rapidly. The missions are now communities with their own elected Aboriginal councils. The advent of Nungalinya College in 1973 has contributed to a number of Aborigines being ordained. The Elcho Revival movement of 1979 still has an influence today. In a number of communities the fellowship meetings have resulted in a style of worship that reflects the Aboriginal way of doing things. It also brought many Aborigines into the Arnhem Land churches. A number of vernacular translations have recently been published, making the gospel more accessible to Aborigines. In a number of communities most, if not all, of the church services are in the local language. Christian Aborigines are discussing how the gospel relates to their culture.

All of the above has caused me to ask what is happening that is different. The interesting thing in the North of Australia is that with most of the missionaries gone, many of the Aboriginal churches that

grew out of the missions have survived. I suggest that Aboriginal agency in contextualising the gospel is a major contributing factor to this result.

**Missionaries and Aboriginal culture**

It is often suggested that missionaries despised Aboriginal culture and were responsible for destroying it. However, when one examines the situation today one finds a number of former missions in North Australia such as Daly River, Nguiu, Yirrakala, Ngukurr, Angurugu and Oenpelli that are small towns with a predominantly Aboriginal population and a strong sense of Aboriginal identity. It is true that Aborigines living in these towns have embraced many elements of a Western lifestyle. They live in houses, drive cars, their children attend government schools and they eat mainly Western types of food. However in these towns Aboriginal art is flourishing, Aboriginal languages are the preferred languages, and ceremonies are held regularly. Society still operates according to kinship rules and many traditional values. These same towns also have a significant number of Aborigines who identify themselves as Christians. Clearly it is too simple to say that the missionaries destroyed Aboriginal culture and replaced it with Western culture.

There are a number of things to be considered when examining the question of missionaries and their attitude towards Aboriginal culture. What was their attitude towards Aboriginal culture? What was actually happening that enabled Aboriginal culture to survive on remote mission stations in the North of Australia? On the other hand it is interesting ask; if the culture survived why did 73.8% of Aborigines identify themselves as Christians in the 1991 census?[203]

It would appear that one of the outcomes of missions in the Northern Territory was that Aborigines were able to preserve their culture, even where it was opposed by missionaries. They came and went from the missions as they pleased, and when ceremonies were banned at missions, they held them away from the mission. This was true of the situation at Ngukurr when ceremonies were not encouraged in the immediate surrounds of where the missionaries and Aborigines lived, and so they were held elsewhere. Aborigines chose to retain such things as their languages, where they were still viable, ceremonies, the sub-section system, social rules, the Dreamtime stories and to teach these to their children.

Florence Grant is an Aboriginal, who does not accept that the destruction of Aboriginal culture can be blamed on the missionaries alone. She writes:

> *Missionaries are often condemned for destroying Aboriginal culture by taking Christianity to the Aboriginal people. However, the lifestyle of the Aboriginal people of Australia was being destroyed by many factors long before missionaries began to reach out to them with the Gospel. Missionaries, and other concerned settlers, continually expressed their concern about the effects that White society was having on the Aboriginal people who lived on the fringes of the towns. They fought for land*

[203] Ian Castles, 'Census of Population and Housing, 6 August 1991', *Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* Population, Australian Bureau of Statistics, catalogue no. 2740.0, 1993, p. 4. The census figures appear to contradict the claim of Howie Willis, in the *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, that the overall attainment of the Christian missions was meagre, if success is measured by conversions. Howie Willis I, 'Missionaries', in *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, Aboriginal Press for Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, 1994, p. 705. The figures which will show how many Aborigines identified as Christian in the 1996 census will be released on 1 June 1998.

*and protection for the Aboriginal people and were often unpopular when missions took up land claimed by pastoralists. The reserves that they set up, however, became paternalistic prisons of welfare, the effects of which are still felt today.*[204]

In the same article Grant states:

*The cultural genocide perpetrated against Aboriginal people was not the result of the introduction of the white man's moral and spiritual ethics and values but of actions by people who were not following Christian teaching.*[205]

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries missionaries worldwide were confronted with the existence of many different cultures.[206] How did they respond to them and, in particular, how did Australian missionaries respond to Aboriginal cultures? After the scaffolding of the missions was removed in North Australia, Aboriginal churches have continued to exist under Aboriginal leadership and control. Why did this happen? It is by no means unique to Australia. Similar things happened elsewhere in the world, an example of which is the emergence of a strong church in China after all the missionaries were expelled.[207]

The negative attitudes of many missionaries towards Aboriginal culture has been documented in books such as Robert Tonkinson's *The Jigalong Mob*, John Harris' *One Blood*, and Swain and Rose's *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*. Many missionaries did have a difficult time seeing Aborigines in any light other than the 'pagan other' who needed to be uplifted, and therefore found it difficult to perceive any good in the Aboriginal way of life.

While many missionaries did have a negative attitude to Aboriginal culture it is not possible to say that all missionaries had no regard for Aboriginal culture. When Elkin nominated the ten founders of social anthropology in Australia, all of whom were amateurs whose work was far from amateurish, five of them were missionaries and clergymen. They were Lancelot Threlkeld, William Ridley, Lorimer Fison, George Taplin and John Matthew [208]

**Population decline**

Following the arrival of White people in Australia, there was a rapid decline in the Aboriginal population. The population of Aborigines living within the boundaries of the nineteen counties around Sydney

*had declined noticeably during the first 50 years of settlement. The most commonly accepted estimate during the 1830s was 500, yet Governor Arthur Phillip had*

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[204] Florence Grant, 'Christianity', in *The Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*, ed by David Horton, Aboriginal Press for Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, 1994, p. 193.
[205] Grant, ibid., p. 193.
[206] Paul G Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1987, p. 104.
[207] William A Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992, pp. 44-7; Wilbert R Shenk, 'Reflections on the Modern Missionary Movement: 1792-1992', in *Mission Studies*, vol. IX-I, 17, 1992, p. 75.
[208]Fison and Matthew were not missionaries to the Aborigines in the normal sense. Fison was actually a missionary in Fiji who devoted a lot of time to researching aboriginal kinship. Matthew was a Presbyterian clergyman who had an interest in the Aborigines who lived in outback Queensland. A. P. Elkin, 'R. H. Matthews: His contribution to Aboriginal Studies', (Part 1), *Oceania*, 46(i), 1975, p. 1.

*estimated the population in the area between Botany Bay and Broken Bay alone at 1500.*[209]

The rapid population decline was caused by dispossession from traditional lands and diseases such as measles, influenza, smallpox and venereal disease[210]. The Aboriginal way of life in Eastern Australia had undergone enormous destruction before the first missionary William Walker of the Wesleyan Missionary Society arrived in 1821, thirty three years after the arrival of the first fleet. Threlkeld's Lake Macquarie Mission founded in 1826 had to close, as by 1838 the mission had lost most of its inhabitants to the growing town of Newcastle. Sixty Aborigines had died at the mission from alcohol and disease since it was founded. In 1837 only a few Aborigines were still living there.[211]

This pattern of a rapid decline in the Aboriginal population in the Sydney area, and in the Roper River area, nearly 100 years later (as discussed in chapter two), could be replicated for many other areas, It demonstrates that substantial change and damage had often occurred to the Aboriginal way of life before missionaries arrived on the scene.[212] This would have lent credence to the idea held by many settlers and missionaries that Aboriginal culture was unimportant and not worth the time required to understand it, as it was going to disappear. There were of course exceptions such as Reverend Threlkeld in the 1820s and 1830s at Lake Macquarie in NSW, Keith Langford-Smith at Roper River in the 1920s, Father Worms at Balgo from the 1930s to the 1970s, who took Aboriginal culture and language seriously.

**The attitude of the majority of settlers towards Aborigines**

The Australian context in which missionaries worked was for many years very hostile towards Aborigines. Reynolds in *Frontier* documents the hostile attitude of the majority towards Aborigines. Aborigines were regarded as wild animals and as being hardly above ourang-outangs.[213] They could not be civilised but instead needed to be tamed in the same manner as wild beasts.[214] Many who did recognise them as human, saw it as a degraded humanity. Aborigines were deemed to be too primitive to adapt to modern society and nothing it was believed could prevent them from dying out.[215] They would disappear in time, before the superiority of the White race.[216] Others saw them as children who never grew up.[217]

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[209] R. H. W. Reece, *Aborigines and Colonists: Aborigines and Colonial Society in New South Wales in the 1830s and 1840s*, Sydney University Press, Sydney, 1974, p. 17.

[210]For further documentation see Reece, *Aborigines and Colonists*, pp. 17-21 and Appendix III on p. 229; D. Collins, *An Account of the English Colony in NSW*, vol. 1, A. H. Reed and A. W. Reed, Sydney, 1975, p. 496-7. R. B. Smythe, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, vol. 1, Government Printer Melbourne, 1878, pp. 22-30 discusses the difficulty at arriving at a correct figure for the Aboriginal population.

[211] L. Threlkeld , 'Seventh Annual Report of the Mission to the Aborigines, Lake Macquarie, New South Wales', in Neil Gunson, *Australian Reminiscences and Papers of L. E. Threlkeld*, AIAS, Canberra, 1974, vol. 1 pp. 133, 136-7, and 1788 and Reece, *Aborigines and* Colonists, p. 20.

[212] For further discussion refer to Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, chapter two; Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, pp. 114-16; John Harris, *One Blood* (it is discussed throughout the book); and Jean Woolmington, Early Missions to the Australian Aborigines - A Study in Failure, PhD thesis, University of New England, pp. 170-215.

[213] Henry Reynolds, *Frontier*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987, p. 12.

[214] ibid., pp 71-3.

[215] ibid., p. 123.

[216] ibid., pp. 121-2.

[217] ibid., p. 72.

Henry Reynolds sums up the two opposing views of Aborigines held around 1850 by the majority and the humanitarians this way.

> *There were, then, 'two opinions diametrically opposed to each other', respecting the characters of the Aborigines. One was held by 'philanthropic individuals' who regarded the Aborigines as equals although disadvantaged by social customs and environmental constraints; the other was accepted by a majority of settlers who viewed the blacks as less than human and adopted harsh and severe measures towards them.*[218]

Reynolds goes on to argue that as settlement expanded in the nineteenth century the concept of racial equality diminished. It was inconvenient in a society intent on dispossession and a threat to those with capital invested in society.[219] The work of humanitarians was not welcome in such an environment. They were a minority and their attention was focused on demonstrating that Aborigines were intelligent fellow human beings so that the violence against them would cease. Understanding Aboriginal culture and recognising Aboriginal agency in building an Aboriginal Christian community was far from their minds.

In the face of opinions that said that Aborigines were less than human, missionaries took refuge in *Acts* chapter seventeen, verse twenty six, where the apostle Paul stated that: 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.' (King James Version) Lancelot Threlkeld writing about Aborigines in the 1830s said:

> *Human Nature is just the same whether clothed with the most delicate alabaster skin, or comely but black exterior of the image of God. Accidental circumstance may make individual difference, but it is 'of one blood, God has made all the nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.'*[220]

Henry Reynolds points out that the above biblical text was taken as the central theme by the 'philanthropists' in the middle 1800s to support their argument that Aborigines were fellow human beings.

> *It was quoted, and misquoted, over and over again and was the single most important buttress to racial equality in colonial Australia, used in agitation against frontier violence and in favour of humanitarian and missionary activity'* [221]

The hostility was still evident when John Gribble started work in Western Australia in 1885. His son, Ernest Gribble, experienced the same hostility in 1922 when he set out to expose the Forrest River Massacres in 1922.[222] Those who argued that Aborigines were fellow human beings had to maintain their view in a hostile environment that did not wish to recognise them as fellow humans.

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[218] ibid., 1987, p. 106; and John Harris, *One Blood*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1990, pp. 33-6.
[219] Reynolds, ibid., p. 106.
[220] Gunson, ibid., p. 59; Reynolds, ibid., discusses the use of this text on pp. 93-5 in *Frontier*, and John Harris in *One Blood*, pp. 34-6.
[221] Reynolds, ibid., documents this on pp. 93-5, 204.
[222] John Gribble, *Dark Deeds in a Sunny Land*, Stirling Bros, Perth ,1886; E. Gribble and Neville Green, *The Forrest River Massacres*, Freemantle Arts Centre Press, South Freemantle, 1995.

The context in which missionaries worked with Aborigines was one in which rapid culture change was already occurring. The population was declining rapidly and the focus was more on saving the remnant and convincing settlers that Aborigines were fellow human beings in order to stop the violence. This view acknowledged Aboriginal agency as long as Aborigines directed it towards conversions and adopting a European way of life. This did not encourage ideas that Aborigines could be active agents in contextualising the gospel in their culture.

## LIVING CULTURALLY

Culture is the context in which contextualisation occurs. As I am approaching culture in a specific way, it is important to define how I am using it.

One of the fascinating features of human life is the 'extraordinary diversity of ways of living it.'[223] Anthropology has labelled this diversity with a concept known as culture.

Ingold in 'Introduction to Culture' in the *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology* points out that the concept of culture itself has obstinately resisted final definition. He gives the following overview of how the concept, culture, has been used in anthropology.

> *In an earlier era of anthropology, when it was assumed that societies differed according to their degree of advancement on a universal scale of progress, culture was held to be synonymous with the process of civilization. Later as the idea of progress lost ground to the perspective of relativism, according to which the beliefs and practices of any society can only be judged by the values and standards prevalent in that society, anthropologists began to speak of cultures in the plural rather than of culture as the singular career of humanity at large. Each culture was regarded as a traditional way of life, embodied in a particular ensemble of customary behaviour, institutions and artefacts. Later still, as the emphasis shifted from manifest patterns of behaviour to underlying structures of symbolic meaning, culture came to be defined in opposition to behaviour, much as language was opposed to speech. Every culture was seen to consist in a shared system of concepts or mental representations, established by convention and reproduced in traditional transmission. But even this view has come under threat from an approach that seeks the generative source of culture in human practices, situated in the relational context of people's mutual involvement in a social world, rather than in the structures of signification where that world is represented.*[224]

Ingold goes on to state that we do not find humanity parcelled up into

> *'neatly bounded and mutually exclusive bodies of thought and custom, perfectly shared by all who subscribe to them, and in which their lives and work are fully encapsulated.'*[225]

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[223] Tim Ingold ,'Introduction to Culture', in *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, Routledge, London and New York, 1994, p. 329.
[224] ibid., p. 329.
[225] ibid., p, 330.

He argues that the idea of discrete cultures has been laid to rest as we have come to realise the interconnectedness of the world's people not only today but throughout history. Ingold argues that it is more accurate to say that people live culturally rather than that they live in cultures.

John Morton in 'Culture' agrees with Ingold that the isolation of discrete cultures is empirically problematic. He argues that isolation of discrete cultures is a fiction that can be demonstrated in relation to language, one of the codes used to identify discreet cultures.[226] He quotes an example from Joel Kahn:

> *If we choose to define 'Germans' as a social group on the basis of language we immediately run into problems of overlap. If a 'German' is someone who speaks German, how do we classify a Turkish national who has studied German and speaks it fluently? Where do we draw the line between German and Dutch, since it is said that these languages grade into each other along a continuum if we travel along the Rhine from Germany into the Netherlands. And the problem is only compounded when other cultural traits are thrown into the mix.*[227]

This raises the question of how should you classify a White person who lives in an Aboriginal community, speaks an Aboriginal language, marries an Aborigine and has been initiated into the Aboriginal religion? In terms of discrete cultures and the way they are defined by things like language, religion and location is such a person White or Aboriginal?

Morton argues that the difficulty comes from the identification that is made between discrete codes such as language and the people who employ them. This occurs when we believe that the codes exist independently of people and that is matter related to dualisms such as society/individual, language/speech and discourse/subject. He continues:

> *In fact, there are no codes (societies, languages or discourses) which exist prior to their engagement by individual human subjects, who put them to strategic use in speech and actions. This full integration of code and message allows for a more fragmentary and dynamic notion of culture, since there is no fundamental opposition between an abstract culture and the individual people who employ certain symbolic resources. People who share a world do not simply share a point of view given in 'the culture': they live to some extent independently of each other and may come to either agree or disagree, and conform or resist, within the terms of their codes.*

This new approach to culture overturns the notion that culture is integrated and whole. In saying that people live culturally they are perceived as approaching their worlds with interest, care and concern.[228] This allows for a much more dynamic notion of culture. It allows for change and difference as well as overlap with other cultures. It pays attention to what might be happening on the boundaries of a culture. The idea of living culturally allows for some members of an Aboriginal community to identify as Christian and be involved in contextualising their Christian faith into an Aboriginal way of life.

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[226] John Morton, unpublished paper.

[227] Joel Kahn, The Culture in Multicaulturalism, 1991, *Meanjin*, vol. 50, no. 1, 1991, p. 51.

[228] John Morton, 1995, 'Culture', unpublished paper.

Missiology tends to treat cultures as discrete wholes and seeks to explore how the Christian faith can become contextualised into a particular discrete culture. In reality it is usually a group of people within a cultural group who identify as Christians and still see themselves as part of the cultural group. By accepting that people live culturally, observers can see how it is that people who identify as Christian are able to contextualise their faith into their way of life and still be part of that cultural group.

The concept of living culturally is valuable for understanding a situation where the gospel is being contextualised. It helps us to understand how a group of people can incorporate new ideas into their way of life, and the change that goes with it, and still identify strongly as Aboriginal.

The notion of people living culturally is used in this thesis when I discuss how Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr are contextualising the gospel. The concept of living culturally fits well with my argument, that it is the Aborigines at Ngukurr who are the active agents in contextualising the gospel. It helps the outsider to understand their claim that in becoming Christians they have lost nothing of their Aboriginal identity.

## THE ERAS OF NON-CONTEXTUALISATION AND CONTEXTUALISATION

Nineteenth and early twentieth century missionaries in Australia, as elsewhere, paid little attention to the models they were following in their work. Missiology was not a separate theological discipline in training colleges and in any case, most missionaries in Australia had little specialised preparation at all for their task. Much of the training for missionaries was in gaining a basic knowledge of the Bible, church teachings and the practical skills that would be needed for their task in isolated locations. Many of them were lay preachers, school teachers and farmers. Few were ordained ministers or priests. Many, and in particular those from an evangelical background, assumed that the Bible alone provided all the resources they needed.

Their engagement with Aboriginal culture was experimental, and tentative and often only long term missionaries gained any understanding of Aboriginal culture. While missionaries were not consciously using models to shape their approach to their missionary task, a study of the various models for missions activity developed by modern missiologists can be applied for analytical purposes retrospectively and to elucidate the Ngukurr experience. In a curious way, the development of modern missiology parallels the developments in Northern Australia.

Before discussing theoretical models I intend to look at the last two hundred years in order to see what it was in their context that influenced missionaries. Bosch and Hiebert[229] divide missionary work during these two centuries into two eras. The era of non-contextualisation broadly covers 1800-1950. While the era of contextualisation is 1950 onwards, as a major change has occurred since then in how evangelism is carried out in cross-cultural situations.

These two eras are very general categories. They cannot be taken to mean that prior to 1950 there were no attempts to contextualise the gospel. Nor does it mean that since 1950 all ethnocentric and accommodation approaches have disappeared from missionary work. There were many earlier attempts worldwide to contextualise the gospel, especially by missionaries who stayed long enough to learn the local language well, understand the local culture and respect it, and know the local people. Such missionaries often arrived with a strong ethnocentric view of how the gospel should be lived by converts, and ended up encouraging contextualisation of the gospel in the new culture. For instance

[229] David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1991, p. 427; and Hiebert, ibid., pp. 104-10.

Carl Strehlow of Hermansberg in his early years tried to suppress traditional ceremonial life but later developed a deep interest in Aboriginal culture.[230] George Taplin of Point McCleay S.A. was another opposed to Aboriginal culture at first who later developed a keen interest in it.[231]

On the other hand there are examples of an ethnocentric approach to missionary work in the era of contextualisation. In the 1970s I have met missionaries who argued that as Aborigines needed to learn English they would preach in English in order to help Aborigines learn English. This justified their not learning the local language and a consequence was that the gospel was presented in a way that took little account of Aboriginal culture.

The rest of this chapter will discuss the eras of non-contextualisation and contextualisation

## THE ERA OF NON-CONTEXTUALISATION

### The Modern Missionary Movement

The modern missionary movement was an important part of the context in which missionaries in Australia worked. The movement had its roots in William Carey's tract 'An Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen' in 1792 and the founding that autumn of The Particular Baptist Society for the propagation of the gospel amongst the Heathen at Kettering.[232]

The whole period of the modern missionary movement was overshadowed by the Enlightenment that emerged at the end of the seventeenth century and set the tone for the next centuries. Historian Peter Gay characterised the impact of the Enlightenment this way:

> *In the century of the Enlightenment, educated Europeans awoke to a new sense of life. They experienced an expansive sense of power over nature and themselves: the pitiless cycles of epidemics, famines, risky life and early death, devastating war and uneasy peace - the treadmill of human existence - seemed to be yielding at last to the application of critical intelligence.*[233]

Taking the benefits of Western culture to other people became an important part of missions. William Carey, the founder of the modern missionary movement, combined Christianity and civilization as part of the same package.[234] He wrote:

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[230] Barbara Henson, *A Straight-out Man*, Melbourne University Press, 1992, p. 13. Henson also reports that while Strehlow steadfastly refused to attend Aboriginal ceremonies, he studied their culture and language in depth. His monumental seven volume work *Die Aranda und Loritja Staemme in Zentral Australien* was published in German. It is yet to be translated into English.

[231] George Taplin,(ed), *The Folklore, Manners, Customs, and Languages of the South Australian Aborigines…*, Government Printer, Adelaide, reproduced in fascimilie, 1989.

[232] Cited in Wilbert R. Shenk, op. cit., p. 62; and in Charles Taber, *The World Is Too Much With Us: 'Culture' in Modern Protestant Missions*, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1991, p. ix.

[233] Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation*, vol. 2. ,Weiderfeld and Nicholson, London, 1969, p. 3. For more detailed discussion see Taber, ibid., pp. 55-88.

[234] Shenk, ibid., p. 65. See also,Taber, ibid., pp. 60-65; and the following works by Jean Woolmington, 'Humble Artesians and Untutored Savages', in *Journal of Australian Studies*, 1973, 16:51-61; 'The Civilization/Christianisation Debate and the Australian Aborigines', in *Aboriginal History*, vol. 10, part 2, 1986, pp. 90-8; '"Writing on the Sand" the First Mission to Aborigines in Eastern Australia', in T. Swain and D. Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, ASSR, Adelaide, pp. 72-92; and her doctoral thesis, Early Christian Missions to the Australian Aborigines - A Study in Failure, PhD thesis, University of New England,

> *Can we hear they are without the gospel, without government, without laws, and without arts and sciences: and not exert ourselves to introduce amongst them the sentiments of men, and of Christians?*[235]

Charles Taber in his book *The World is Too Much with us: 'Culture' in Modern Protestant Missions,* points out that humanitarian factors were an important motivation in missions. He writes:

> *from the point of view of Western missionaries, life in the non-Western world was obviously harsh and miserable. Disease, starvation, violence, vice, illiteracy, corrupt and repulsive customs were all rampant. Causes of these conditions, in addition to original sin, which as we have seen most took to be universal, included the 'inferiority' of the people and their cultures, the darkness of 'heathenism,' the incidence of tribal warfare, and in many cases the ravages of the slave trade. These social ills constituted an unavoidable challenge for the spiritual children of Wesley, or for that matter for any disciples of Jesus of Nazareth.*[236]

This sense of mastery resulted in a Western world view that had a great sense of buoyancy, self-confidence and optimism, resulting in a secular vision for the rest of the world to benefit from the Enlightenment in a similar way.[237] This vision was not universally welcomed and both China and Japan resisted this incursion.

A consequence of this optimism was that missionary work tried to hold two things together. One was the command of Jesus to make disciples in all nations, the other was a commitment to modernity.[238] Taking the benefits of Western culture to other people became an important part of missions. When the evolutionary theory of culture was added to this in the mid-nineteenth century, missionaries acquired a further sense of representing a higher culture that should replace lower cultures and benefit them by doing so. It is hardly surprising then that missionaries and other humanitarians thought that one of the best ways that they could help Aborigines was to lift them to the level of European society.

This mentality contributed to the debate: do we civilise and then evangelise or evangelise and then civilise? This debate influenced the work of missionaries in Australia and elsewhere in the world. It is against this background that ethnocentrism, paternalism, accommodation and indigenisation, should be understood.

The missionary work of 1800 -1950 A.D. has been characterised by Bosch and Hiebert as non-contextualised.[239] The argument is that missions in this period took little account of the context in which missionaries worked. This was also true of the way Western propositional theology was taken across into other cultures as a package. For both Protestants and Catholics theology had been defined

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1979, pp. 175-215. Also refer to, N. Gunson, *Messengers of Grace,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1978, ch. 14, 'The Gospel of Civilization'.

[235] Cited in Wilbert R. Shenk, ibid., p. 65

[236] Taber, ibid., p. 60.

[237] Shenk, ibid., pp. 64.

[238] ibid., p. 65.

[239] Bosch, ibid., p. 427; and Hiebert, ibid., p. 104.

and only needed to be indigenised into other cultures.[240] Western theology was regarded as having universal validity.

While it is true that many missionaries did see Western culture as superior to the indigenous cultures, this does not mean that in all situations the indigenous culture was regarded as expendable. The fact that some missionaries started to think about how Christianity could be indigenised in other cultures suggests there was a growing awareness of the context they were working in and that they were groping towards coming to terms with it. Context was indeed being discovered and wrestled with .

While the missiological models often used to understand this period of non-contextualisation are usually those of imposition and accommodation (or indigenisation) it is too strong to say that context was ignored entirely. Accommodation models while insufficient in themselves did to some extent concern themselves with context and were the forerunner of later contextual models. While we look back and say it was ethnocentric and paternalistic for missionaries to expect Aborigines to dress and live as Europeans, in the context of them being anxious to demonstrate that Aborigines were human beings with souls, and not some lower form of life that could be disregarded, it does not appear so strange. True, they had a European idea of how human beings should live and behave, but then so did the rest of their community. The accommodators sought to include those parts of the culture that they saw as not conflicting with Scripture or the teaching of the church. Language was one such area where much work was done by missionaries. Many learnt the language of the people they lived amongst. This gave them an appreciation of the other culture, as learning a language involves learning about how another culture thinks and views the world. They analysed languages, wrote grammars, compiled dictionaries and translated the Bible, and along the way learnt indigenous modes of thought. One of the results of this is that today there is at least a portion of the Bible available if not the whole Bible or a New Testament in approximately 2,000 languages.[241] Dana Robert attributes the explosion of Christianity into Africa, Asia and Latin America today to this work and points out that having a translation of the Scripture in their own language often gives a language group a sense of ownership over Christian theology.[242]

Wilbert Shenk states that at the start of the era of non-contextualisation there prevailed what has called a pre-critical understanding of culture.[243] By this he means that people take their own culture to be self-evidently correct and the norm by which the behaviour and values of other people are judged. Such a view is by no means unique to Europeans. A Torres Strait Islander commented to a White Bible translator that 'White people don't have any culture.'[244] A similar view was expressed by a Murinbata Aborigine when he said to Professor Stanner '*White man got no dreaming*'.[245]

At the start of the nineteenth century the human sciences in the modern sense had not been established and there was no explicit or abstract concept of culture. A conceptual development of

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[240] Bosch, ibid., p. 427.
[241] Dana L. Robert, 'Christianity in Asia, Africa and Latin America', in eds Howard Clark Kee, Emily Albu Hanawalt, Carter Lindberg, Jean-Coup Seban and Mark A. Noll, *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, Macmillan, New York, 1991. p. 759.
[242] Robert, ibid., p. 759.
[243] Shenk, ibid., p.72.
[244] Susanne Hargrave, 'Culture Abstraction and Ethnocentricism', in *Missiology*, vol. XXI, no. 1, 1993, p. 11.
[245] W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979.

'culture' can be dated from about the 1840s.[246] Two contributing factors were the growing interaction with other cultures around the world and the interaction of missionaries over a long period with the people they lived amongst. Missionaries were concerned with communicating the gospel. They preached and taught in the language and translated the Scripture.[247] It was necessary to understand the culture and the worldview of the people in order to be able to communicate accurately. This usually resulted in a respect for the other culture.

In the second half of the nineteenth century Gustav Warneck wrote *Outline of the History of Protestant Missions.* It was among the early books that appeared on missions and culture. In his preface he commented that there was an abundance of mission literature about missions and culture, but the presentation of such literature had not been the focus of mission.[248] Unfortunately this growing knowledge about culture was not applied to mission theory and imperialism went largely unchallenged.[249]

Shenk argues that from the 1870s onward imperialism was dominant and makes three points about the imperialist periods. Firstly, few missionaries or administrators of mission societies, questioned the role the West was destined to play in relation to the rest of the world. Secondly there were those throughout the period who criticised the imperialist system and pointed out its incompatibility with Christian mission. Thirdly missionaries were to be found on all points of the spectrum, from uncritical advocates of collaboration between imperialism and mission to those who argued for careful separation.[250]

He further points out, that as we moved into the period of imperialism, the human sciences were emerging. The new theories of culture and race demonstrated ways of evaluating and grading people and their cultures. Western civilisation was seen as being at the top. This along with the new technology of the West, gave the West both the ability to dominate the rest of the world in a way never seen before, and also the moral responsibility to teach and improve the weaker peoples.[251]

By the end of the nineteenth century two reactions were taking shape. One was the indigenous political movement that eventually gained independence from the West. The other was a growing movement of religious independence, usually in reaction to western missions. Eventually it resulted in the formation of thousands of new Christian denominations around the world.

While Hiebert's two eras of non-contextualisation and contextualisation are useful for describing missionary work, they do not explain everything. Since the end of the modern missionary movement around 1950, two surprising facts have emerged that should make us wary of seeing the era of non-contextualisation only in terms of ethnocentrism, paternalism, accommodation and indigenisation.

During the past two centuries there has been an amazing change in where the majority of Christians are located. In 1800, in the early stages of the modern missionary movement more than 86% of all

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[246] Shenk, ibid., p. 68.
[247] ibid., p. 68.
[248] Gustav Warneck, *Outline of the History of Protestant Missions*, James Gemmell, George IV, Bridge, Edinburgh, 1884, p. vi-vii.
[249] Taber, ibid., p. 7, also comments: 'that missionaries and missiologists have contributed far more to our ethnographic information than to the development of a formal concept of culture.'
[250] Shenk, ibid., pp. 69-70.
[251] ibid., pp. 68, 71.

Christians could be classified as European. By 1997, 57.6% of all Christians were to be found outside of the North Atlantic heartland of historical Christendom. During the same period the percentage of the world population identified as Christian increased from 23.1% in 1800 to 33.9% in 1997, while the world population went from 902 million to 5.9 billion in 1997.[252] It is expected that by the year 2000 Western Missionaries will be outnumbered by missionaries from the churches of Asia, Africa and South America. Christianity today cannot be portrayed as the religion of the West.

The most surprising aspect of the history of the church in the twentieth century is that at the end of the century, European Christians are no longer numerically dominant. Dana Robert comments:

> *Christianity, a religion that began in a Jewish world, spread into a Greco-Roman culture, and from there into Europe, is now undergoing its third massive cultural shift - a shift to the southern hemisphere and to the Third world.*[253]

An illustration of the change is seen in the fact that at the 1988 Lambeth Conference, the decennial meeting of the bishops that make up the Anglican community, the Church of England was a minority and the non-Western contingent was powerful enough to reverse a centuries-old Anglican prohibition against the baptism of polygamists.[254]

The second fact is the emergence of so many viable churches in the countries that missionaries went to.

> *Although there is much that is ambiguous about the record of the modern missions movement, it is not being presumptuous to speak of success. In the nineteenth century missions were described as the scaffolding of the new church under construction. In too many cases the scaffolding seemed oppressively heavy or was allowed to stay in place far longer than necessary. As the scaffolding has been dismantled - at times forcibly- especially in the years since 1945, we are continually impressed that viable churches were constructed in which the Spirit of God dwells. The treasure was indeed entrusted to earthen vessels; but it was God's treasure. And God never sends labourers into the harvest field without supervision. (Matthew 28:20b)* [255]

While the modern missionary movement suffered from cultural imperialism, thousands of new churches have emerged and it is in many of these churches that contextual theologies are now being formed. This demonstrates that worldwide, Christian converts have not accepted everything that missionaries taught.

As Shenk points out the nineteenth century is:

> *riddled with contradictions with regard to missionaries and their attitudes toward other peoples and their cultures.*[256]

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[252] These statistics are taken from David Barret (ed), *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1982, p. 796. The 1997 figures from Barret's annual update, Status of Global Mission, 1997, in Context of Twentieth and 21st Centuries, pub in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, vol. 21, no. 1, January 1997. p. 25.

[253] Robert, ibid., p. 757.

[254] ibid., p. 757.

[255] Shenk, ibid., p. 75.

[256] ibid., p. 72.

Some were very sensitive and others were insensitive seeing their culture as superior and appropriate for everyone. There are a number of examples of efforts to contextualise the gospel. William Carey and his associates at Serampore represent those who had a high regard for linguistic and cultural studies and gained the respect of the Bengali community. Carey also represents those who saw that if the gospel was to be understood it had to be in the language of the people. Many other missionaries followed his example and translated the Scriptures into vernacular languages. The early Jesuits and Hudson Taylor in China represent those missionaries who in order to understand the people and their culture better, dressed like them and sought to live as much like them as possible.[257]

The era of non-contextualisation also saw the emergence of what is known as the 'three selves, approach to establishing indigenous churches. From 1840-1870 mission theory was concerned with the ideal type of the 'indigenous church'. This was formulated by Rufus Anderson of the American Board of Missions and Henry Venn of the Church Missionary Society in the 1850s.[258] It aimed to see independent churches that were self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. This held a prominent place, in the Protestant missionary movement for many years [259] This approach emerged as a desire to overcome the problem of weak churches, dependent on European or American missionaries that had emerged in various parts of the world under approaches of imposition.[260] However it did not address many related questions such as the relationship between the emerging church and its cultural context.[261] Often the idea of a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating church was envisaged along Western lines rather than in a way that was in keeping with the indigenous culture. Another consequence was that it sometimes assured a small self-contained world. Such isolation is today increasingly challenged by the development of a global world culture and an increasing awareness of the many different kinds of churches that exists in today's world.

While in general terms non-contextualisation characterises the era of 1800-1950 there were also a number of attempts to contextualise the gospel. Implicit contextualisation was often occurring even if other models such as paternalism appear to characterise the era as a whole. Models of accommodation point to a growing awareness of context and its importance.

Ideas of cultural superiority influenced the work of missionaries during the era of non-contextualisation. The same ideas of superiority also influenced those people in Australia who were so hostile towards the Aborigines. The difference between the two groups was that missionaries saw Aborigines as human beings. In the era of contextualisation other cultures are seen as worthy of respect in their own right.

**Era of Contextualisation**

Before contextualisation the approach known as indigenisation or accommodation had developed. This approach endeavoured to make use of the good neutral elements in a culture. It was the

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[257] R. A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, Acadamie Books, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983, p. 176.

[258] For a more detailed discussion of the three selves theory, see Peter Beyerhaus, 'The Three Selves Formula. Is it Built on Biblical Foundations?', in Charles H. Kraft and Tom, M. Wisely, *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, Carey Library, Pasadena, 1979, pp. 15-30.

[259] ibid., p. 15.

[260] ibid., p. 15.

[261] Wilbert, R. Shenk, p. 70.

forerunner of contextualisation models.[262] The more sensitive missionaries to Aborigines were from the beginning moving towards 'accommodation' or 'indigenisation' in that they were concerned with developing a local church and recognized a need to adapt their approach to the local conditions. I am not suggesting that they would recognize the terms, or were very reflective about their policies, but simply that they behaved in ways that modern missiologists would identify as 'accommodation' or 'indigenisation', but their achievements were limited by their world view and lack of understanding of the particular culture they were working in. With the development of Anthropology, including some outstanding contributions by missionaries themselves the further step of contextualisation became possible. It is only with deep knowledge of the context that contextualisation becomes possible. The differences between the two approaches are shown clearly on Louis Luzbetak's table which is reproduced below.

Contextualisation as used in missiology takes into account the context in which the gospel takes root. It does not see a culture or context as static. Schineller states that the word contextualisation as used in missiology literally

> *means a 'weaving together' thus an interweaving of the gospel with every particular situation. Instead of speaking of a particular culture, whether traditional or modern, it speaks of contexts or situations into which the gospel must be inculturated.'*[263]

Luzbetak defines contextualisation as follows:

> *We understand contextualisation as the various processes by which a local church integrates the gospel message (the 'text') with its local culture (the 'context'). The text and context must be blended into that one, God-intended reality called 'Christian living.*[264]

It is the contextualisation processes that allow people to live culturally as Christians.

Referring to context rather than cultures highlights the need for appropriate theological reflection in each situation. The context of an Aboriginal Outstation in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory is very different to that of urban Aborigines in Melbourne, Victoria. Contextualisation also allows for culture change. As the context changes the situation can be studied afresh and the gospel contextualised for the situation as it changes.[265]

There is disagreement about when the term contextualisation was first coined. Schineller[266] states that 'contextualisation' first achieved prominence in 1957 when the Rockefeller Foundation donated three million dollars so that a theological education fund could be established to train leaders for third world churches. Grants were offered with a view to 'contextualising the gospel'. [267]

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[262] This approach is discussed under the accommodation model later in this chapter.
[263] P. Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, Paulist Brothers, New York, 1990, p. 19.
[264] Louis J. Luzbetak, 'Signs of Progress in Contextual Methodology,' *Verbum* SVD 22:1981, p. 39, cited in Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1988, p. 69.
[265] Schineller, ibid., p. 19.
[266] ibid.
[267] ibid., p. 19. Unfortunately Schineller offers no supporting documentation for this claim.

***Major Differences between (Traditional) Accommodation and Inculturation***

| | ACCOMMODATION | INCULTURATION |
|---|---|---|
| PRIMARY AGENT<br>with chief responsibility for initiative and action. | The proclaimers of the Gospel (missionaries, the sending or universal Church.) | The Christian cultural community. |
| GOAL | The planting of a local church as an extension of the universal Church. | The penetration of the Gospel message into, and its integration with, the community's culture as a single system of belief, values, and behavior, making the Gospel message generative and creative with the culture. (Called also the "evangelization of culture.") |
| CHIEF PROCESSES | Diffusion. (Translation by outsiders.) | Integration. (The blending of the Gospel message with the rest of culture by insiders.) |
| DEPTH | Generally superficial and haphazard. Understanding of culture very limited. | "To the very roots" *(Evang. nunt*., no. 53). Holistic. Based on a good understanding of the nature, structure, and dynamics of culture. |
| JUSTIFICATION | Viewed as a concession and privilege granted to a "mission" church by sending or universal Church. | Viewed as a necessity and a right to express one's faith in terms of one's own culture. |
| BENEFICIARIES | *Still "immature"* local churches. | *Every* cultural community. |
| EMPHASIS | Unity (with limited toleration of diversity). | Unity in diversity (with both unity and diversity considered sacred). |
| APPROACH | Practical sense of primary agent. | Tripolar dialogue between the Gospel, the universal Church tradition, and the local culture. (Subject to judgment and correction of the communion of churches.) |

**Table 1** Luzbetak's table of differences between accommodation and inculturation.[268]

It is generally accepted that contextualisation gained wide usage in the 1970s. Bosch states that the word 'contextualisation' was:

> *first coined in the early 1970s in the circles of the Theological Education Fund, with a view particularly to the task of the education and formation of people for the church's ministry.*[269]

[268] Louis Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, pp. 82-3.

[269] To support this claim Bosch, ibid., p. 420, refers to Justin Ukpong, 'What is Contextualisation?', in *Neue*

Bruce Fleming's view is that the term 'contextualisation' was first used publicly in 1972 when the Theological Education Fund published *Ministry in Context.*[270] He also reports that this book targeted four areas for contextualisation efforts. They were missiology, educational structures, theology, and pedagogy.[271]

W. Berends points out in, 'The Evaluation of Culture in Missiology' that at the time, the TEF identified 'contextualization' as the 'central concept' in its program that was to bring about renewal in theological education. The TEF defined the new term contextualisation as follows:

> *It means all that is implied in the familiar term 'indigenisation' and yet seeks to press beyond. Contextualisation has to do with how we assess the peculiarity of third world contexts. Indigenisation tends to be used in the sense of responding to the gospel in terms of a traditional culture. Contextualisation, while not ignoring this, takes into account the process of secularity, technology, and the struggle for human justice, which characterises the historical moment of nations in the Third World.*
>
> *Yet a careful distinction must be made between authentic and false forms of contextualisation. False contextualisation yields to uncritical accommodation, a form of culture faith. Authentic contextualisation is always prophetic, arising always out of a genuine encounter between God's Word and His world, and moves toward the purpose of challenging and changing the situation through rootedness in and commitment to a given historical moment.*
>
> *It is therefore clear that contextualisation is a dynamic not a static process. It recognises the continually changing nature of every human situation and of the possibility for change, thus opening the way for the future.*
>
> *The agenda of a Third World contextualising theology will have priorities of its own. It may have to express its self-determination by uninhibitedly opting for a 'theology of change', or by recognising unmistakable theological significance in such issues as justice, liberation, dialogue with people of other faiths and ideologies, economic power, etc.'* [272]

Berends comments that this defines contextualisation in terms of indigenisation and change, as well as in terms of secularity, technology, human justice, liberation and dialogue with other faiths and ideologies.[273] It is clear that contextualisation had the potential for a wide range of meaning from the start and it is not surprising that there has been much discussion about what is meant by contexualisation.

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*Zeitschrift fur Missions Wissenschaft*, vol. 43, pp. 161-8.

[270] Bruce C. E. Fleming, Contextualisation *of Theology*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1980, p. 4.

[271] ibid., p. 4.

[272] Ministry in Context, The Third Mandate Programme of the Theological Education Fund (1970-77) (Bromley: TEF, 1972), p. 20., in Wilem Berends, 'The Evaluation of Culture in Missiology. A Topical and Theological Approach to the Value and Significance of Culture in the Context of Mission', DTh thesis, Australian College of Theology, 1990, p. 111.

[273] Berends, ibid., p. 112.

Contextualisation soon caught on and became a blanket term for various theological models.[274] It was quickly accepted and used by the three main groups that make up the church worldwide. These are, The Roman Catholic Church, The Evangelical Churches and their related missionary sending agencies and the ecumenical and conciliar movement which includes the Orthodox Churches.[275]

The term was used at the consultation on 'Dogmatic or Contextual Theology?' held by the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches at Bossey, Swizterland, in August 1971.[276] The participants at this consultation were very much aware that rapid social change was occurring in the world and also that the influence of the churches of Europe was declining.

> *The group envisioned a dialectic between theological insights gained from working in a culture, and dogmatic or confessional theologies. The dialectic was to result in contextualised theology. Since the methodology included the context, it was assumed that the contextualised theology always would be relevant. Themes of political theologies were especially evident in the discussions.*[277]

Buswell credits Byang Kato with introducing the term contextualisation at the International Congress on World Evangelisation in Lusanne, Switzerland in 1974.[278] He introduced it 'as a new term imported into theology to express a deeper meaning than indigenisation ever does.' He explained:

> *We understand the term to mean making concepts or ideals relevant in a given situation. In reference to Christian practices, it is an effort to express the never changing Word of God in ever changing modes for relevance. Since the Gospel message is inspired but the mode of its expression is not, contextualisation of the modes of expression is not only right but necessary.*[279]

Bruce Nichols also used the term contextualisation at the Lausanne Congress. Nichols stated that contextualisation 'includes all that is implied in indigenisation and more.' Nichols also cites the definition of Gadiel Isidro of Manila who defines contextualisation as:

> *the attempt [in relation to the task of communication in Asia] to analyse the situation and then from an absolute perspective of the Gospel make this absolute unchanging Gospel speak with relevance to the needs of Asia.*[280]

James Buswell draws our attention to the fact that focus of contextualisation for both Kato and Nichols at Lausanne was on communication:

> *the main focus of application was upon textual meanings refined and clarified for the receiving society in terms of their culture.*[281]

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[274] Bosch, ibid., p. 421; Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1985, p. 6-16; Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology*; and Peter Schineller, *Handbook on Inculturation*.
[275] Fleming, ibid., p. 3.
[276] ibid., p. ix.
[277] ibid., p. xi.
[278] James O. Buswell III, 'Contextualization: Theory, Tradition, and Method', in David J. Hesselgrave, *Theology and Mission*, Grand Rapids, Baker House, 1978, p. 87.
[279] Byang Kato, 'The Gospel Cultural Context and Religious Syncretism, in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, Worldwide Publication, Minneapolis, 1978, p. 1217.
[280] Bruce Nichols, 'Theological Education and Evangelisation', in *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, Worldwide Publication, Minneapolis, 1975, p. 637.

Inculturation is a term often used instead of contextualisation. Bosch credits Pierre Charles with introducing to missiology the concept 'enculturation' from cultural anthropology and J. Masson with coining the phrase 'Catholicisme inculturé' (inculturated Catholicism) in 1962.[282] The term inculturation quickly gained acceptance by the Jesuits and in 1977 the Jesuit superior-general Arrupe 'introduced the term to the Synod of Bishops'. The document which came out of the Synod, 'the Apostolic Exhortation, Catechesi Tradendae' gave it universal currency.[283]

Arrupe defined inculturation this way:

> *Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about 'a new creation'.*[284]

Inculturation is based on an analogy of the incarnation of God's son. Aylward Shorter's definition of inculturation is similar:

> *just as the Eternal son was incarnated, that is became a human being, not in general, but in the specific culture of lower-middle-class Galilean Jewry in the early first century, so the gospel today, and its human messengers, needs to become humanly incarnate in all of the specific cultures of the peoples to whom mission is addressed.*[285]

Inculturation is something that should occur naturally wherever the gospel is lived and shared. It is the best and most natural way to live and share one's faith as a Christian in a particular cultural setting. It includes how the church is organised, the liturgy, the music, language, the many and varied activities of the church and the life style of its members.

> *At its best the term combines the theological significance of incarnation with the anthropological concepts of enculturation and acculturation to create something new.*[286]

Enculturation is a term that is used by anthropologists to describe the process of being socialised into a culture. In the case of enculturation we come empty handed to the culture we are born into, but with a distinctively human competence to learn a culture.[287] Inculturation differs from enculturation in the following way.

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[281] Buswell III, ibid., p. 88.
[282] Bosch, ibid., p. 447.
[283] Catechesi Tradendae (Rome 1979) Ch. VII Section 53. This is the first time that the term inculturation apppears in a major papal document. Part of Ch. VII including Sections 52-52 are reprinted in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (eds), *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 1, Basic Statements 1974-1991*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 97.
[284] Arrupe cited in Peter Schineller, ibid., p. 6.
[285] Aylward Shorter in Charles Taber, *The World is Too Much With Us: 'Culture' in Modern Protestant Missions*, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 1991, p. 174.
[286] Schineller, ibid., 22.
[287] Luzbetak, ibid., p. 182.

> *Inculturation is not the same as enculturation, because in the case of inculturation the Christian does not come empty handed, but has a specific tradition to bring to the new situation.*[288]

Acculturation refers to the encounter between two cultures and the changes that result. The difference between acculturation and inculturation is that Christianity is not in the view of many just another culture. It has its own special uniqueness that can engage in a dialectic with any culture and it is possible for it to have its own unique expression in that culture, and yet still be recognisable as a Christian way of life.

The concept of inculturation was introduced in Protestant circles by Linwood Barney in the early 1970s. It appears that he was unaware of the Catholic usage of the term.[289] For him the analogy was anthropological, starting from the concepts of enculturation and acculturation

> *he devised a way of speaking about the way in which the 'supracultural' gospel could be effectively and appropriately expressed in the enormous diversity of human cultures, and came up with 'inculturation'.*[290]

The term inculturation is used by both Catholics and Protestants. It is often used interchangeably with contextualisation and both terms are used as a blanket term to cover various approaches. The emergence of contextualisation/inculturation demonstrates that there was a desire in all branches of the Church to deal at a deeper level with evangelisation and how converts can live as Christians in their context.[291] I have chosen to use the term contextualisation as it appears to be the most widely used term.

The attitudes of these two eras are represented in the theoretical models that describe the way missionaries approach the task of establishing and nurturing churches. The theoretical models are the subject of the next chapter.

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[288] Schineller, ibid., p. 220.
[289] Taber, ibid., p. 175.
[290] Taber, ibid., p. 175.
[291] Fleming, ibid., p. 3.

## Chapter Five

# MODELS DESCRIBING MISSIONARY WORK

Chapter five is concerned with theoretical models that can be used to describe retrospectively the way that missionaries approached their task of evangelisation and church planting. Alternatively they may also be used to gain an understanding of how an indigenous church is functioning. While in the era of non-contextualisation many missionaries did not consciously use a model to shape their approach to their task, in the era of contextualisation missionaries are more likely to use a particular model to guide their work.

In this chapter I will discuss models of imposition, accommodation and five different models of contextual theology looking at how each model deals with culture, Aboriginal agency and identity. I will suggest a new model that accounts for the presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians bring to contextualisation and allows them to interact with culture, social change, the gospel and traditions of the wider church. Furthermore it recognises the members of the local church as the agents of contextualisation.

When discussing the various models used to analyse missionary work I will use the broad categories of non-contextual and contextual. I will examine the models to identify their strengths and weaknesses and the importance the model attributes to Aboriginal agency, culture and identity.

Bevans,[292] in his book *Models of Contextual Theology*, points out that in the last two decades a number of books have been published that make use of models in their discussion of theology. Apart from Bevans' own book, there are books such as Avery Dulles (1974) *Models of the Church;* Bosch's *Transforming Mission*; Schreiter's *Constructing Local Theologies*; Schineller's *A Handbook on Inculturation* and Luzbetak's *The Church and Cultures,* that make use of models.

Dulles in his book *Models of Revelation* defines a model as:

> *a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated.*[293]

As Bevans points out, it is important to understand that models are constructions.[294] We should never regard them as mirrors of reality. They are best regarded as ideal types. They can be formed in two ways. A model can be a logically constructed theoretical position, or it can be an abstraction formed from a concrete position.

A model - in the sense that it is most often used in theology - is what is called a theoretical model. It is a 'case' that is useful in simplifying a complex reality, and although such simplification does not

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[292] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 22.
[293] A. Dulles, *Models of Revelation,* Doubleday and Company Inc., Garden City, New York, 1983, p. 30.
[294] Bevans, ibid., p. 24.

fully capture the reality, it does yield true knowledge of it. Theoretical models can either be exclusive and paradigmatic, or inclusive, descriptive and complementary. [295]

It is important to remember that models should not be taken literally. A model can give a window on reality but will not account for everything in a particular situation. Models help focus our attention on features of the matter being examined. A model is like a map which while it is not the territory represented gives a clear idea of what the territory is like. I will be using models to gain an understanding of the church at Ngukurr.

When using models to try and understand the reality of what is being investigated, it can be advantageous to use more than one model. Barbour refers to a model as an organising image that gives a particular emphasis and enables one to notice and interpret certain aspects of experience.[296] No one model can account for the complexity of the data. One model may highlight certain features of an experience. When a different model is used other features may come into focus. The reality of a situation such as the emergence of a church in a new culture can be complex. A clearer picture of the emergence of a new church may come from using more than one model to understand or describe the reality.

## MODELS AND THE IMPORTANCE THEY GIVE TO ABORIGINAL AGENCY

I am using models in two ways. The first is to gain an understanding of how missionaries approached their work of evangelisation and church nurturing. What were the ideas and expectations that they brought to the task, and in particular how did they perceive Aboriginal agency and culture? Secondly, I am attempting to use models to gain an understanding of how Aborigines at Ngukurr are contextualising the gospel. Is there any particular pattern in how Aborigines are contextualising and what they are bringing to the task?

A model as an organising image helps us to understand what the perspective of the missionaries was, and what occurred. There is a danger that models can over-simplify a situation. I am not suggesting that all missionaries viewed Aboriginal culture in the same way. They did not. Many did view it in a negative fashion, while others such as F.W. Albrecht early this century, spent an enormous amount of time learning the language, preaching in the language, learning about the Aboriginal way of life and consulting with Aborigines about things that affected the life of the church and community at Hermansburg.[297] Whereas Theodore Webb of the Methodist Missions in Arnhem Land lamented in a letter to the mission board just before he left Arnhem in 1939, after 13 years of work that he had not had time to learn the language and culture.

> *Why is it that there is not and never has been a single one of us with a real knowledge of an Aboriginal tongue? Why has there been not a Gospel translated into the tongue of the people? Why is there no properly organised religious or educational work to be found? Is it supposed that these things, which are recognised as of the first importance on other fields, are unnecessary here? Is it that the Board has struck*

[295] ibid., p. 26.
[296] I. G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*, New York, Harper and Row, 1974, p. 7.
[297] See *A Straight Out Man* by B. Henson., in particular pp. 22, 47-9, 52-4, 81-1, 60-92 and 251-3.

*in us such a lot of duds that we are incapable of accomplishing them? Or is it that the policy of the Board has rendered it impossible for us to attempt them?*[298]

He was not alone in this. I heard a number of missionaries express similar sentiments in the 1970s in the Kimberley and Arnhem Land.

It is important to see models as tendencies. There are always exceptions and always movement towards a new model. In a situation that one might describe as paternalistic there could be some missionaries who are not paternalistic or ethnocentric and who struggle to contextualise the gospel. Conversely it is possible for a person who believes in contextualisation of the gospel to be paternalistic and dominant in the way they relate to the church and the local community. Or while objecting to the ethnocentrism of past missionaries a missionary may still be guilty of a subtle ethnocentrism. He might for example live in a society that operates on consensus and try to insist that church government must be by majority vote. Implicit contextualisation or ethnocentrism does occur.

## NON-CONTEXTUAL MODELS

Non-contextual models describe much of missionary work in Australia and throughout the world prior to 1950, though these approaches have not entirely disappeared today. These models highlight general tendencies rather than account for the work of every mission or missionary. There were always exceptions. Non-contextual models fall into two broad categories, models of imposition and models of accommodation.

### Models of Imposition

Schineller defines the method of imposition as one in which:

*Doctrines, religious customs, morals, and ways of praying and acting are brought from the outside, from a foreign or alien culture and tradition, and imposed or forced upon the new culture. It shows no appreciation, no respect or regard, for the values, customs, and religious traditions of the group that is the object of mission.*[299]

Models of imposition place no value on the culture in which the missionary works. Christianity was so well contextualised into a culture whether it was British, German or Irish that missionaries could not separate Christianity from these cultures. They assumed that the way they lived the Christian life, worshipped and understood the faith was the only way to do so.

The problem with imposition is that it imposes a finished product on top of another culture. Christianity is regarded as a finished product that can be easily exported from one culture to another.[300] The package is delivered complete with liturgy, church organisation, and the propositional theology that was common in the missionary's own denomination. Often it came with a foreign language. There is no thought that a different culture might want to do theology in way that is consistent with its own way of thinking and life, nor that there might be culturally appropriate ways to conduct liturgy, build churches, do theology.

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[298]Maisie McKenzie quotes this but does not document the source. *Mission To Arnhem Land*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1976, p. 99.

[299] Schineller, ibid., p. 14.

[300] ibid., p. 15.

Models of imposition have commonly been labelled as ethnocentric. Luzbetak identifies three ethnocentric models. These are paternalism, triumphalism, and racism and class prejudice.[301] None of these attached any importance to Aboriginal agency, culture or identity. Rather they expected that Aborigines who converted to Christianity would accept the European way of life. Thus the missionary was the one who knew how Aborigines should live as Christians and little or no regard was given to Aborigines contextualising the gospel into their way of life.

In discussing models of imposition I am using them to gain an understanding of how missionaries whose work can be described by these models viewed Aboriginal agency, culture and identity.

*Paternalism*

In this model the missionary is the one who knows best. He or she is the authority on how the converts should live and run their church. The missionary is in the dominant position and Aboriginal agency is of little importance. Paternalism regards the new Christians as unable to take care of their smallest spiritual needs and incapable of running their own churches or becoming fully ordained ministers for a considerable time. The paternalistic sending church or missionary insists on playing parent to the new church and always finds a reason for retaining control.

In Australia it was a long time before the mainline churches ordained Aboriginal ministers and allowed Aborigines to have full responsibility for their churches. In the Northern Territory the first Aborigines to be ordained were Conrad Raberaba and Peter Bulla of Hermansburg. The Lutheran Church ordained them in 1964 nearly one hundred years after they commenced work in the Northern Territory. The Methodists commenced work in 1916 and ordained Lazarus Lamilami of the Crocker Methodist mission in 1966. The Anglicans established their first mission in 1908 and ordained Gumbuli Wurramara as a priest in 1973. Sometimes it was the denomination that was tardy in approving ordination not the missionaries. At Ngukurr in 1953 there were men who were regarded as good candidates for ordination but the requirement of the Bishop of the Diocese that they needed six years formal training away from Ngukurr proved too arduous, and ordination was delayed another 20 years.[302]

This was justified at the time by the view that the only way for Aboriginal priests to be equal to White priests was for them both to be trained in exactly the same way. In reality it failed to acknowledge culturally acceptable ways of preparing Aborigines for ordination and left the missionary clergy in charge of Aboriginal churches.

For the Anglicans it was the combination of the Northern Territory becoming a diocese in its own right in 1968, the illness of the missionary chaplain and the church being successfully taken care of by Gumbuli Wurramara as the lay leader, that resulted in his ordination as a worker priest in November 1973. Prior to his ordination he had undertaken a number of short training courses.

Part of the reason for this long delay was that the educational and theological requirements for ordination made it very difficult for Aborigines to qualify. It was only when the mainline churches were prepared to look at ordination requirements for Aborigines in a different way and established

[301] Luzbetak, ibid., p. 66.

[302] The Anglican situation is discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Also in Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985, p. 79.

Nungalinya College in 1973 to provide theological education in an appropriate way, that ordination became much more accessible to Aborigines.

The long delay in ordaining Aboriginal men on the various missions in the Northern Territory, meant that Aborigines were not seen as equals in the church and control remained in the hands of the missionary clergy. This delayed the emergence of an independent Aboriginal Church.[303] Furthermore it kept Aborigines in an inferior position. It recognised Aboriginal agency only when it conformed to their expectations. The missionary clergy were the ones who best understood how Christianity should be lived and often they made decisions that should have been made by Aboriginal Christians.

*Triumphalism*

Triumphalism is when a culture is convinced that its culture is so successful and beneficial that the way its members live and work will benefit all who follow suit. In regards to mission Luzbetak defines it this way:

> *Triumphalism, …. is the conviction of the sending church that it has been so successful and so blessed that it now has a manifest destiny to share with the receiving church not only its faith but more importantly, the special purely cultural qualities of that faith.*[304]

This approach to missions contributed to the Evangelisation or Civilisation first debate, worldwide as well as in Australia. The debate was not about whether Aborigines should be in the European way of life but whether they should be civilised before they were evangelised or vice versa. The two were seen as closely related, no matter whether the missionary viewed that civilisation or evangelisation should come first. This debate about the correct approach to missionary work was well underway when the first missionary arrived in Australia.[305] The debate missed a vital point. It gave no recognition to Aboriginal agency in conversion and church life, except where they changed their lifestyle and adopted a European way of life.

The belief that European Civilisation and Christianity were part of the same package put a large barrier in the way of Aborigines becoming Christians. Europeanization meant giving people the skills they needed to fit into European society. Woolmington points out that for many nineteenth century missionaries '*the rejection of pagan ways was as important as the rejection of pagan religion.*'[306] This sent negative messages to Aborigines about their own culture. It also alienated the two groups because while missionaries regarded Aboriginal culture as inferior Aborigines did not. It meant that if they converted to Christianity they had to become in everything, but colour, a white person. Aboriginal agency would in this situation consist of adopting a European lifestyle. It may have been freely chosen but the context of the choice was entirely imposed from outside.

Samuel Marsden, an Anglican clergyman, who was not a missionary, but had enormous influence over the early missionaries of the Church Missionary Society, The London Missionary Society and

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[303] Bill Edwards, 'Ministering in Aboriginal Churches', in *Nelen Yubu*, 1989, no. 40, p. 4.
[304] Luzbetak, ibid., p. 66.
[305] Jean Woolmington, 'The Civilization/Christianization Debate and the Australian Aborigines', in *Aboriginal History*, vol. 10, part 2, 1986; and Early Christian Missions to the Aborigines - A Study in Failure, PhD thesis, University of New England, 1979, pp. 170-215.
[306] ibid., p. 90.

Wesleyan Missionary Society, held to the view for most of his life that civilisation had to precede Christianization. He wrote in 1822

> *Missionaries going amongst savage nations are very differently situated from those who go to preach the gospel to civilized heathens. It is necessary to introduce the simple arts among the savages in order to arrest their idle vagrant habits. I think it will be very difficult for missionaries to maintain their ground in any savage country without the introduction of arts and commerce.*[307]

Among evangelical missionaries it was believed that conversion to Christianity would enable Aborigines to become civilised. There was a belief that social progress in the direction of civilisation was somehow tied up with the message of atonement and conversion to Christianity.[308]

Not all missionaries thought it necessary to civilise before a person would be capable of becoming a Christian. Lancelot Threlkeld, who opened a mission at Lake Macquarie in 1826 was one who held that Aborigines could be converted to Christianity without being civilised first.

However, even those who held to evangelisation first, still expected Aboriginal Christians to become Europeanized. In the end the debate was theoretical as applied to the early period of missionary work in Australia. By 1850 all early missionary work among Aborigines in the colony of New South Wales was deemed a failure. Twenty seven years after Walker, the first missionary, arrived in Australia all the first generation of missions in New South Wales had been abandoned.[309] The idea that the Aborigines needed to be civilised was to remain for a long time. As mentioned in chapter two it was for many years a part of the way that missionaries approached their work at the Roper River Mission after it commenced in 1908.

When Christianity was equated with European civilisation it communicated to Aborigines that the White community as a whole represented Christianity. Given the hostile behaviour of a large part of the White community towards Aborigines it would not commend Christianity to them. Why should they want to accept the Christianity and civilisation of those who had brought such wholesale destruction to them and their way of life? John Harris reports that a thoughtful Aboriginal man told his father on one occasion:

> *that some Aborigines thought the Christian God was a weak God because White people so flagrantly broke his laws and remained unpunished.*[310]

In spite of these views, missionaries were usually compassionate people and when Aborigines got to know them, they were quick to see that missionaries were different to most other Whites they had dealings with. An example of this is when 'King Bob' encouraged his people and Aborigines of his acquaintance to go to the new Roper River Mission.[311]

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[307] cited in Harris, ibid., p. 79.

[308] See R. Joynt, 'Ten Years at the Roper River Mission Station, Northern Territory, Australia', *Gleaner*. Neil Gunson also makes the same point about evangelical missionaries in the pacific in *Messengers of Grace*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1979, p. 267.

[309] Jean Woolmington, 'Writing on the Sand', ibid., p. 88; and Early Christian Missions to the Australian Aborigines, 1979, pp. 216-90 for a detailed discussion about the failure of the early missions.

[310] Harris, ibid., p. 701.

[311] See chapter one of this thesis.

The view that Aborigines should assimilate to the White culture was common amongst missionaries as well as other Australians until the early 1970s. Assimilation was the official government policy for Aborigines from 1938 until it was replaced by a policy of self-determination in the early 1970s. It was thought by those like Professor Elkin who advocated that assimilation become official policy, that it would bring Aborigines the benefits of citizenship. Aboriginal activists like William Cooper, William Ferguson and David Unaipon thought it would bring justice and give them equality.[312]

Much of the missionary work in Australia until the 1970s could be characterised as triumphal. This approach was characteristic of much of the early missionary work in Australia. What did set most of the missionaries apart from other Whites in Australia at the time was that they believed that Aborigines were human, and therefore could be civilised.[313]

Like paternalism this model had little regard for the local culture and regards Christianity as a package to be delivered. Models of paternalism and triumphalism highlight certain characteristics and tendencies of mission work. However in both cases we are looking at what happened through Western eyes and know little of what Aborigines were thinking and doing. The models say little about Aboriginal agency or context except how the missionaries regarded them. We are not getting the full picture. Without an understanding of what Aborigines were thinking and doing, we are not gaining a full understanding of what was happening. Because the missionaries did not recognise Aboriginal agency, does not mean that it was not being exercised.

*Racism and Class prejudice model*

This form of ethnocentrism judges people on the basis of the colour of skin, and those who have darker skin are regarded as second class citizens even in the church. This manifested itself in the church in some parts of the world in the unfortunate and biblically incorrect doctrine that those who had darker skin were descendants of Noah's son, Ham, and therefore cursed and second rate. Such people could not be ordained or be responsible for running local churches. Local culture is again totally ignored and no attention given to contextualising the gospel. Christianity was seen as a complete package in which the local people could be grateful for limited participation.

John Harris in his book *One Blood* argues that some of the early missionaries to Aborigines, did hold the view that all dark skinned people were under the curse of Ham and therefore inferior. He gives as an example William Walker the first missionary to the Aborigines, saying that he held this view when he first arrived in Australia.[314] While many missionaries, when encountering Aborigines, regarded their way of life as totally alien to their own and therefore inferior, they were prepared to be immovable in their contention that Aborigines were also human beings.[315] Thus there appears to have been some ambivalence in their views of Aborigines regarding them as inferior but still human and capable of adopting a civilised way of life.

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[312] See Tigger Wise, *The Self-Made Anthropologist*, George Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1985, pp. 141-5; and Harris, ibid., 1990, ch 10.

[313] Andrew Markus, *Australian Race Relations*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, NSW, 1994, p. 49-53; and Henry Reynolds, *Frontier*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1987,
pp. 83-107 and in particular pp. 93-5.

[314] Harris, ibid., pp. 30-6, 47.

[315] Harris, ibid., pp. 32-6.

Missionary work in Australia was not usually formulated on a basis of outright racism.[316] It was characterised more by paternalism and triumphalism, with racist overtones. Many missionaries did see European culture as superior but in attempting to civilise Aborigines they wished to lift them up, to share in the benefits of the superior culture. Many missionaries and clergy clearly defended their view that Aborigines were fellow human beings and part of the human race.

Catholic Archbishop, John Bede Polding and his fellow bishops clearly expressed their view in a pastoral letter in 1869.

> *[Some of our fellow colonists] have in justification of a great crime, striven to believe that these black men are not of our race, are not our fellow creatures. We Catholics know assuredly how false this is: we know that one soul of theirs is, like one of our own, of more worth than the whole material world, that any human soul is of more worth, as it is of greater cost, than the whole mere matter of this earth, its sun and its system or, indeed, of all the glories of he firmament* [317]

Missionaries who thought that Aborigines should be lifted up to European civilisation did not consider how Aborigines would contextualise Christianity into their way of life. It was expected that Aboriginal converts would embrace a White way of life and renounce their own dying culture. However missionaries who stayed long enough to appreciate and understand Aborigines often developed views of respect for Aborigines and their way of life, and wanted to see Aborigines incorporate the gospel into their way of life. John Fallon describes what his view was when he arrived at Nguiu on Bathurst Island in the late 1950s:

> *I was there to 'save souls' according to the then Church and Diocesan Plan: help the people become Australian citizens and true members of the Catholic Church - our way! No language is tolerated in school - or church! Don't try to interest yourself in pagan ceremonies: they must go! So I being a devoted Catholic priest and obeying the policy of the diocese, didn't bother about language or ceremonies. In fact I was a Saul on the way to Damascus, ready to break up any such 'pagan' ceremonies: against the First commandment, I was told they were. I can recall vividly two such occasions when in my Saulian zeal I marched up to Jubilee Park, strode angrily into the middle of a ceremony, a Kulama (life-preserving ceremony and very sacred to the Tiwi -it continues to this day) where old Enraeld was the leader, and gave them all 'a piece of my mind'. I told off the tribal leader, the guru of his clan, a fount of wisdom and tribal knowledge, and said he should be ashamed of himself, bringing into the Mission this pagan and superstitious ceremony. I told him to leave and not come back. (Later I baptised him with his two wives. Recently old Aloysius reminded me of the occasion, with a great smile on his face…)* [318]

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[316] R. Broome, *Aboriginal Australians*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1982,
pp. 101-19, in his discussion of missionaries refers to the racist attitudes that some of them held; pp. 87-100 is a discussion of racism.

[317] 'The Bishops of Australia on Christian Duty to the Aboriginal People', 1969, in O'Farrell, *Documents in Australian Catholic History*, Geoffrey Chapman, Melbourne, vol. 1, pp. 414-15.

[318] John A. Fallon, 'The Good Old Days', in *Nelen Yubu*, 1991, no. 48, p. 13.

He goes on to report that he has changed his view and now encourages those who are ministers to reflect on their culture and their own lives as Tiwi Catholics.

The models of imposition, when used to view missionary work among Aborigines last century and most of this century give an understanding of why a strong Aboriginal church did not emerge in Australia for a long time. As these models describe missionary work in Australia it suggests that the paternalism, the confusion of civilisation with the gospel, and a prejudice that regarded Aborigines as inferior, all conspired to construct a view of Aborigines that left little room for an Aboriginal Christian identity. Aborigines were seen as human and as having a soul. However they needed civilising and evangelising so that they could experience the benefits of Western civilisation and be uplifted. This view of Aborigines put the missionaries into a position of superiority when contrasted to Aborigines, who were viewed as the pagan other. It did not expect Aborigines to exercise agency in contextualising the gospel into their way of life. There was no need to as Aborigines would become civilised. On the other hand while many Aborigines were interested in the new ideas in the gospel message they were not so interested in having to adopt a White way of living as they did not regard their culture as inferior.

The failure of many, but by no means all, missionaries to appreciate and respect Aboriginal culture meant that they actually made it more difficult for Aborigines to accept Christianity, which was the main motivation of missionaries who went to work with Aborigines. The interesting thing is that there were Aborigines who chose to embrace Christianity and became recognised Christian leaders in their communities but they did not totally abandon the Aboriginal way of life.

Models of imposition failed to recognise Aboriginality as valid. They only recognised agency when actions initiated by Aborigines moved towards doing what they thought was best for Aborigines. The models give an understanding of the approach of missionaries to evangelisation and establishing churches but they give little understanding to what Aborigines were thinking and doing on the missions.

**Accommodation Model**

In this section I will be using the accommodation model to understand the approach of those missionaries who saw some good in indigenous culture.

When missions were undergoing rapid expansion in the nineteenth century Western Christians were unaware that their theology was culturally conditioned. They assumed that it was supracultural and universally valid. As Western culture was Christian it was necessary to export the culture along with the Christian faith. It was soon realised that to expedite the conversion process, some adjustments were necessary.[319] The strategy by which the adjustments 'were to be put into effect were variously called adaptation or accommodation (in Catholicism) or indigenisation (in Protestantism)'. [320] The term accommodation will be used for this discussion.

While many adjustments were made, they often dealt with things like liturgical rites, art and music instead of the wider context that influenced a person's world view. Accommodation models are different to models of imposition as they give some attention to the context. As such they are the forerunners of contextual models. On the surface the local culture appears to have been acknowledged

[319] Bosch, ibid., p. 448.
[320] ibid.

but underneath it was still a Western church and one that the Western missionary had trouble regarding as mature and not needing him or her.

The accommodation approach accepted that 'other cultures contain elements that are consistent with the gospel'[321] and that they should be incorporated into the local Christian community's way of life. These cultural elements should also be used to adapt the message and liturgy.[322] The 'neutral' and 'naturally good' elements of a culture [323] can be employed as a contact point for Christianity and may be used as foundation-blocks on which to build the new Christian community.[324]

Accommodation saw Christianity as consisting of a kernel and husk. The husk was the cultural wrapping that could be changed, but the kernel had to remain unchanged. The unalloyed kernel was the Christian faith as understood by Western theology. The cultural accoutrements of the people to whom the missionaries went were the expendable husk.[325] This approach left theology firmly in the hands of the Western Church. Members of a different culture could have some input into what was the appropriate husk, but that was all. Where elements of Aboriginal culture were acceptable to missionaries, they were endorsed. Aboriginal art is found in a number of churches. Maningrida Uniting Church has a bark panel that was executed by local people.[326] Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr painted the 'Stations of the Cross' in Aboriginal style at Daly River.[327] Church architecture has sometimes acknowledged Aboriginal preferences. The church at Numbulwar has a sand floor because the people prefer to sit on soft sand. Aboriginal customs of looking after one's relatives and sharing one's possessions were seen as consistent with Christianity, whereas polygamy was held to be inconsistent with Christianity.

One aspect of the accommodation approach was the three selves theory. It aimed to see independent churches that were self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. The weakness of this approach is that a church that is self-governing, self-supporting and self propagating, is not necessarily a truly indigenous church. The way it structures itself and functions could reflect how former missionaries thought a church should be structured and function, and not necessarily be the choice of the people. Bill Edwards quotes a letter from Paul Albrecht in 1988 that offers the following reflections on what the Lutherans had done in this area.

> *In retrospect, it is fairly clear that what we have done, was superimpose on the Aboriginal Christians our forms of ministry. To give a few examples. By assigning to the various Pastors areas of ministry with a number of congregations, we assumed a fulltime ministry of preaching, teaching, counselling, etc., financially supported by the congregations the Pastor served, with a small subsidy from the Finke River Mission. Of course we received from them what appeared to be their agreement. What we understand more clearly now, is that if you put to Aboriginal people a plan which to them indicates you do not understand how things are done in their society,*

[321] Luzbetak, ibid., p. 67.
[322] Schineller, ibid., p. 16.
[323] For example: Moral rules against stealing, adultery, greed. Ideals of peace and harmony, looking after family and relatives.
[324] Luzbetak, ibid., p. 67.
[325] Bosch, ibid., p. 449.
[326] McKenzie, 1976, ibid., p. 149.
[327] Farrelly, ibid., pp. 42-5.

*it means you do not agree with how they do things. The idea is then seen as your idea, and in their terms, you are quite welcome to your idea. However, because it is your idea, it is also your responsibility to make it work. Hence the Aboriginal ministry as presently structured is largely seen as having been introduced and structured by us, and therefore as our responsibility, financially and otherwise.*[328]

The intention to give Aboriginal Lutherans full responsibility for their churches had not come to full fruition, as an outside form of ministry had been superimposed and the resultant problems were seen as the responsibility of the Lutheran church and not the local churches.

*Albrecht then writes that for the present there will be no more ordinations but the licensing of men to preach and perform sacraments within their families, so that they will be seen as having a special role and function similar to that of traditional Aboriginal elders. 'Our intention… is to help establish a Ministry which operates within the culture, and which is therefore accountable to the people, and for which the people feel responsible.' (Albrecht, 1988:2) The fact that the Lutheran Church in Central Australia, which has been pioneering and innovative in encouraging Aboriginal ministry, has seen the need to revise its procedures, should cause all involved in such developments to re-examine the effectiveness and appropriateness of their programs.*[329]

When fulltime specialist positions are created in a society that did not have such people it can create problems. In Aboriginal society one man was not responsible for religious teaching and the passing on of traditions. Iinstead it was the responsibility of a group of men. Also when one is ordained to a position after extensive training away from the community, it may undermine the authority of those who have been active in the church before. They feel inadequate because they have not had the training. At Ngukurr when two deaconesses were appointed to the church in an honorary capacity after four years at Nungalinya College, local people were loath for some time to continue to assume responsibility for church activities that they had previously been responsible for, as they had not been trained at Nungalinya.

While the accommodation approach gave more recognition to Aboriginal cultures than did the imposition approach, it was inadequate in a number of ways. Bosch has identified eight problems with the accommodation approach to missionary work.[330]

1. It was still 'prefabricated' Western theology that was presented.

2. It was a concession that third-world Christians could use some elements of their culture to give expression to their new faith.

3. Only those elements not contaminated by pagan religions could be used.

4. The word 'elements' suggests that cultures were not seen as complete wholes. In Enlightenment fashion culture could be separated into components. This allowed for some components to be isolated and employed in service of the Christian church.

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[328] Bill Edwards, 'Ministry in Aboriginal Churches,' in *Nelen Yubu*, 1989, no. 40, pp. 8-9.
[329] ibid., p. 9.
[330] Bosch, ibid., p. 448.

5. Accommodation was seen as a problem only for the 'young' churches. In the Western Church accommodation had been a fait accompli for centuries.

6. Terms like adaptation and accommodation suggested that the changes were peripheral. It was concerned with the form and garb of Christianity. The philosophy behind all of this was that of a division between kernel and husk.

7. The older churches saw themselves as giving to the young churches, but they were not dependent on receiving anything from the 'young' churches.

8. The initiatives came from the missionaries rather than the newly converted.

The accommodation approach to culture is far better than that of imposition models. It does acknowledge that there are good elements in the culture as opposed to seeing it as all bad. It does want to see indigenous Aboriginal churches. The weakness was that in seeking to recognise Aboriginal church leadership the structures of the dominant majority in Australia were usually imposed. It was Aboriginal in name but reflected the structures of the church that had founded the missions. Aboriginal agency had been given some recognition but not enough. In the above example given by Paul Albrecht, Aboriginal agency had been given a lot of recognition. Yet it appears that more listening by the representatives of the wider Lutheran Church in Australia was necessary. There needed to be more dialogue back and forth between Aborigines and the Lutheran Church about the appropriate form for an Aboriginal ministry. Aboriginal agency needs to be listened to, as well as recognised.

The accommodation model gives an understanding of how missionaries who used that approach regarded Aboriginal culture and agency. The weakness is that it does not tell us much about how Aborigines viewed and understood the gospel.

Models of imposition and accommodation seem to assume that members of other cultures passively went along with what the missionaries taught. This was not the case at Ngukurr where Aborigines, from an early stage, saw themselves as responsible for evangelization of the area. Those who became Christians chose to continue to identify as Aborigines and retained most of their way of life choosing to assimilate what they thought was useful from White society and rejecting the rest. This is discussed in depth in the next four chapters.

## CONTEXTUAL MODELS

Contextual theologies have gained wide acceptance since the 1950s. The reasons for their emergence and what they consist of are discussed in this section. I have chosen to explore contextual models of theology as they go beyond abstract theology and consider the context in which people live their Christian faith. Good contextual theology is concerned with both orthodoxy and orthopraxis. Bevans defines contextual theology as having four elements:

> *Contextual theology can be defined as a way of doing theology in which one takes into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people: the culture in which one is theologizing: and social change in that culture, whether brought about by western technological process or the grass-roots struggle for equality, justice and liberation.*[331]

[331] Bevans, ibid., p. 1.

What is new about contextual theologies is that human experience is to be considered along with Scripture and tradition. While classical theology was objective, contextual theology is subjective in that it points to the fact that the human person or human society, culturally and historically bound as it is, is the source of reality, not a supposed value and culture-free objectivity 'already out there now real'. [332]

As Charles Kraft puts it:

> *there is always a difference between reality and human culturally conditioned understandings (model) of that reality. We assume that there is a reality 'out there' but it is the mental constructs (models) of that reality inside our heads that are the most real to us. God, the author of reality, exists outside any culture. Human beings, on the other hand, are always bound by cultural, subcultural (including disciplinary), and psychological conditioning to perceive and interpret what they see of reality in ways appropriate to these conditionings. Neither the absolute God nor the reality he created is perceived absolutely by culture-bound human beings.*[333]

A study of church history shows that contextualisation is not new. Contextual theologies can be found in the New Testament and throughout church history. The decision of the Jerusalem Council in the book of Acts in the New Testament that converts to Christianity did not have to become Jewish proselytes is an important example. The early theologians after the New Testament era, tried to make sense of the faith in terms of the dominant Hellenistic culture. Later Thomas Aquinas used the newly discovered works of Aristotle and the works of other philosophers to forge a new synthesis of Christianity.

In the language of contextualisation, Thomas listened openly to the new ideas, new methods, and new culture that came with Aristotle. He evaluated them and accepting the true and the good, accepting that the same God who spoke through Jesus Christ could also speak through the writings of this pagan philosopher.[334]

Contextual models of theology are different from propositional models of theology, in that they are concerned with the context in which the theology is worked out. They are about living the Christian life in a specific context. Theology is worked out and applied by and with the people in a specific context. The old way of working with theology was to work with abstract propositions about God and the church. Their main interlocutor was the educated unbeliever. Contextual theologies have not discarded doctrines previously held by the church but deal with theology as it impinges on people's lives. They are concerned more with orthopraxis than orthodoxy.

> *Theology that is contextual realises that culture, history, contemporary thought forms, and so forth are to be considered along with Scripture and tradition, as valid sources for theological expression.*[335]

Bevans puts forward two sets of external and internal factors that show why theology now needs to take account of context.

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[332] ibid., p. 2.
[333] Charles Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, 1979, p. 300.
[334] Schineller, ibid., p. 33.
[335] Bevans, ibid., p. 2.

**External factors**

The four external factors that he identifies are:

1. There is a general dissatisfaction in both the First and Third Worlds with classical approaches to theology. In the First World the various classical philosophies that have served as bases for theology in the past do not seem to resonate with contemporary society. Theology that is unchanging, is today challenged in the name of relevance. At the same time the Third World is becoming convinced that traditional approaches to theology do not really make sense within their cultures and thought patterns.

2. Context is important today because the traditional theologies of the past were oppressive in only seeing theology from the way they understood it. The insistence of classical western theology on individual salvation was disruptive in societies that operated on a communal basis. In Latin America traditional theology was used ideologically to support the dominance of the rich and powerful and gave no hope to the poor. Older approaches to theology contained many assumptions about male superiority and this led to distortions regarding the notion of God, liturgical language and the role of women in ministry.

3. The growing identity of local churches is fostering the development of contextual theologies. As they realise their values are as good or better than those of the colonising nations interest grows in a theology that takes account of their context.

4. Underlying all the above is the understanding of culture that is provided by the social sciences. Bevans follows Bernard Lonergan in distinguishing between a classicist notion of culture and one that is empirical. The classicist idea of culture, is that there is really only one culture that is universal and permanent. One became cultured by listening to the works of musicians like Bach, reading the writings of authors like Homer, and Dickens and appreciating the art of artists like Michelangelo and Rembrandt. The empiricist defines culture as a set of meanings and values that inform life. There are many such sets throughout the world. One is 'cultured' by being socialised within a particular culture. If a person works out of the classicist notion of culture there can be only one theology and there is only one culture. Whereas if a person works fromthe empirical definition of culture local theologies are appropriate. Theology is the way religion makes sense within a particular culture.[336]

**Internal factors**

Bevans identifies three internal factors that are really the dynamics of Christianity itself. They are strong arguments for a theology to take account of culture and cultural change, as it attempts to understand the Christian faith.[337]

1. The first is the incarnational nature of Christianity. God's self became flesh. God became present as a man among people. Rene Padilla expresses it this way:

> *The incarnation unmistakably demonstrates God's intention to make himself known from within the human situation. Because of the very nature of the gospel, we know this Gospel only as a message contextualised in culture.*[338]

[336] ibid., pp. 5-7.
[337] ibid., pp.7-9.
[338] Rene Padilla, 'The Contextualization of the Gospel', in eds Charles H. Kraft and Tom N. Wisely, *Readings in Dynamic Indigeneity*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1979, p. 286.

2. The second factor is the sacramental nature of reality. The incarnation proclaimed that God is revealed primarily not in ideas but in concrete reality. It is in the flesh of Jesus that we encounter God most fully. Encounters with God can also take place through concrete things such as the waters of baptism, the remembering of community with the bread and wine of communion, the oil used for healing or in a gesture of forgiveness and reconciliation. These proclaim that at any moment persons and things can become transparent and reveal their creator as present in creation. If the ordinary things of life can reveal the presence of God then one can speak of contexts as sacramental and so revelatory. The continuing task of theology is to reveal God's presence in a truly sacramental world.

3. There has been a shift in the understanding of divine revelation and as an internal factor this is determining the nature of contextual theology. In the past theology was often understood mainly in terms of propositions. The shift has been to exploring the idea of revelation in more interpersonal terms. Revelation is now conceived of in terms of:

> *a personal self-offer of God's very self to men and women, an offer of friendship and loving relationship, it must be asked whether such an offer could be made in any way except in terms that men and women could understand.*[339]

Thus contextualisation does not see itself as at the fringes of theology. Rather it is at the very centre of what it means to do theology in today's world. Contextualisation is a theological imperative.

**Emergence of a new paradigm**

In the era of contextualisation theology is not the only field that is experiencing a major change. Bosch argues that today theology is taking account of context because at the moment we are undergoing one of the changes in macro paradigm that occurs every 200 to 300 years. The last such major shift took place at the time of the Enlightenment. Today there is a shift away from the enlightenment era and the rationalism and the tremendous confidence and feeling of superiority that it gave the West. A new paradigm is emerging.

Today scholars in all disciplines are pre-occupied with the meta questions concerning their discipline and there is a growing awareness that we live in an era where we are changing from one way of understanding reality to another.

> *Today there is a growing sense of disaffection with the Enlightenment and a quest for a new approach to and understanding of reality. There is, on the one hand, a search under way for a new paradigm; on the other hand a new paradigm is presenting itself.*[340]

This is also true of theology and missiology. The transition from one paradigm to another takes time. Often it does not come about by taking a rational scientific next step. [341]

> *For individuals moving from an old paradigm to a new it often comes about more by flashes of 'intuition,' indeed of 'conversion'.*[342]

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[339] Bevans, ibid., pp. 8-10.
[340] Bosch, ibid., p. 185.
[341] Bosch, ibid., p. 184.
[342] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition, enlarged, University of Chicago, Chicago, 1970, pp. 122-3.

The idea of macro-paradigms implies that each new macro-paradigm makes a fundamental break with the paradigm that preceded it.

Bosch argues that a post modern macro paradigm is emerging. This paradigm challenges rationality, the subjecting of the physical world to the human mind and will, and the idea that the answer to everything lay in development and progress. Objectivity is now questioned. The interpretation of facts is now seen to be conditioned by the scientific plausibility structure which is largely socially and culturally produced. Contrary to expectation, religion did not disappear or die. Instead Christianity, Islam and Buddhism have been revitalised.[343]

In theology the shift from one paradigm to a new paradigm and its application to mission has not been abrupt.

> *Most contemporary theologians have grown up within the parameters of the Enlightenment paradigm but find themselves today thinking and working in terms of two paradigms.*[344]

They are struggling to understand the new emerging paradigm, which in missions Bosch has labelled the emerging ecumenical paradigm, while still influenced by the paradigm of the Enlightenment.[345]

Bosch argues that the world of the era of contextualisation is a vastly different world to what existed prior to World War Two. Enormous changes have taken place politically, socially and culturally. These, together with the change experienced at the macro-paradigm level, confront Christian mission with issues that were never thought of before and demand responses that are relevant to today and in harmony with the Christian faith. Bosch identifies seven of these though I argue that the first two are not exclusive to this era.[346]

1. The West, the home of Christianity for more than a millennium, is no longer dominant in the world. I would interpret this as being true in an imperialistic and numerical sense, but in many other ways the West is still a dominant influence politically and materially. It is possible to interpret Bosch's argument as that the West is no longer numerically the dominant force in Christianity. Christianity now exhibits far more vitality in other areas of the world. It is growing fastest in Africa where the rapid increase of independent churches has occurred after the shackles of Western imperialism were removed. It is thriving in South America and parts of Asia.[347]

2. The structures that cause oppression and exploitation are challenged as unjust in ways not seen before. The struggles against racism and sexism are examples of this. I do not regard this as unique to the present, as in the past Christians have challenged the structures that allowed slavery to exist, widows to be burned in India, lepers to be treated as outcastes, and child labour to be exploited.

3. Today there is a profound ambiguity about progress especially as represented by Western technology and development. Western technology has been a mixed blessing, sometimes inadvertently creating as many problems as it solves and often not transferring well to other cultures.

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[343] ibid., p. 476.
[344] ibid., p. 188.
[345] ibid., pp. 368-507.
[346] ibid., pp. 188-9.
[347] Barrett, 1997, ibid., supports this.

4. We now know that the earth's resources are finite and that we live on a shrinking globe. People and their environment are now perceived as mutually independent.

5. Today we need an ecological response to our ability to kill God's earth and the threat of a nuclear holocaust challenges us to work for peace and justice. This is now attempted on a global scale.

6. The superiority of Western theology is challenged by other theologies that are emerging in different parts of the world. Western theology is now often regarded as only one way of doing theology. Other cultures want to do theology in a way that is suitable to their context. This is a new situation as western theology was supreme for a thousand years.

7. The superiority of Christianity over other religions is no longer taken for granted. Freedom of religion is now regarded as a basic human right. This means that Christians must re-evaluate their attitude to other religions and how they relate to them.

It is against this background that contextual theology has emerged. It represents an epistemological break when compared with traditional theologies. Contextual theologies are concerned with praxis and a dialectal way of knowing truth. Here is a new way to do theology. In the past:

> *theology was an elitist enterprise conducted from above. Its main source apart from Scripture and tradition was philosophy, and its main interlocutor was the educated unbeliever. Contextual theology turns this on its head. It is theology from below. Its main source, apart from Scripture and tradition, is the social sciences. Though possibly only those members of the Third World who have been educated in the Western model use the social sciences in this way, as the social sciences as a discipline originated in the West. The poor or the culturally marginalised are its main interlocutor.*[348]

An important part of this new theology is the priority of praxis. Theology says Gutiérrez, is '*critical reflection on Christian praxis in the light of the word of God*.'[349] The new priority given to praxis involves Christian reflection on an issue followed by action followed by further reflection. It does not follow the traditional western philosophical way of doing theology in a way that was removed from society.

The difference between traditional western epistemology and the emerging epistemology is explained by Sergio Torres as representing a new way of knowing, a dialectical one.

> *The traditional way of knowing considers the truth as the conformity of the mind to a given object, a part of Greek influence in the western philosophical tradition. Such a concept of truth only conforms to and legitimises the world as it now exists. But there is another way of knowing the truth - a dialectical one. In this case, the world is not a static object that the human mind confronts and attempts to understand; rather, the world is an unfinished project being built. Knowledge is not the*

[348] Bosch, ibid., p. 423.

[349] An alternative reading given in the book is 'critical reflection on the word of God received in the church'. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *Theology of Liberation*, 15th anniversary edition with a new introduction by the author, Maryknoll, New York, Orbis, 1988, pp. xxxix and xxxiii.

*conformity of the mind to the given, but an immersion in this process of transformation and construction of a new world.*[350]

Bosch identifies six features of this new epistemology that emerge from the above statement.[351]

1. There is a profound suspicion of all western scholarship. The claim that knowledge is neutral is viewed as being designed to serve the purposes of the West and legitimises the world as it now is. In this environment Western theology is no longer seen as the only way of doing theology and contextual theologies are accepted as an appropriate way to do theology.

2. The new epistemology refuses to endorse the idea that the world is a static object to be explained. Like Marx, it argues that the point is to change it, not interpret it. The local changing situation is what needs to be dealt with. It is history and the human and physical world that need to be taken seriously. The context is now an important part of how theology is carried out.

3. The emphasis is on commitment, especially to the poor and marginalised. The point of departure is orthopraxis, not orthodoxy. Praxis in liberation theology is an important part of contextualised theology and represents a radical departure from the previous concern of theology with orthodoxy.

4. Theology can no longer be done from a distance. It is credible only if it is done with those who suffer or those who are part of the context. The theologian needs to be part of the context.

5. Today the emphasis is on doing theology. The universal claim of the hermeneutic of language is challenged by the hermeneutic of deed. Doing is more important than knowing or speaking. In Scripture it is the doers who are blessed and the emphasis is now on doing theology.

6. The above priorities of contextual theology are worked out in the hermeneutic circle. A person's experience of life provides the framework by which that person understands the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The idea of theology being regarded as higher than praxis, is turned upside down. What is sought is a dialectical relationship between theory and praxis. It should be a relationship of inter subjectivity rather than one of subject to object. In the hermeneutic circle the movement around the circle should move from praxis or experience to reflection as a second act of theology.

In good contextual theology it is no longer necessary to juxtapose theory and practice. 'Orthopraxis and orthodoxy need one another, and each is adversely affected when sight is lost of the other.'[352] When this happens, two ambiguities in contextual theologies emerge. The two main ambiguities are, one, a tendency to overreact, to make a clean break with the past and 'deny any continuity with one's theological and ecclesial ancestry'.[353] This discards all the richness of orthodox theology and tradition, and what can be learnt from it. There is a danger of seeing everything as relevant and only the new context as worthy of attention.

The second ambiguity is to react the other way and oppose or try to neutralise all change. When one behaves like this, one becomes irrelevant to one's context. The danger here is that the context is totally ignored. There is the need for both these ambiguities to be addressed if a balanced contextual theology is to emerge.

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[350] Sergio Torres in eds Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergios Torres, *African Theology En Route*, Books, Maryknoll New York, 1979, p. 5, cited in Bosch, op. cit., pp. 423-4.
[351] ibid., pp. 424-5.
[352] Gustavo Gutiérrez, ibid., p. xxxiv.
[353] Bosch, ibid., p. 426.

There is also the danger of absolutism. This is what happened with theology that was contextualised in the West and as part of missionary outreach was exported as package deal with the gospel.[354] There was a possibility of this happening again with Liberation Theology at the Melbourne Conference of the Commission for World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches in 1980 when Latin American spokesmen were inclined to promote their type of contextual theology as having universal validity. Delegates from other Third World countries did not want to see Western theology replaced by Latin American liberation theology.[355] Instead they wanted a theology that was appropriate for their context.

> *The issue, therefore, is less one of the primacy of praxis over theory than it is one of 'which theoria is sufficiently true and just, that praxis ought to be carried out in its service'.*[356]

The emergence of contextual theologies has challenged the traditional way in which theology was done. The new approach takes account of the context in which people live and the need for theology to deal with the issues that confront them. It puts emphasis on praxis and theological reflection. The dialectic that occurs between context, praxis and theological reflection is an important part of the process. Contextual theology is concerned with orthopraxis, whereas classical western theology was concerned with orthodoxy.

**Contextual models**

Contextual models of theology do not consider only the context in which they work. Bevans has pointed out that they take into account: the spirit and message of the gospel; the tradition of the Christian people: the culture in which one is theologizing; and social change.[357] These are the four important foci of Bevans discussion of contextual models. However, to some extent they are present in each of his five models, but each model will emphasis a different area except his synthetic model which tries to hold them in balance.

When Bevans proposes various models of contextualisation, he is speaking about theoretical models of the inclusive or descriptive type. Each of his five models of contextualisation presents a different way of theologising that takes serious account of a particular context. Each model 'represents a particular starting point and distinct theological presupposition.'[358]

While Bosch and Schreiter discuss various models of contextualisation I am following Bevans' suggestion that there are five types of models that delineate contextual theology. He has constructed the following map of the models.

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[354] ibid., p. 428.
[355] ibid.
[356] Max Stackhouse, *Apologia Contextualization, Globalization and Mission in Theological Education*, William B. Eerdman's Publishing Company, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1988, p. 98.
[357] Bevans, ibid, p. 1.
[358] Bevans, ibid., p. 27.

**A Map of Models of Contextual Theology**

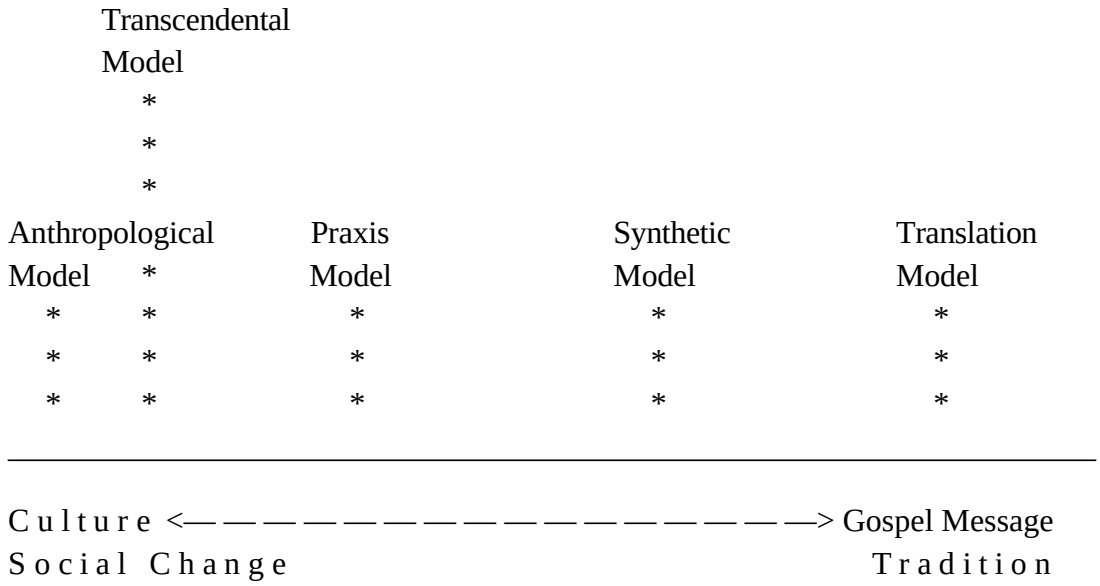


**Figure 1** Bevans' map of models of contextual theology.

As Bevans describes the map, the anthropological model is on the left. It is the most radical of the models and departs most from the traditional way of doing theology. It emphasises the importance of cultural identity and its relevance for theology more than it emphasises Scripture and tradition. The translation model as the most conservative model is on the right and while not ignoring culture and social change it emphasises fidelity to Scripture and tradition. The praxis and the synthetic models come in between. The synthetic model will try to keep all four elements of culture, social change, gospel message and the wider church tradition in balance. The transcendental model floats above as its focus is on the subject who is articulating the faith rather than the theological content to be articulated.

Contextual models have come into wide usage since around 1950. This approach is the most useful for understanding the current situation in Aboriginal churches, that grew out of missions. I am examining the contextual models with a view to understanding the recognition they give to Aboriginal agency and how they are contextualising the gospel at Ngukurr.

**The Translation Model**

The translation model, also known as the dynamic equivalence model is the model that is most well known, and one that is employed by most people when they think of context.[359] The translation model has its roots in the accommodation model. It is a model that has been widely used by catholics and evangelisation. This model is described as a translation model because it insists that the gospel message is an unchanging message. This model is seen as faithful to the essential content of the gospel message and the traditions that have arisen within the church. Its attitude to culture is that:

[359] ibid., p. 30.

> *the values and thought forms of culture and the structures of social change are understood not so much as good in themselves, but as convenient vehicles for this essential unchanging deposit of truth.*[360]

In this model, the word 'translation' is not used in a literal sense. It is not concerned with a formal correspondence to translation where words are literally translated from one language to another. This is what people often have in mind when they ask an indigenous person to do a literal translation of an abstract concept like 'glory' into his language. There is no straight out match. A translation has to be a translation of meanings if it is to be a good translation. Charles Kraft in his book *Christianity and Culture* takes a theory of biblical translation known as dynamic equivalence and applies it to theologising. Dynamic equivalence translation is concerned to produce in the hearers and reader the same response that was produced in the original hearers and readers. Eugene Nida and Charles Tabor describe this method of translation this way:

> *a translation of the Bible must not only provide information which people can understand but must present the message in such a way that people can feel its relevance (the expressive in communication) and can then respond to it in action (the imperative function)*[361]

Charles Kraft, after a careful treatment of the translation theory of dynamic equivalence, takes it and applies it to theologising. In making this shift he refers to Bengt Sundkler's statement that 'theology is, in the last resort translation,'[362] Kraft then states:

> *theological truth must be re-created like a dynamic-equivalence translation or transculturation within the language and accompanying conceptual framework of the hearers if its true relevance is to be properly perceived by them. Theologizing, like all Christian communication, must be directed to someone if it is to serve its purpose. It cannot simply be flung out into thin air.*[363]

A key presupposition of this model is that there is a core to the gospel that is the essential message of Christianity. It is referred to as supracultural gospel and is often discussed in terms of the kernel and the husk. The kernel being the essential gospel core and the husk being the disposable cultural package. However this kernel is defined differently by different advocates of the translation model of contextualisation. Krikor Haleblain notes that for some theologians the core is simply Christ incarnate and states that examples of this are represented in the writings of Saphir, Athyal and Byang Kato.[364] He gives McGavran as an example of including more in the core. For McGavran the essential core is

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[360] ibid., p. 30-1.

[361] Eugene A. Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, United Bible Societies, Leiden, 1969, p. 24.

[362] Bengkt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa*, SCM Press Ltd, London, 1962, p. 99. Here he states: 'Theology is in the last resort, translation. It is an ever-renewed re-interpretation to new generations and peoples of the given Gospel, a re-presentation of the will and the way of the one Christ in a dialogue with new thought-forms and cultural patterns.'

[363] Charles Kraft, ibid., p. 297.

[364] Krikor Haleblain, 'The Problem of Contextualization', *Missiology*, vol. XI, no. 1, January 1983, pp. 101-2.

'the belief and allegiance to (a) the Triune God, (b) the Bible, and (c) ordinances and doctrines set in the Bible.[365]

More recently Max Stackhouse[366] advocates four doctrines that he considers essential to the core of the gospel for everyone. The first one is that humanity is fallen and needs healing and salvation. Secondly, as recorded in the Bible, God's revelation takes place within human history. Thirdly the doctrine of the Triune God articulates best what God is truly like and what faith in God means for life in the world. His fourth point is that Jesus is the Christ. It is in Jesus, that men and women can find the true meaning of life.

While there is disagreement as to what the precise content of the kernel message is, there is agreement that it can be separated from its cultural packaging and then communicated to a receptor culture.

Culture is seen as important but it is always subordinate. If conflict occurs between the supracultural message and a culture then the content of the gospel message is what must be preserved. Divine revelation is conceived as communication of certain doctrines and truths from God, and because they are from God they are wholly culturally free. Revelation is seen as propositional and often as quantitative. This model also implies that, while all cultures have unique features, every concept from one culture can be translated across to another culture if not exactly then equivalently.

This model takes culture more seriously than its predecessor the accommodation model. It tries to translate the gospel into the other culture in a way that makes sense to that culture. Rather than superficially make accommodation to the culture it looks for equivalents within the culture itself. It is a more serious attempt to treat culture in a holistic manner.

The strength of the translation model is that the message of Christianity as recorded in the Scriptures and handed down by tradition is taken seriously. There is a message from God and a core of truth that must be believed in. This is the core of the gospel that must be communicated. The proponents of this model are intent on removing the husk of one culture and wrapping the kernel in the husk of the new culture. The model acknowledges the importance of culture but sees it as subordinate to gospel and tradition. However, it acknowledges the need for the gospel to be presented in language and cultural vehicles that enables people to understand this new message. This model is useful for understanding what needs to be done in primary evangelism.

The translation model recognises Aboriginal culture as important in its own right, though it does give a higher priority to church traditions and Scripture than culture. It is also a model that Anglican Aborigines often use. They have a high regard for Scripture and constantly refer to it when discussing issues of how to live as Christians in Aboriginal society. They are taking the Christian message, as found in the Bible and seeking to clothe it with their culture. This highlights the importance of having

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[365] McGavran, *Christopaganism or Indigenous Christianity?*, William Carey Library, South Pasadena, 1975, pp. 41-2 for a fuller discussion of his view.

[366] Max Stackhouse, *Apologia: Contextualization, Globalization and Mission in Theological Education*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids Michigan, 1988, pp. 170-2; for a fuller discussion of Stackhouse's four core beliefs, see also Stephen Bevans, ibid., p. 33. For more discussion on the concept of the core or kernel gospel that can be transferred to a new culture, see Fleming, *Contextualization of Theology, an Evangelical Assessment*, William Carey Library, Pasadena, 1980, pp. 57-63; and The Willowbank Report, *Gospel and Culture, Lausuanne Occasional Papers*, no. 2., pub. Committee for World Evanglelism, 1978, pp. 12-13.

access to a good quality Bible translation in their own language, in which meanings are translated in a way that can be readily understood. When Aborigines are the ones clothing the kernel of the gospel in their culture they are the agents of contextualisation.

**The Anthropological Model**

This model is identified by Bevans, Berends, and Schreiter.[367] Bevans identifies it as the most radical of his five models.[368] In this model the emphasis is on cultural identity and its relevance for theology. Culture is the starting point. It is culture that shapes the way that Christianity is articulated. Scripture, tradition and social change are considered important but they are seen as the product of culturally relative theologies that have been produced in very particular contexts. [369] As Bevans points out, what is important for this model is the understanding that Christianity is about the human person and her or his fulfilment. This does not mean that the gospel cannot challenge culture but any such challenge is viewed suspiciously as not being from God but as one culture (usually Western or Mediterranean) trying to impose itself on another.[370]

The model is described as anthropological because it seeks to find God's presence in culture and relies on the skills of anthropology. Its reliance on the skills of anthropology suggests that this is a model that would be used more by an outsider than an Aborigine in today's situation. Thus it would be the outsider who was tempted to exert influence. However Aborigines have appropriated anthropological concepts and often talk about 'culture,' 'language' and 'religion' and they could find this model attractive.

The strength of the model is that it seeks to deal with how people live faithfully as Christians in the terms of their own culture and starts with people's questions and interests. It is a useful approach in a situation where a people's culture has been put down and so could be appropriate for Aborigines.

Bevans points out several weaknesses in the approach. It can fall prey to human romanticism and lack critical thinking about the culture in question and ignore that cultures are changing all the time. The ideal of this approach is that the gospel will be discovered emerging from a culture. Bevans comments that he knows of no case where this has happened.[371] Also while this approach tries to fend off the influence of other cultures its method is dependent on the use of the Western discipline of Anthropology.

Nungalinya College in its theological program has taken some steps in this direction. Students are encouraged to explore how the gospel can be inculturated into their culture. Topics like God and the Dreaming are explored. The timetable is arranged so that a block of one or two weeks is given to a subject, before moving on to the next one. This is a suitable approach, as it allows the students to explore the subject in depth without being distracted by other subjects. Where available, use of vernacular Scriptures is encouraged, so that the gospel is clearly understood. Nungalinya strives to

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[367] Bevans, *Models of Theology*; Schrieter, *Constructing Local Theologies*; W. Berends, The Evaluation of Culture in Missiology. A Topical and Theological Approach to the Value and Significance of Culture in the Context of Mission, DTh thesis, Australian College of Theology, 1990.
[368] Bevans, ibid, p. 25.
[369] ibid., p. 27.
[370] ibid., p. 47.
[371] ibid., p. 54.

recognise Aboriginal agency as fully as possible. The Reverend Wally Fejo was appointed as the first Aboriginal principal in 1995.

A difference between this model and the translation model is that the anthropological model finds God's revelation not as a separate supracultural message, but in the complexity of human culture. It looks for God's revelation within the values, relational patterns and concerns of a culture [372] Its view of divine revelation is that it is not necessarily a message but an encounter with God's loving and healing power in the midst of the ordinariness of life.

Another variant of the anthropological approach is what Schreiter identifies as the ethnographic approach. In this approach the movement is from the people and their problems to church traditions. The result is that the theology is always relevant.[373] For Schreiter the weakness of the ethnographic approach is that it is seldom completed and can become a conservative form opposed to change.[374]

A further example is Schreiter's Semiotic Model to which he devotes a large part of his book. This is an anthropological approach that is largely based on symbols that giving meaning to culture. Haleblain, sees a number of strengths in the model but regards it as weak in coping with syncretism. In trying to ensure that everything is dealt with it has some similarities to the synthetic model.[375]

The anthropological model places its emphasis on the culture. It uses anthropology and sociology to try and discover the Word of God hidden in that culture, like a dormant seed.[376] When using this model, it is easy to fall prey to cultural romanticism and fail to acknowledge that cultures are changing all the time. The strength of the anthropological model is that it starts where faith lives, in peoples lives. God speaks to people in their context. The model views culture as the most important element of the four elements on Bevans' map. It discovers God in the midst of life as experienced in a particular culture and not necessarily in a revealed message as a supra-cultural gospel. A weakness is that in listening to the present context it can ignore the past and the history that has helped to shape the present context.

The anthropological model clearly recognises the culture in which Aborigines live and there is a place for Aboriginal agency as Aborigines are the ones who know their situation best and so are in the best position to contextualise. However to be fully carried out it seems to require someone trained in western anthropology. This is limiting in a situation like Ngukurr where no one is trained in anthropology. There is also a danger that the context will be studied through Western eyes rather than Aboriginal eyes.

**The Praxis Model**

The praxis model places its focus on '*the identity of Christians within a culture as that culture is understood in terms of social change*'. Bevans, Schineller and Schreiter characterise this model as being concerned with social change as it relates to the issues of overcoming social ills such as poverty, social injustice and oppression. These are current issues for Aborigines. There are two dimensions to praxis in this model. '*It is reflected upon action and acted upon reflection – both*

[372] ibid., p. 49.
[373] Berends, ibid., 1990, p. 116.
[374] Schreiter, ibid., pp. 12-15.
[375] Schrieter, ibid.; Haleblain, ibid., pp. 106-8; and Berends, ibid., p. 117.
[376] Bevens, ibid., p. 51.

*rolled into one*.'[377] Theology is regarded as consisting of more than a set of Christian beliefs that need to be communicated. Commitment to Christian action to bring about change is an integral part of this way of doing theology. This model proposes that '*the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing*'. [378]

Bevans has chosen to call this model 'praxis' and not 'liberation' for two reasons. One, it may be possible to do theology this way in a situation where social injustice is not rampant. Secondly, the praxis model reveals more clearly that the strength of the model is its method rather than a theme such as liberation.[379]

In the praxis model, culture is seen in terms of human values, behaviours, traditions, economics and political organisation, and an appropriate expression of the Christian faith that cannot be politically or economically neutral.

The strength of this model is its method and underlying epistemology.[380] As a theological method it is closely wedded to context. It cannot act without a context. Doing theology as a critical reflection of praxis can be a powerful expression of Christianity. The Christian faith is expressed by action. The praxis model understands divine revelation as the presence of God in history, and in the events of everyday life. God is not just in history, people of faith are called to locate and cooperate with God in healing, reconciling and liberating.

The praxis model does allow for cultural expressions of the Christian faith. It also goes beyond dealing with the culture in its traditional form and deals with social change that is occurring in the culture, especially where such change is oppressive and unjust. It can also deal with the social change that might occur as a result of commitment to the Christian faith.

This model describes some of the things that are happening in the Aboriginal churches in North Australia where they are addressing issues such as land rights, poverty, health, social justice and reconciliation.

Commitment to Christian action to bring about change is an integral part of this way of doing theology. A continual dialogue needs to occur between theology and action. The praxis model accepts that the '*highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing*'. [381]

In the past many clergymen, missionaries and lay people in the church have strongly voiced their concerns for what was happening to the Aborigines. Examples of this were Bishop Polding, in the 1860s; John Gribble, 1886-87; and Professor Elkin, 1930-1960s. The difference today is that it is Aboriginal Christians who are taking the lead. Some examples of this approach are as follows.

At the 1985 Synod of the Anglican Church in the Northern Territory an Aboriginal deaconess Dinah Garradji expressed most strongly that Aboriginal Christians were to care for their land. In 1986 Aboriginal Anglicans again expressed their concerns about landrights to the synod. The synod passed a number of motions on landrights the contents of which came from Aborigines. Part of one motion read:

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[377] ibid., p. 65.
[378] ibid., p. 66.
[379] ibid., p. 66.
[380] ibid., p. 70.
[381] ibid., p. 66.

*This synod supports the belief expressed by Aboriginal members of the synod that God gave Aboriginal people their land and it is their Christian responsibility to care for it.*[382]

The Anglican Church in the last ten years has taken some significant steps towards reconciliation with its Aboriginal members and other Aborigines. Both Aboriginal and White leaders have been involved in this process.

An example is the ceremony of forgiveness and reconciliation that took place between the Anglican Primate and the Anglican Aboriginal Bishop in 1988. The occasion was a service at St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney commemorating the first Christian service in Australia. In the presence of all the diocesan bishops, the Primate of the Anglican Church, Archbishop Sir John Grindrod, apologised for all the hurt that Aborigines had experienced, Arthur Malcolm of Yarrabah accepted the apology and request for forgiveness.[383]

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[382] Refer to The Minutes of the 1986 Synod of the Diocese of the Northern Territory, Motion no. 3.

[383] The Primate's words were:

*My brother in Christ:*

*We have come together to give thanks to Almighty God for his protection and provision for this nation during the last two hundred years of European settlement. You and I and all of us in this cathedral recognise clearly that your people, the Aboriginal people, were here on the land before any of the people from Europe arrived. When the European people did come, much misunderstanding took place which caused great suffering to your people and is still, even today, having its effect. This has caused a grave breakdown in the culture and lifestyle of your people.*

*May I express on behalf of all non-Aboriginal people of our church our profound sorrow for the suffering that your people have had to endure, with its violence and hurt. We humbly ask God's forgiveness; and we seek your forgiveness as a leader of your people, for the actions of the past and those causing hurt at the present time. We have longed to share with your people the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We confess our endeavour has often fallen short of his love. We want to walk together with you, sharing and learning together, accepting and respecting each other. Help us to listen to you. Help us to learn from you…*

*Please accept our sorrow for the past and the seeking of your forgiveness. May God give all of us grace to contribute together to the progress of this nation and its harmony and peace.*

*My brother I ask that you pray for us all.*

Bishop Arthur Malcolm then responded on behalf of Aboriginal people of the Anglican church:

*My brother in Christ:*

*I stand before you representing my people from within the Anglican Communion. For a long time we have been hurting: our spirits have felt crushed by the wrong actions that took place between my ancestors and yours. Much suffering has been the result, but it is through the message of Jesus Christ that we have learned to forgive. We have received his forgiveness and now in turn we must also forgive.*

*On behalf of my people, I accept your seeking of our forgiveness and thank you for your apology. Please forgive us, too, for our people also engaged in fighting with yours and so caused some suffering on your side, too. It is our desire to be treated as the saved children of God, who have been given the same ability as you have. I believe that we are to work and live side by side in a way that enables God to take hold of each one's contributions and blend them together to enrich and mature us as a people who belong to this nation of Australia.*

(Church Scene [447] 5th Feb 1988, cited in Harris, 1994, 866-7.)

In 1998 the General Synod of the Anglican Church in response to the 'Bringing Them Home Report' on children removed from their families, apologised to Aborigines for any involvement it had in removing children from their parents Motion 27/98 read:

> *On behalf of the Anglican Church of Australia the General Synod apologises unreservedly and seeks forgiveness for any part played knowingly and unwittingly by the Anglican Church that has ever contributed in any way to the hurt or trauma by the unjustified removal of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander children from their families, and for our past silence on the issue.*

A service of reconciliation was held during General Synod in 1998 at which the Primate of the Anglican Church apologised unreservedly for any harm that it had caused to Aborigines and committed the church to reconciliation. The Aboriginal Bishop Arthur Malcolm and the Torres Strait Islander Bishop Ted Mosby pronounced the forgiveness. The four bishops then bound their crosses together as a symbol of unity and washed one another's feet.[384]

In 1997 The Synod of the Diocese of the Northern Territory carried the following motion.

> *That this Synod recognises the pain and suffering endured by Aboriginal people forcibly removed from their families, and apologises for any of our Church policies and actions that have ever contributed, in any way to that hurt.*[385]

A different example of praxis is a Co-op managed and run by Catholic Aborigines in Broome. It was started to provide access to furniture. For a $10 joining fee members can purchase furniture and repay the money at a regular rate that suits their financial situation. This avoids the traps of costly hire purchase agreements. Later the Co-op moved to providing burial services, as the local provider often demanded the cost of burial before the service would be provided.[386] This is an example of Aboriginal Christians working to solve problems related to poverty. The praxis model describes how they address social issues of concern from their position as Aboriginal Christians.

An approach based on the praxis model gives an opportunity for Aboriginal Christians to tackle issues that are of concern to the wider Aboriginal community, and make the point that in being Aboriginal Christians they have not become White people. They are still part of the struggle against the injustices that White people have committed against Aborigines.

The praxis model deals with the issues of social justice that affect Aborigines today. It copes with social change. It allows for Aboriginal agency in dealing with social problems and strengthens it by encouraging them to work and overcome the social injustices that they experience.

The praxis model could also offer valuable insights into how Ngukurr Christians are contextualising the gospel. Their approach seems to be one of reflecting on Scripture, acting and then reflecting again.

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[384] *Melbourne Anglican*, no. 347, March 1998, pp. 1 and 3, A liturgy of reconciliation used at the reconciliation services, and motion 27/98 (i) 6. The Social Responsibilities Commission of the Anglican church isssued a statement in 1987 *Faith in a Just Australia* that among other things called for a 'new sense of justice for Aboriginals'. In 1988 the Heads of Australian Churches issued a document 'Towards Reconciliation in Australian Society: Reconciliation and Aboriginal Australians', in *Unity*, February 1988.

[385] Minutes of the 1997 Synod of the Northern Territory, motion no. 19.1.

[386] Michael McMahon, Liberation Theology Kimberly Style or: A short History of the Bishop Raibole co-op, in *Nelen Yubu*, 1992, no. 50, pp. 11-22.

This will be explored further after the data in the next four chapters has been examined to discover what it has to say about how and where they are contextualising the gospel.

**The Synthetic model**

This model tries to balance the insights of the translation, anthropological and praxis models. Its intent is to balance the culture and social change at one end of Bevans' continuum with the gospel message and church traditions at the other end of the continuum on his map of the models of contextualisation.

Bevans sees the synthetic model as a synthesis of the translation, praxis and anthropological models.[387] The synthesis occurs in three ways. It tries to preserve the importance of the gospel message, the heritage of traditional doctrinal formulations as well as recognise the important role that culture can play in the formation of theology. Secondly it allows for a reaching out to the resources of other cultures and theological expression as the church formulates its faith. This means that the church is not isolated from churches elsewhere. A synthesis develops between one's own cultural point of view and the views of others. Thirdly the model is synthetic in a Hegelian sense, in that it is not seeking a compromise but endeavouring to develop a creative dialectic that is acceptable to all. This model could also be called the dialectical model or the dialogical model.

Practitioners of this model would argue that every culture or context has elements that are unique to it and elements that are held in common with other cultures.[388] Thus cultures can borrow and learn from one another. Some features of culture, such as clothing, are seen as neutral while other features may be regarded as good or bad. While contextualisation or inculturation of the gospel is best done by the local people, there is also a place for the outsider to stimulate the approach

Bevans suggests that the procedure of this model is best likened to producing a work of art rather

*than following a set of rigid instructions. One needs to juggle several things at one time but it is not a matter of just keeping everything moving smoothly.*

At one point emphasis might be placed on the culture, at another it may be placed on keeping traditional church practices.[389]. In another set of circumstances traditional church practices might need to be opposed.

Stephen Bevans diagrams the synthetic model in this way:

[387] Bevans, ibid., pp. 82-3.
[388] ibid., p. 83.
[389] ibid., p. 85.

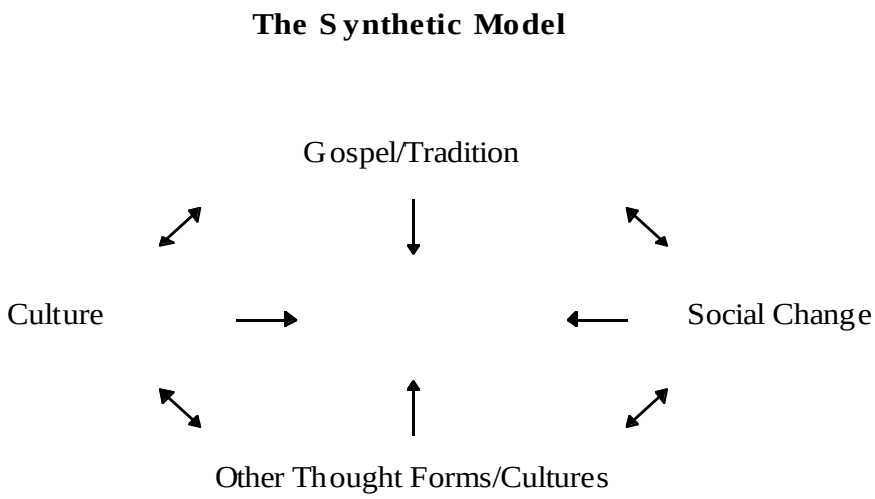


**Figure 2** Bevans' diagram of the synthetic model.[390]

Bevans presents several strong points of the synthetic model. Its method allows for an attitude of openness and dialogue. The synthetic model makes theology an exercise in true conversation and dialogue allowing for one's cultural identity to emerge. It recognises that contextualisation must be an ongoing process. This model also recognises the universality of the Christian Faith and that every culture can learn from other cultures. The weakness of this model is a danger of selling out to the dominant culture or tradition in a particular context. The theologian always need to be wary of the power of the dominant culture. There is a possibility that the theology that emerges will be too wishy washy and nothing but a collection of ideas that do not form a true synthesis.

God's revelation is understood to be something that is historically circumscribed in the particular culture of the Scriptures, and so has a particularly culturally conditioned message. At the same time it is understood to be operative in one's own context:

> *calling men and women to perfect that context through cultural transformation and social change. Revelation is both something finished, once and for all, of a particular place and something ongoing and present, operative in all cultures and un-circumscribable in every way.*[391]

Theology can be done by the ordinary local people but it does not have to be exclusively so. Outsiders may also have something to say.

This approach can describe at times the way Aborigines contextualise the gospel when they are actually considering culture, social change, the gospel and the wider church. The difficulty in the way that they do it at Ngukurr is that it is not a conscious effort to consider all four elements when they are dealing with a particular issue or biblical teaching; it is easy for something like what the wider church has to say to be overlooked. The model seems to require from a Western point of view that all four

[390] Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, ibid., p. 97.
[391] ibid., pp. 84-5.

elements are taken into account. The model certainly does allow for Aboriginal agency to be recognised.

### The Transcendental Model

The Transcendental model is pictured on Bevans' Map of Models of Contextual Theology as floating above all the others. This is because in this model the focus is on the subject who is doing the articulating and not on the content to be contextualised. Berends points out that this model is named for the transcendental method pioneered by Immanuel Kant and developed by Karl Rahner and B. J. F. Lonergan.[392] What is important in this model is not that a particular theology is produced but that the theologian producing it 'operates as an authentic, converted subject.'[393]

The starting point of this model is one's own religious experience and certainly recognises a person's agency. This approach argues that what might seem to be personal can also articulate the experience of others in the same context. This model 'might simply be too ideal, or at best only a 'meta-model' that lays down the condition for the possibility of any contextual theological thinking'.[394]

The Transcendental Model argues that God reveals himself within human experience to a person who is open to Scripture, events in daily life and the values embodied in a cultural tradition. Revelation is an event that takes place when a person opens himself or herself to God. Theology is possible only as a person is open to God and struggles '*to articulate and appropriate this ongoing relationship with the divine*'.[395]

While I cannot recall a situation where this would describe Aborigines' approach to theologising, it could be useful in a situation where Aborigines come from a number of different tribal backgrounds. As one person articulated their theology and experience of God, others might be stimulated by it to reflect on their theology and experience of God. One difficulty would be that Aborigines are reluctant to draw attention to themselves.

## SCHINELLER'S PASTORAL OR HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

Peter Schineller proposes a model to address the how of contextualisation.[396] He calls it the pastoral or hermeneutical circle. While Bevans' models are excellent for understanding elements that are part of contextualisation and how the importance of the elements that vary from model to model, Schineller's model assists in understanding how the process is taking place. His circle has three poles which are the local agent, the situation and the pastoral agent or minister. He diagrams it this way:[397]

[392] Berends, ibid., p. 117.
[393] Bevans, ibid., p. 97.
[394] ibid., p. 102.
[395] ibid., p. 99.
[396] Schineller, ibid., pp. 64-123.
[397] ibid., p. 62.

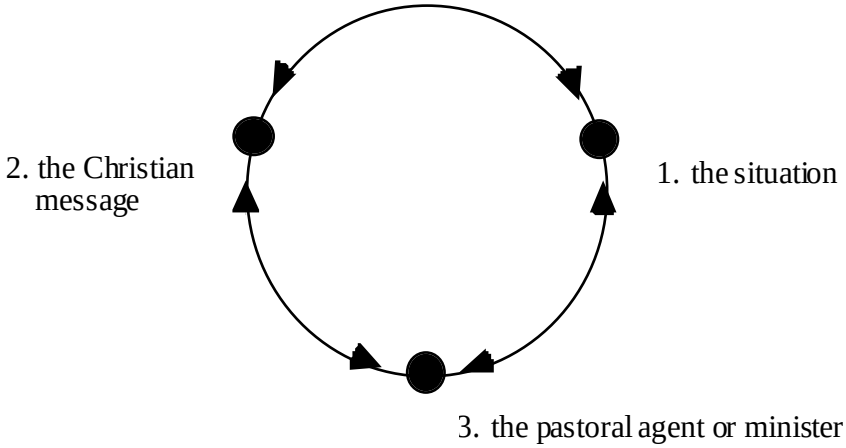


**Figure 3** Schineller's hermeneutical circle.[398]

On the above diagram the first pole on the diagram is the situation, which represents the situation in which the contextualisation is happening. It is there to ensure that the local context is understood. His view is that in the last analysis the situation consists of people.

> *All theology, ministry, and inculturation is in service to human needs. There is some problem, tension, question, new possibility, or opportunity that calls for reflection, response, resolution, or decision.*[399]

Depending on the situation various disciplines can be used. These could be anthropology, sociology, history, economics or pastoral skills. The analysis should include the people in the situation as well as the local agent.

The second pole on the diagram is the Christian message. It is there to ensure that Christian values are brought to bear on the situation. An approach needs to be formed that is in accord with God's word and truth, and in particular as represented by the life and message of Jesus. The Christian message also involves the heritage and traditions of the church. The agent needs to understand the Christian message and its heritage in order to ensure that what is being contextualised is Christian, though it may be expressed or worked out in a new way. The result of attending to the second pole is that the situation is not seen in isolation, but in '*continuity with God's word in the past and in similar present situations*'.[400]

The agent of contextualisation or minister of the gospel is represented on the third pole of Schineller's pastoral circle. The agent refers to the resource person, the minister, or the agent who has the mission and task of inculturation. His description of the agent calls for someone who is recognised in the situation as the agent of contextualisation and who appears to be an outsider working as a facilitator. St Matthew's Church Ngukurr does not have a person there who is recognised in this way. However I think that the local Christian community who are part of the situation could also be defined as the

[398] Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation*, ibid., p. 62.
[399] ibid., p. 63-4.
[400] ibid.

local agents. The result of recognising the local agent as part of the process is the acknowledgement that contextualisation can only be done by the people who are part of the situation. Even if Schineller's local agent is an outsider who is facilitating the contextualisation process the gospel is only successfully contextualised when the local people do it.

## WHICH CONTEXTUAL MODEL IS BEST?

Bevans raises the question:

> *Is one model of contextual theology better than others? Is there one way of taking account of Bible, tradition, culture and social change that is more adequate than another?*[401]

His conclusion is that all five models are valid and that different situations will call for a different model. The praxis model is the most appropriate where radical social change is called for. The translation model will be the most appropriate in a situation of primary evangelism. In that situation it might be deemed best to translate one's own understanding of the gospel into the language and culture until indigenous Christians can reflect and construct a local theology. The anthropological model might best suit a situation where the local culture has been ignored. The synthetic model might best suit a place like the Philippines, where there has been cross-fertilisation between cultures for years.[402] Bevans suggests that the transcendental model works well in a situation of multicultural diversity, such as where a person is teaching theology to people from a number of different cultures. The teacher articulates his own theology and hopes that the students will be provoked into finding similarities and differences in their own theologising.

When trying to account for how contextualisation is happening, in a particular situation the use of more than one model would ensure that all general tendencies in how the theology is being done are accounted for. When a situation can be accounted for as following mainly the translation approach, this does not mean that a praxis or anthropological approach is not used on some occasions. An outsider going into a situation with a particular model in mind as to how to encourage the church to contextualise the gospel, would be wise to remember that there could be times when he will find a different approach more suitable in dealing with a particular situation.

In trying to understand what has happened in a particular context, it is useful to use more than one model so as to gain a comprehensive understanding of what is happening.

In endeavouring to account for how Ngukurr Christians are doing theology it has become clear that no one model will fully account for what is happening. When the church was under missionary control, theology was largely dominated by missionaries and presented under the propositional model. Often this answered questions that they were not asking. While this approach fits the paternalism model, it did result in the initial conversions to Christianity. The imposition and accommodation models do not give a clear understanding of what Aborigines were thinking and doing in the context of their situations. Nor does the accommodation model allow for sufficient control or agency to be in Aboriginal hands. They have some say but the final say rests in the hands of the missionary or outsider.

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[401] ibid., p. 111.
[402] ibid., p. 112.

Ngukurr Christians were not passive about their conversion or theology. Their early reflection on theology in their context is attested to by the fact that they referred to God the True Dreaming, and had identified God with a good spirit who was above the Dreamtime beings,[403] and as mentioned in chapter one they take the credit for evangelizing the surrounding area. They successfully resisted the colonisation of the self[404] by accepting the gospel while resisting becoming civilised in the White man's way (which was important to the missionaries). It has been important to them to retain their Aboriginal identity. In this they were assisted by the missionaries' expectations that they would either die out or take a long time to become 'civilised'. The isolation of the mission further contributed to their retaining their Aboriginal identity.

A difficulty that I have with the contextual models as presented by Bevans is that they seem to be designed for an outsider to be involved in the contextual process or alternatively to make use of them in analysing what is happening in a particular church. I have no doubt that any cross-cultural worker using these models to approach his task will be better equipped than one who has no knowledge of them. However, the situation at Ngukurr is one where the local church is doing the contextualising in what appears to be a fragmented approach and furthermore they are not consciously using any model for their contextualising of the gospel.

A further difficulty that I have with Bevan's models is that the focus is on the interaction between the four elements with the expectation that a dialectic interaction will occur between them. In order to understand the situation at Ngukurr I think the focus needs to be on the local agent as it is only with their involvement that such a dialectic interaction between the four elements will occur. The elements cannot interact with each other without the involvement of an agent.

A new model might be appropriate to account for how they are doing theology at Ngukurr. Before suggesting a new model there is another important matter to be considered. People bring presuppositions to how they do theology and it is important to identify these as they affect the outcome.

## PRESUPPOSITIONS

In my opinion what would be useful for understanding what is happening at Ngukurr would be to identify what presuppositions Ngukurr Christians bring to contextualising the gospel. This should reveal something of what they bring to the task and what their expectations are. The idea that it is important to understand presuppositions in contextual theology is not unusual. Bevans discusses the presuppositions that are behind each of his models. The key presupposition that people bring to the translation model is that the gospel is supracultural. People who are consciously using this model speak about a core gospel.

For the anthropological model the key presupposition is that God's revelation is found in human culture, not as a separate supracultural message but within the complexity of a culture '*in the warp and woof of human relationships which are constitutive of cultural existence*'.[405] It recognises that culture will shape the way that Christianity is articulated[406] in a particular context.

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[403] This is discussed in chapter nine under the sub heading "God is the True Dreaming.".
[404] This is a term that I have picked up from my reading of African theology, but I cannot recall where it came from.
[405] Bevans, op. ibid., p. 49.
[406] ibid., p. 50.

For the praxis model the key presupposition is '*the insight that the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing*'.[407] Its practitioners believe that by following a process of acting, and then reflecting in faith on that action, then repeating the process, that a theology can be developed that is truly relevant to the people in a particular situation. The expectation of social change is vital for the praxis model.

The key presupposition for the synthetic model is '*the composite nature of human culture or the situation in which men and women live*'.[408] People who practise this model argue that every culture has elements that are unique to it and elements that are held in common with other cultures. For this model it is important to emphasise both the uniqueness and complementarity of a particular situation as one's identity emerges in a dialogue with both.

For the transcendental model the key presupposition is that in order to theologize contextually the starting point must be transcendental. A person needs to start with their own religious experience and their experience of her or himself. Context is important as it is the context of the person's experience of life that shapes who that person is. From the transcendental starting point theology is conceived of as discovering who the person is, as a person of faith, in every respect in relation to their historical, geographical, social and cultural environment.[409]

The above presuppositions are important to understand how the five models work and what they are bringing to the construction of a local contextual theology. In my opinion it is just as important to understand the presuppositions that local agents bring to contextual theology. It would seem to me that contextual models, while recognising the role of local agents, do not really account for what they bring to the contextualisation process.

I will argue in chapter nine that the Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians are bringing their own set of presuppositions to how they do theology and that this, together with not consciously choosing to follow a particular model, needs a new model to describe it. The following seven presuppositions have emerged from the material discussed in chapters six to nine. The seven presuppositions shape the way Ngukurr Christians perceive gospel, traditions of the wider church, culture and social change and influence the product.

As the presuppositions are discussed more fully in chapter seven I will only list them here:

1. Christianity is a viable alternative.
2. Scripture is the revealed Word of God.
3. Aboriginal identity is essential.
4. The supernatural is real and God is the greatest source of power.
5. Christianity is holistic and not just another ritual.
6. God was always present in their culture.
7. Their theological heritage is of value.

[407] ibid.
[408] ibid., p. 83.
[409] ibid., p. 98.

All of these presuppositions affect the way they approach doing local theology. It results in a local theology that is dealing with the nitty gritty and is more concerned with religious practice than with abstract understanding of God.

While Bevans' models are a valuable way of gaining an understanding of what is happening in local theology, we need to go further and look beyond what the model describes and identify what people are bringing with them when they do local theology. Theology is not done in a vacuum. The presuppositions that people bring to doing theology have a profound effect on how people do theology and the outcome. If the Ngukurr Christians had different presuppositions, their local theology would still include local agents, culture, gospel, social change and church, but would look very different. If for example, the local theology learnt from the missionaries had been a strong sacramental theology they would probably give more attention to sacraments. The CMS missionaries gave them a high regard for Scripture and this has shaped their view of Scripture as the revealed word of God. It means that now it is available in their own language they give far more weight to what they read now, than when they regarded it as a collection of stories. Their presupposition that the gospel affects the whole of life, defines the scope of their theology. Presuppositions do affect how theology is done.

To adequately account for how they are doing theology a new model is needed. It will still be contextual but give a more defined role to the local agents and what they bring to the task. An appropriate model to describe how local theology is done at Ngukurr should include the local agents, their presuppositions and the four important elements that Bevans identified in his contextual models: culture, social change, gospel and the traditions of the wider church. The model that I suggest is appropriate is diagrammed below.

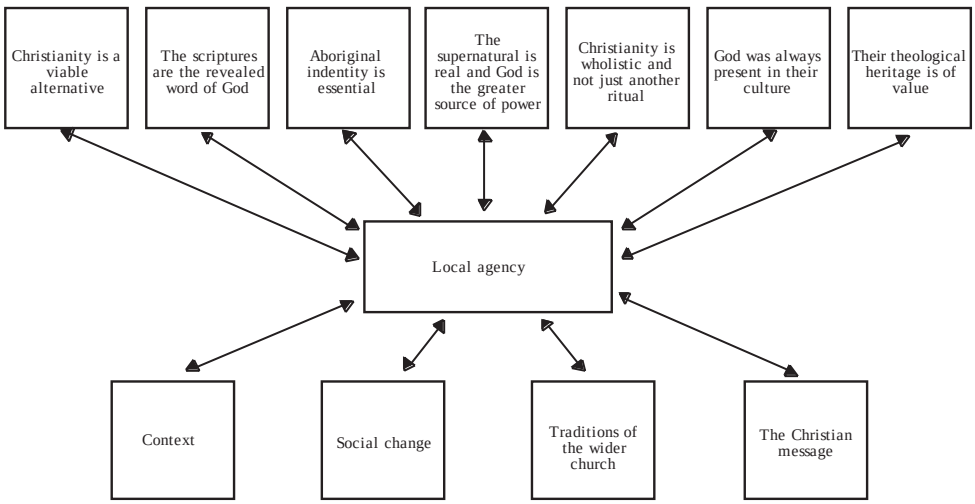


**Figure 4** Model of contextual theology as practised at Ngukurr.

I believe that this model gives us the best understanding of how they are doing theology. It gives central place to the agency of the local Christian community at Ngukurr in the contextualisation of the Christian message. When an outsider is involved they make a valuable contribution but it is still the local people who have to contextualise it as they live in the situation. On this diagram a professional theologian would fit under the category of the wider church, as the theologian is not a member of the community.

The boxes at the top represent the presuppositions that the local people bring to doing local theology. The presuppositions do not have to remain fixed. They could change over time or a different situation would mean that the agents could bring some different presuppositions to the situation.

On the lower level of the diagram are context, social change, traditions of the wider church and the Christian message. They are defined below. Interaction with these occurs through the local agents reflecting on what they mean in relation to a particular issue that is under discussion and how to live culturally as a Christian in the local context.

**Context**. Bevans has used the term culture on his map of contextual theologies, but I have chosen to use context as I think it is a better term for a situation like Ngukurr that is experiencing rapid social change. This refers to their way of life as lived at this point in time in their community. It includes language, what they teach their children, what is important to them, importance of relationships, sharing, their values, symbols, hopes and dreams.

**Social Change.** They realise that change is happening rapidly in their lives and that it has to be coped with. They do not regard culture as static. There is an awareness that if they seek to change the way that something has always been done such change is possible.

**Traditions of the Wider church.** The wider church for Ngukurr includes the other Anglican Aboriginal Churches, the Anglican Diocese of the Northern Territory and Uniting Church Aboriginal Churches. There is also interaction with parachurch organisations that include the Church Missionary Society, Nungalinya College, the Bible Society, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Katherine Christian Convention. There is an awareness of the existence of other denominations and church related organisations but there is little interaction with them. Acceptance of the Ngukurr church by the above demonstrates that that it is recognised as being part of the Christian tradition.

**The Christian message.** Bevans has used the term ‘gospel’ on his map of contextual theologies. I have replaced it on my diagram with the phrase ‘the Christian message’ as it is my conclusion that Ngukurr Christians are contextualising more than the gospel. It includes the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, the teaching of the epistles, and what they broadly refer to as the teaching of the Bible. It also includes a number of the doctrines of the Anglican church. As discussed in this chapter, what is meant by gospel is ambiguous. Schineller has also chosen to use the Christian message to identify what Christians contextualise. ‘The Christian message’ while still ambiguous, is a more appropriate term to identify what Ngukurr people are contextualising.

At Ngukurr it is the local people who are doing theology. They do not view context, social change, the Christian message and the traditions of the wider church as interacting with each other in an abstract way. Instead they see themselves as living culturally and involved with their culture, social change, the wider church, the gospel and the particular matter that they are dealing with. They discuss the matter they are considering, usually over a period of time pondering what Scripture is teaching, what it means for their situation and occasionally exploring what acceptance their conclusion has in the wider Aboriginal church. Most of it takes place informally with people trying out different solutions. Occasionally a more formal meeting will be held to discuss an issue like marriage.

The model I have suggested allows for the fact that they are dealing with the four elements identified by Bevans in an ad hoc fashion. It is not a synthetic approach as there is no attempt to hold all four in a balanced creative tension. Rather they relate to each element as it is necessary. The model I suggest

allows for a more fluid approach to contextual theology which fits the Ngukurr situation of an emerging theology at the cutting edge of contextualisation.

The presuppositions at the top of the figure acknowledge that a local agent (or an outsider) has presuppositions that affect the way the contextual theology is done and its product. Local agency in the middle recognises that Aboriginal Christians are the key contextualisers, while the four elements on the bottom are acknowledged as important and can be brought into the discussion as necessary. All may be included at different times, or there may be only one or two. It can change according to what they regard as necessary to include in their discussion. The resulting model gives a better account of how theology is being done without having to work within the confines of a translation or other model.

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in this chapter has shown that all the models, with the exception of Schineller's model which assigns a role to the local agent, are weak on acknowledging the role of local agents and what they bring to the contextualising process. Not surprisingly, as the models are designed by Westerners, the models are strong on concepts and ideas and allow Western eyes to examine a situation or for an outsider to work in a particular context. For my purposes they do not give an adequate understanding of what the local Aboriginal agents bring to the task or how they approach contextualisation.

My suggested model recognises the local agent as the key player in the contextualising process. The model is not one that seeks to discover dialectical tensions and balance as theology is contextualised into daily life. Rather it seeks to discover what is actually happening and the presuppositions that people bring to the task. It also highlights the important role of the local agents. The reasons for formulating the above model will become clearer after the examination of the empirical data in the next four chapters.

Having examined the various theoretical models and the ways that they help to focus and understand the dynamics of an indigenous church, I will move on to Part Four of this thesis where I present the empirical data related to contextualisation of the Christian message at Ngukurr.

# Part Four

Chapter 6: A Ngukurr View of the World

Chapter 7: A Distinctively Aboriginal Way of Living as a Christian at Ngukurr

Chapter 8: Aboriginal Agency and The Ngukurr Church

Chapter 9: Ngukurr Contextualised Christian Beliefs

## Chapter Six

# A NGUKURR VIEW OF THE WORLD

Today, even though a number of Aborigines have learned to operate in the White domain, the Aboriginal way of perceiving the world around them is distinctly different from that of White Australians.

In this chapter I am dealing with a number of assumptions that Ngukurr Aborigines make about the world around them. The chapter gives a brief overview of the assumptions that formed the traditional world view and still exerts a strong influence on the way Ngukurr Aborigines perceive the world today even though they are experiencing rapid social change. An understanding of their world view gives an insight into the context they are contextualising the gospel in and an understanding of how they approach it. It also assists in identifying from the data in the following chapters some of the presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians bring to the contextualisation of the gospel.

World view is a general term and I have chosen to use it rather than values, styles, perceptions or differences, all of which are too narrow for my purposes. World view is a more inclusive term for understanding how people interpret the world around them.[410] In using the phrase 'world view', I do not mean that everybody at Ngukurr views the world around them in the same way. That is never true of a society, as a society consists of individuals who can come to different conclusions about how to interpret a particular event. Ngukurr is in a state of change but the assumptions discussed below occur often enough for me to make some generalisations.

I will discuss world view in terms of cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions.

### WORLDVIEW

W. E. H. Stanner when discussing the cultures of Aborigines and European Australians and the growing evidence that many Aborigines did not see assimilation into the White way of life as appropriate for Aborigines, commented that '*We are dealing with two distinct logics of life*'.[411] He quotes Muta, a Murinbata man, who highlighted the contrast when he said:

> *White man got no dreaming,*
> *Him go 'nother way.*
> *White man, him go different.*
> *Him got road belong himself.*[412]

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[410] Stephen Harris also found it difficult to choose an appropriate term. *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling*, Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1990, p. 44.
[411] W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938-1973*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1979, p. 324.
[412] Stanner, ibid., p. i.

In this chapter I am dealing with the way Ngukurr Aborigines view the world around them. Most Aborigines at Ngukurr believe that religion, activity in the spirit world and sorcery explain, what happens in the world around them. European Australians are more likely to believe that science can offer an explanation for everything that happens in their world. These are two fundamentally different ways in which to perceive the world. Stephen Harris writing about the contrast between the two world views states:

> *The differences are ontological and epistemological - they lie in the ways that the two cultures conceptualise how people relate to each other and the universe.* [413]

Harris argues that it is more appropriate to regard traditional Aboriginal culture and European Australian culture as on two different thought paths than to regard them as at two different ends of a continuum. They are two alternative ways of perceiving reality.[414]

Charles Kraft, a missiologist, defines world view as:

> *the culturally structured assumptions, values and commitments underlying a people's perception of reality.*[415]

These assumptions are the lens through which a member of a cultural group sees the world and on the basis of which he or she evaluates what is happening and forms his judgements.

Michael Christie, an educationist who has worked in Aboriginal schools and written about the difficulties of working with two cultures in one school without placing undue pressure on Aboriginal culture, defines world view as:

> *a set of concepts which relate individuals within any culture to the natural universe and to other humans in their social reality.*[416]

As Christie points out:

> *The world-view of a group of people underlies every aspect of their life - their religion, their language their social system, even the way they go about their daily life. World-views do not arise spontaneously. They arise from, and in their turn also constrain, the mode of economic adaptation developed by the people, their cultural goals, and patterns of social relationships.*[417]

Today Ngukurr is undergoing rapid social change as the outside world encroaches on it at a far more rapid rate than when it was a mission. This has resulted in a more open society. People perceive the world around them in more diverse ways than when they lived a traditional lifestyle in small groups. Now they have the options of following a secular lifestyle, Christianity, the traditional religion or a combination of the previous three. I know one middle aged man who describes himself as not believing in the traditional Aboriginal religion, Christianity or any religion. Young people are

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[413] S. Harris, ibid., p. 21.
[414] ibid., p. 21.
[415] Charles Kraft, 'Christianity with Power: Your World View and Your Experience of the Supernatural', in M. Kraft, *Understanding Spiritual Power A Forgotten Dimension of Cross-Cultural Mission and Ministry*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1995, p. 21.
[416] Michael Christie, *Aboriginal Perspectives on Experience and Learning: The Role of Language in Aboriginal Education*, Deakin University, Geelong, 1985, p. 8.
[417] ibid., p. 8.

becoming increasingly secular and upset the older people by referring to the Dreaming mythology as 'animal stories'.

I am using world view to describe characteristics of the traditional way of perceiving the world as this still has a strong influence in a community that is experiencing social change and underlies how members of the community view the world around them. The way they perceive reality contributes to their Aboriginality. There is also a strong desire to retain their Aboriginality and be recognised as distinctive from White society.

To describe characteristics of the world view of Ngukurr people I am using Hiebert's model of world view which argues that it is the cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions that people make that in turn forms their perception of reality.[418] Hiebert's model defines world view as follows:


**Figure 6** Hiebert's model of world view, taken from P.G. Hiebert *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, p. 46

[418] P. G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1985 p. 45-9. I consulted L. R. Hiatt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Concepts*, Australian Institute of Aborginal Studies, Canberra, 1978, but it did not offer as comprehensive framework to work with as Hiebert's model did. The articles in the book are concerned with three interconnected matters. Firstly, classification of flora, fauna, colours, sounds and emotions; secondly, choice of natural species for symbolic purposes; and thirdly, conceptualism of the land, secular and mystical.

> *Taken together cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions provide people with a way of looking at the world that makes sense out of it, that gives them a feeling of being at home, and that reassures them that they are right. This world view serves as the foundation on which they construct their explicit belief and value systems, and the social institutions within which they live their daily lives.*[419]

Hiebert's model of a world view is also useful for understanding that individuals may perceive the world around them differently from other members of the group. A world view changes when members of a group change, the way that they view things and then convince others that the new way is preferable. Change is always occurring. If a person changes to a new religion it is likely that he will evaluate many things around him in a new way, but also retain many things that identify him as a member of that culture. This is what Aboriginal Christians are doing when they contextualise Christianity.

I will use Hiebert's three types of assumptions to briefly describe the world view of Ngukurr Aborigines. In the following discussion of cognitive assumptions I have included a number of characteristics of world view that Stephen Harris has used to describe the world view of Yolngu Aborigines in North East Arnhem Land.[420]

**Cognitive Assumptions**

Cognitive assumptions define what is real. As Hiebert expresses it:

> *Existential assumptions provide a culture with the fundamental cognitive structures people use to explain reality.*[421]

Cognitive assumptions perform many tasks. They shape the mental categories people use for thinking, as well as determine the kinds of authority people have confidence in and the types of logic they use. *'Taken together these assumptions give order and meaning to life and reality'*.[422]

Cognitive or existential assumptions give people their concepts of space, time and other worlds.[423] For Aborigines at Ngukurr they include spirit beings, spirits of the dead and sorcery.

*Religious*

The Aboriginal world is religious rather than scientific in the sense that what they believe involves a different basis of proof. For an Aborigine the world around them is alive with spiritual potential and this vitality has a religious causation. When Aborigines encounter spirits, or have unusual encounters with animals or supernatural experiences, they do not regard them as abnormal. As people who are comfortable with religious or spiritual causation they accept such things as part of life.

Traditional Aboriginal society was very religious, and Harris argues correctly that religion permeated the whole of society and religion could not be separated from society. One evidence for this integration of religious thinking and human activity is the absence of prayer in ceremonies. Human beings and the sources of religious power, are not regarded as a them and us situation. Therefore

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[419] ibid., p. 47.
[420] S. Harris, ibid., pp. 22-45. I have used his categories of religious, relatedness, time, being, closed society, work and economics, authority, style and continuity in change. Other categories are mine.
[421] Hiebert, ibid., 1985, p. 45.
[422] ibid., 1985, p. 46.
[423] ibid., 1985, p. 45.

prayer is not regarded as necessary to bridge the gap between them.[424] Michael Christie explains it this way.

> *In Aboriginal ceremonies the ritual enactment is, of itself, sufficient and effective. The power of the ceremony is contained in the words and activities themselves. This is why, says Strehlow (1971), there is no prayer. The ritual behaviours are held to be causative because they use the actual and effective behaviour instituted by the original creating supernatural beings.*[425]

Traditional Aboriginal religion was far more concerned with religious practice than with dogma.[426] Correct belief was not the primary consideration, correct practice was.

Aboriginal belief that the primary cause of illness and death is not the result of natural causes but instead of activity in the supernatural realm reflects a religious way of perceiving the world around them.

### *Relatedness*

Aborigines are concerned with how things are related.

> *In the Aboriginal view the vitality of the earth is consistent with the degree of relatedness between particular places, people, kinship and religious belief and expression.*[427]

For Aborigines it is impossible to talk about land, religion, kinship, or responsibility without referring to the others as they are regarded as inter-related. This degree of relatedness is in stark contrast to the way that European Australians compartmentalise the same topics and can talk about one without including the other.

### *Time*

Time orientation for traditional Aborigines can be described in a number of ways. It is cyclical in the sense that some events occur at the same time each year. The wet season, the dry season, the time when bush turkeys are plentiful, the time each year when sharks can be easily caught and so on.

Time is not viewed primarily as progressing in a linear sense. However all Aborigines that I know are able to tell their life story in a linear manner. This is not unlike Europeans who primarily see time in a linear sense but refer to time in a cyclical sense to describe the seasons of the year.

Another perspective on time is that a part of a week can be viewed as a whole week. An example of this was when a man agreed to come to Sydney to help people learn Kriol at a linguistics course. The agreement was that he would come for four weeks. He arrived a day or two before he was needed on the Monday. After three weeks work had been completed he insisted that it was time for him to go

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[424] S. Harris, ibid., p. 22.

[425] M. Christie, *The Classroom World of the Aboriginal Child*, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, p. 263, cited in Stephen Harris, *Two Way Aboriginal Schooling*, 1990, p. 22. The Strehlow reference would be to T. G. H. Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion*, Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Special Studies in Religions Series, vol. 2, Adeliade, 1978, p. 14. See also *Songs of Central Australia*, Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1970, pp. 284, 332.

[426] Malcom Calley, *Aboriginal Pentacostalism: A Study of Changes in Religion North Coast New South Wales*, MA thesis, University of Sydney, 1955, p. 64.

[427] S. Harris, ibid., p. 24.

home as he had been there for four weeks and had kept his part of the agreement. In explaining how he reached this conclusion he said he had arrived before the Sunday and so that was one week. He had then worked the next three weeks and this meant he had been in Sydney for four weeks. The same thing happens if a person arrives for work at half past nine. By ten o'clock they have been there for an hour.

In relation to the Dreaming, Aborigines view the past as overlapping with the present. The religious experience of their rituals gives them the opportunity to experience the past in the present and the Dreaming is not viewed as an historical past. It is part of the present. The eternal aspect of the sacred appears to be free of chronological time.[428] This seems to carry over into Christianity. I have always noted with interest that Easter, Christmas, Pentecost are always preached about in the present tense as if happening today.

*Being*

For Aborigines their world view places an emphasis on being rather than on doing; on maintaining rather than on developing, changing, making or storing.[429] Meaningful behaviour that is concerned with personal relationships is more important than purposeful behaviour such as finding a job. Aborigines will choose to maintain a relationship ahead of meeting a goal related to purposeful behaviour. Thus, if something needs to be done to maintain a relationship, this will have priority over going to work that day.

The traditional nomadic life style fitted in with the environment. They responded to the environment in hunting and gathering food rather than working to change the environment to grow crops or domesticate animals.

For a group that had chosen to be responsive to their environment it was far more important to maintain good relationships with your kin if you were going to survive future difficult times, than it was to be doing things to meet economic goals to provide for the future.

*Closed society*

Traditional Aboriginal society was a closed society in the sense that it centred around what had happened when the people, the land, the ceremonies and the social system were created. Much of their religion and life centred around staying in harmony with the Dreamtime and performing the rituals that would ensure that the work of the creator beings was maintained.

In the absence of sustained contact with other major societies, Aboriginal life was lived in a closed society in which change occurred gradually. The contact in the last hundred years with the dominant Western society which is mainly secular, has given Aborigines in the Roper area far more alternatives than they had in the past when they only had contact with neighbouring Aboriginal groups.

Today Aborigines at Ngukurr have more alternatives, both religious and secular, than in the past. Women who do not wish to stay in a marriage have the option of the Supporting Parents Allowance, Unemployment Benefits or participating in the Community Development Employment Program to enable them to live independently, and thus do not have to follow traditional patterns of re-marriage.

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[428] Margret S. Bain, *The Aboriginal-White Encounter*, Australian Aborigines and Islanders Branch, Summer Institute of Linguisitcs, Darwin, 1992, pp. 27-9, 143.
[429] S. Harris, ibid., p. 28.

Young people can move away for work or education in order to avoid demands that they participate in ceremonies. Christianity is not the only new religious element, they have learnt about different ceremonies from wider contact with other Aborigines. They have also discovered through television that there are other major religions in the world. No longer do they have only the limited choices of a closed society.

The widespread adoption of the sub-section system is another move to cope with wider contact with other Aborigines than they had in the past. The sub-section system, which is discussed in the next chapter, allows them to work out how they relate to Aborigines from far away places they have not dealt with before. While society is more open today there is a strong desire to retain an Aboriginal distinctiveness in the midst of change.

*Work and economics*

In the past Ngukurr Aborigines hunted and gathered food and believed that religious ritual ensured an adequate supply of food. They did not see a close causal connection between, land, labour and wealth.[430] When the government took over the missions in the Northern Territory starting in the late 1960s Aborigines were amazed at the large amount of goods and money that poured into the missions. The missions had been run on shoe-string budgets and were often understaffed. As Stephen Harris points out, traditional Aborigines often have a very different view of the government to European Australians.

> *Many remote Aboriginal people appear to view the government very much as a creator being in the sense that it can cause goods and cash to materialise. The connection between land and use and individual effort as the source of a government's resources is not perceived.*[431]

Such a view is in keeping with a view that rituals ensure that food supplies are sufficient and religion is the integrating idea that ties everything together. Aborigines look at the seemingly endless resources of the government and comment that *'The White man has a secret and he has not told us what it is'*. On one occasion a thoughtful Ngukurr man trying to understand the White way of doing things asked the shop manager if everything in the shop had been paid for? When the manager replied in the affirmative the man then asked, 'Why do we have to pay for it a second time when we get something from the shop?'

Aborigines also regard it as far more important to participate in something than to work, even though a person may work while participating. The amount of time spent in participation is not as important as the fact that you have participated. People at Ngukurr are not worried about arriving late or leaving early, for an event such as a community meeting, church service or ceremony. They have participated in the event, that is what is of most concern.

*Authority*

Aboriginal society was small scale and egalitarian. Authority was organised in two ways. On the one hand it was organised by religious or ritual authority. On the other hand it was based on affection and the obligations of kinship. Religious authority was gained by passing through many ceremonies and was usually in the hands of a gerontocracy which had its roots in ownership of land that also gave

[430] S. Harris, ibid., p. 34.
[431] S. Harris, ibid., p. 34.

ownership to ceremonies. Authority in the ritual domain, which has its origins in the Dreaming, is the only authority that can overide loyalty to kin. Religious authority was not easily transferred to the secular world.

Authority based on the affections and the obligations of kinship plays an important role in Ngukurr society. The first thing that Aborigines did when they became responsible for running the local council at Ngukurr was to reorganise the work gangs along the lines of people who were related in a way that allowed them to work comfortably together. Relationship to a person both by blood and in the classificatory kinship system determines how you behave towards that person.[432] Such a system encounters all kinds of difficulties when a large group of people are brought together in a community under a local council. People are primarily loyal to and responsible for their own kin, not a large community.

In everyday life authority was perceived as 'minding', looking after and nurturing.[433] When a young man was initiated or introduced to a new ritual he was minded or looked after by an appropriate person. Grandmothers and mothers looked after children. A person who was a boss for a traditional ritual looked after those who helped him. He was responsible to meet their needs.

This idea of nurturing authority has been associated with the word boss.[434] Traditionally a person in the position of boss for a ceremony was expected to meet the personal needs of those working for him (who were always related to him) and not just to be concerned with the ceremony. This idea has been applied in a secular sense to a boss who employs an Aborigine to work for her or him. It means that the boss is regarded as having a nurturing role and helping them with personal difficulties. This notion was aided and abetted by the ration system which placed the boss in the position of supplying food, clothing and other goods. Also the boss was often the person who dealt with outside authorities for them.

*Continuity and change*

A fascinating aspect about Aboriginal society at Ngukurr is its ability to change while remaining distinctively Aboriginal.[435] In many ways life today bears little resemblance to before White people entered the area. After the arrival of Whites the Aboriginal population declined rapidly,[436] some languages now only have a handful of elderly speakers. Today Ngukurr Aborigines live a settled life in a large community. Even those who have returned to live on outstations live a very different life to that which their nomadic grandparents lived. Their response to all of this change has resulted in a distinctive Aboriginality being maintained.

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[432] Discussed more fully in the next chapter.

[433] F. Myers, 'A Broken Code: Pintupi Political Theory and Contemporary Social Life', *Mankind*, 12, 1980, pp. 311-24.

[434] F. Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986, pp. 262-8.

[435] For a discussion on continuity in change in Aboriginal communities, see Jeremy Beckett, *Past and Present: the Construction of Aboriginality*, Aboriginal Studies Press, AIAS, Canberra, 1988; Ian Keen, *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*, Aboriginal Studies, Press Canberra, 1988; and Erich Kolig, *The Silent Revolution: The Effects of Modernisation on Australian Aboriginal Religion*, Institute for the Study of Human Issues, Philadelphia, 1981.

[436] The population at Ngukurr has increased over recent years and has experienced good birth rates for a number of years.

Change has often resulted in new versions of Aboriginal ways rather than accepting Western ways. When faced with no common Aboriginal language the mission Aborigines took the Pidgin English they shared and creolised it into a mother tongue that now has fifth generation mother tongue speakers, and is the language of the community. The hope of the missionaries and government was that Aborigines would adopt English.[437] Aboriginal art previously done using traditional materials has re-emerged in a new style using acrylic paints on canvas but it has retained its religious themes. Western schooling is accepted, but since 1979, at the community's insistence, the school has been staffed by Aborigines with an Aboriginal principal and strict limitations on how many White staff can be employed. Houses are Western in broad terms, but Aboriginal input has influenced the style, including large open areas and the style of living in them is different. The Community Development Employment Program functions with more than twenty extended family groups known as clans responsible for a project. The community has improved the standard and amount of housing by paying rent regularly. However they achieved this in their own unique style. Everyone who receives a cheque, whether pension or pay cheque, pays rent instead of a house being rented to a family. The church also functions in a manner that represents their Aboriginality.

All of the changes mentioned show that there has been continuity in change. Ngukurr Aborigines have assimilated what they chose to, while, at the same time retaining an Aboriginal way of doing things. This demonstrates the failure of the assimilation goals of the mission and government.

The discussion of cognitive assumptions made by many Aborigines at Ngukurr shows that they view the world around them through the lens of assumptions that are different to the cognitive assumptions that other Australians use to view the same world. An examination of the following affective assumptions will give further insights into how Ngukurr Aborigines view the world around them.

**Affective Assumptions**

Hiebert's second group of assumptions are the affective assumptions that underlie the ideas of beauty, style and aesthetics found in a culture. They influence tastes in music, dress, food and architecture. Affective assumptions also account for 'the way people feel toward one another and life in general.'

*Style*

Aborigines have their own distinctive style of doing things and this can be shown in interpersonal communication. Aborigines reserve the right to speak and the right not to listen. It is not seen as rude for people to wander in and out while someone is speaking at church or any other meeting. They regard everything as personal and Aboriginal languages do not have a form of impersonal debate. Hypothetical examples suggested by a European Australian in discussion are regarded as concrete. A White boss giving a harsh telling off to an Aborigine is regarded as committing a worse misdemeanour than what the Aboriginal committed. It is considered acceptable to ask questions to gain general information but not to ask 'why'. Another characteristic of the Ngukurr Aboriginal style of doing things is their preference for consensus when making decisions.

Notions of occasion, location and time are part of a distinctive Aboriginal style of doing things. These are discussed in the previous chapter and mentioned briefly here. Aborigines are most comfortable

[437] John Sandefur, A Language Coming of Age: Kriol of North Australia, MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1983, pp. 248-92.

out of doors and prefer things to be held in the cool of the late afternoon or evening. This was also the traditional time for song and dance[438] and represents their idea of when and where to hold a community event. People arrive when they are ready. Time is flexible and events start when people are ready to commence the activities.

*Sharing*

It is imperative to observe the social ethic of looking after and sharing with close relatives. A person who does not do this is regarded as a hard person and as behaving in a most un-Aboriginal way. Stories from the Dreaming reinforce the practice of sharing. Traditionally the sharing of food was essential for everyone's survival. Today when a person is paid their wages they will buy food for their extended family. When a relative is paid a few days later they will do the same thing. Clothes and possessions are shared around the extended family group. They are not shared freely outside of this group. To participate in this sharing fully you must ask the appropriate relatives to share things with you. It is essential to let relatives know you have a need rather than expecting them to observe your need and then meet it.

It is far more important to share possessions than retain them. This ensures that a person will be looked after in a time of need. Possessions are regarded as being of use for the extended family and should be given to appropriate relatives when requested.

*Art*

The Dreaming is regarded as the appropriate theme for art. In recent years several Ngukurr artists have received wide recognition of their work.[439] Their style is different to that of traditional bark paintings but still distinctively Aboriginal. They make use of canvas and modern paints but their theme remains a religious one. The artists' paintings centre around their 'dreaming' and the events that accompanied its journey through their country.

*Architecture*

Houses are western in many ways, but local people have contributed to the design and it reflects their preference for out of doors living. The houses often have small rooms as bedrooms where belongings can be kept, and a large area under the roof that is open on all sides to catch the breeze which is used as a living area. This reflects their assumption that open space is preferable to being fully enclosed.

*Music*

Music is enjoyed by the community and cassette tapes are played in most homes at all hours of the day. Tapes of traditional music are heard but the most popular music is country and western, and rock and roll. Electronic bands are formed by the young men and occupy many hours. One of their bands, 'Broken English', has been a popular band in Darwin. Popular discos are held on the basketball courts.

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[438] W. Chaseling, *Yulengor: Nomads of Arnhem Land*, The Epworth Press, London, 1957, p. 29.

[439] Ginger Riley was honoured in 1997 with a ten year retrospective of his work by the National Art Gallery of Victoria.

Traditional music is owned by the clan group or a member of it, whereas country and western music and Christian hymns and songs are perceived as being the property of all,[440] and therefore able to be sung or played by whoever desires to do so.

Affective assumptions made by people at Ngukurr influence their style of doing things, attitude to personal belongings, what is acceptable art, architecture and choice of music.

**Evaluative assumptions**

Hiebert's third group of assumptions are the evaluative ones. These provide the standards people use to make judgements and includes the criteria for deciding what is truth. Evaluative assumptions also determine the priorities and allegiances of the people.[441]

*Religious knowledge*

In Aboriginal culture a high value is placed on religious knowledge, especially knowledge about correct religious practice. Ceremonies were given a high priority and important ceremonial men were respected. Religion through the law taught correct behaviour and was expected to involve the whole of life. Religious knowledge was gained by experiencing it. A person gained their knowledge by participating in ceremonies and being initiated into the 'inside' or secret knowledge. This knowledge was demonstrated by saying something or doing something, such as participating in a ritual at the appropriate time or occasion. A person would deny knowledge of a myth or ritual if he/she was not of the right gender or group to know about it.[442]

Knowledge in the area of everyday life is regarded as knowing by experience. You do not know about something until you do it. You can know everything that is involved in preparing a type of damper made with water lily seeds, but until you actually do it you cannot say that you know how to do it.[443]

*Moral system*

Traditional Aboriginal religion had a moral code that Aborigines have likened to the Ten Commandments. They refer to it as the law. The law which came from the Dreamtime taught that people should refrain from jealousy, stealing, lying and murder; that they should share and not be greedy. It taught that it was their obligation to look after those for whom they were responsible. The law taught that they should respect and look after sacred sites and artefacts. Breaking the law would result in harm to your extended family.

There was a system of arranged marriages and polygyny which operated according to carefully defined rules, and meant widows were cared for. It was incomprehensible to traditional Aborigines that a woman could live on her own. Today at Ngukurr with the exception of one man who has several wives, women will not be part of a situation where they have to live with a second wife. The first wife leaves when a second wife is taken. Women at Ngukurr now have the alternative of the

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[440] The *Kriol Song Buk*, produced by the Ngukurr church, contains over 200 Christian hymns and songs in Kriol. It acknowledges copyright and the church has obtained permission to use translated versions of the songs.
[441] Hiebert, ibid., pp. 46-7.
[442] For a comprehensive study of knowledge and religious knowledge, refer to Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Society*, Clarendon Press, London, 1994.
[443] This is discussed in Margret Bain, *The Aboriginal-White Encounter*, Australian Aborigines and Islanders Branch, Summer Institute of Linguisitcs, Darwin, 1992.

supporting mother's pension, or employment. They prefer this to living with another wife. Today young people are more likely to choose their own partner instead of their parents arranging it for them.

One of the big moral dilemmas is what to do about a 'promise'. A 'promise' is a person who is promised to a future spouse at birth or a young age. Today, when a person marries a person of their own choice, the 'promise' may be left without a spouse. Or when the spouse of the promise dies the family of the 'promise' may then exert pressure on a person to take the promise even though they are married. The fact that today there is still concern about what to do about a 'promise', in spite of major changes to marriage arrangements, shows that old assumptions about what are appropriate marriages are still at work.

*Health*

The assumption that breaking taboos, activity in the spirit world, payback and sorcery are the actual causes of prolonged and unexplained illness and death, means that explanations are looked for in the those areas and not in living conditions, lifestyle, diet and infection. Good health is not viewed as a right or as something that you have much control over and this view at times, comes close to fatalism.

**Conclusion**

Hiebert's model of world view using cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions has proved a useful tool for forming an understanding of how Aborigines at Ngukurr make sense of the world around them, what makes them feel at home and reassures them that they are correct in how they understand their experience of life.

Their perception of the world is one in which supernatural activity is normal, and much of what happens can be accounted for by the activity of spirits, magic or sorcery.[444] It is not surprising that they should expect Christianity to meet their needs in the world as they perceive it. The Bible does portray a God who is more powerful than spirits and who heals the sick.

It would be presumptuous to reach a conclusion at this point about what presuppositions Ngukurr Christians bring to contextualisation of the gospel. However, given the assumptions discussed in this chapter, it would not be surprising if they included a view about God as a God of power who can act in the supernatural world; the importance of Aboriginal identity and a view that Christianity is a holistic religion. Furthermore if contextualisation of the gospel is to be successful in this situation it needs to be done by those who are members of the community as they understand the situation best.

Having examined the cognitive, affective and evaluative assumptions that shape the way that Aborigines at Ngukurr view the world around them, in chapter seven I will examine five areas of life in which contextualisation is occurring and resulting in a distinctively Aboriginal way of living as a Christian.

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[444] Janice Reid demonstrates that this is also true for Aborigines in north eastern Arnhem Land, in *Sorcery and Healing Spirits*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1983, p. 32. See also Warner in his book on north eastern Arnhem Land, *A Black Civilization*, revised edition, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass, 1969 pp. 183-233. The topic is explored further in chapter seven of this thesis.

## Chapter Seven

# A DISTINCTIVELY ABORIGINAL WAY OF LIVING AS A CHRISTIAN AT NGUKURR

In this chapter I will explore five important areas of Aboriginal life to demonstrate how Aboriginal Christians function in those areas. I will examine whether or not their claim to be Aboriginal and Christian is borne out by how they live. The five areas are the spirit world, death and funerals, illness and healing, social relationships and traditional ceremonies.

After the presentation and discussion of the data it should be possible to identify some of the presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians are bringing to the contextualisation process. Also their role as local agents should be clearer. It should also be possible to make some comment about the place of culture, social change, the gospel, and role of the wider church in the contextualisation process at Ngukurr. I will also discuss the data to see if any general tendency is emerging in how they approach contextualisation.

### THE SPIRIT WORLD

The spirit world and the spirits who inhabit it are a matter of concern for traditional Aborigines and Aboriginal Christians. Spirits are accepted as real and regarded as impinging on their lives. I will describe the Aboriginal view of the spirit world at Ngukurr and the Aboriginal Christian view. These are not usually seen by Aborigines as contrasting views and there is often a good deal of overlap between the views.

Aborigines accept the spirit world as real. This is in keeping with their world view. It is not unusual to hear people discussing a spirit that someone has seen and what it means. The spirit world is accepted as part of life. It does not cease to exist for Aboriginal Christians.

The traditional Aboriginal view of the spirit world can be described as consisting of three kinds of spirit beings: creator beings, spirits of the dead and miscellaneous spirits.

#### Creator Beings

Ngukurr and the area around it has many accounts of creator beings travelling through the area and the track that they followed. There are sacred sites associated with these myths. A. Capell when working with the Nunggubuyu north of Ngukurr, a number of whom live at Ngukurr, identified the following: the two pythons, Dalmungguru the lizard, catfish, mudcod and the two snakes.[445] A map of their journeys is included below. Some of the other creator beings that myths record as travelling through the area are: left-handed wallaby, black goanna, sandridge goanna, mosquito and mermaids

[445] A. Capell, 'Myths and Tales of the Nunggubuyu, S.E. Arnhem Land', *Oceania*, vol. XXXI, no. 2, September 1971, pp. 110-67.

(fish women). Elkin[446] also includes goanna, brown chicken hawk, paper bark tree, dingo, plains kangaroo, barramundi, black nose snake, plum tree, plum bird, lilybird, honeybee, turkey, lightning and rain. There are a number of sites related to these activities of the creator beings in the Ngukurr area. Mount Warren was formed by the left handed wallaby. The white gum tree by the jetty at Ngukurr is where kangaroo died. Napurr Gorge contains the sites related to the mosquito and mermaid dreamings. When travelling in the area with older Aborigines they will point out the various sites where these creator beings were active and describe what happened there. The myths, the routes travelled and the sacred sites are still well known.

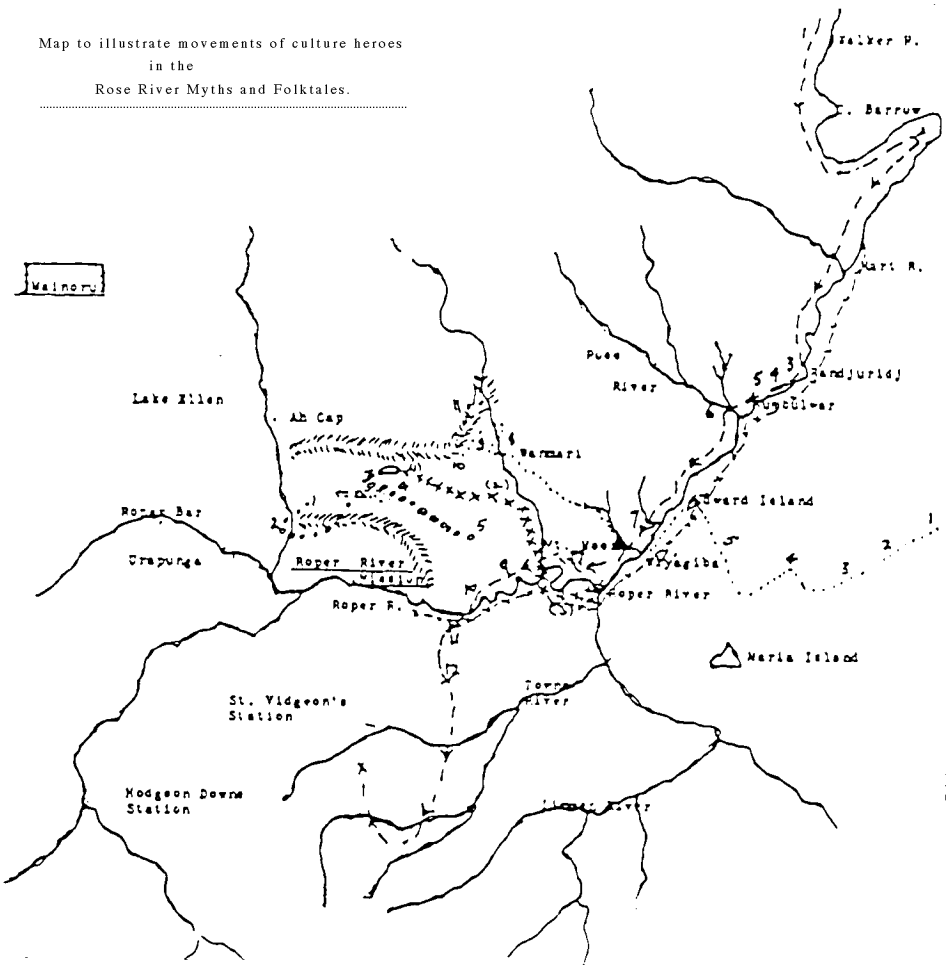
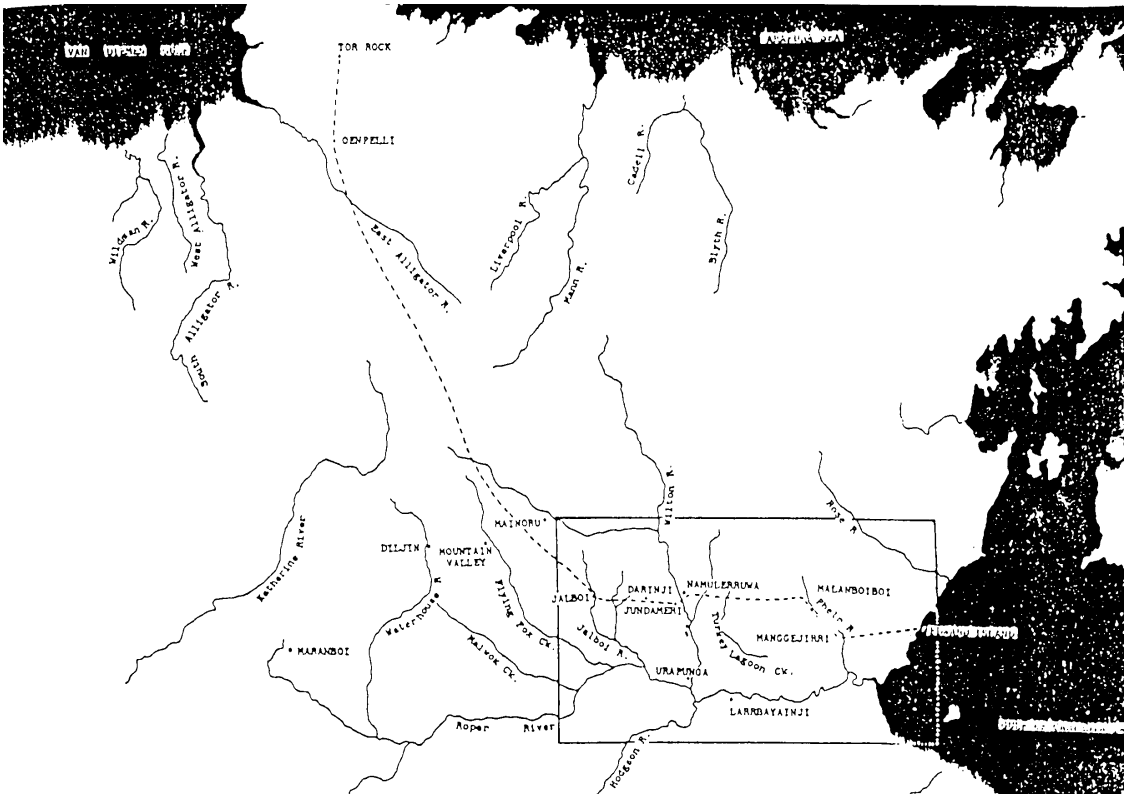



Figure I.
This map shows the region between Blue Mud Bay and the Roper River, covered by the stories in the text. The routes of the various actors in the stories are marked as follows :

| | |
|---|---|
| -------- | Dalmunguru (Story I). |
| xxxxx | The Two Pythons (Story 2). |
| ..... | Catfish (Story 4). |
| x-x-x- | Mudcod (Story 6 (2)). |
| ooooo | The Two Snakes (Story 6). |

**Map 1** Capell's map showing movements of culture heroes.[447]

[446] A. Elkin, 'Yabuduruwa at Roper River Mission 1965', *Oceania*, vol. XLII, no. 2, December 1971, pp. 112-67.
[447] Taken from 'Myths and Tales of the Nunggubuyu,' 1960, by A. Capell, in *Oceania*, vol. XXXI, no. 1, p. 32.




Map 2.—Nagaran's journey in Arnhem Land.
Inset : See map of Nagaran's route in south-east Arnhem Land.

**Map 2** Elkin's map showing Nagaran's journey in Arnhem Land.[448]

Nagaran the giant, is a creator being whose activities are well known in the area. Elkin recorded the route that Nagaran followed when travelling through the area.[449] In 1959 the remains of a large sea-serpent were washed up opposite Edward Island.[450] Mordacai Skewthorpe showed John Sandefur a photo of the remains in 1973.[451] Locally the bones were regarded as being those of Nagaran. Mordacai who saw the decomposed body before it was buried said:

> *'the ribs were about nine inches through each bone, the vertebrae each about eighteen inches long, and the carcase about eight or nine feet high and very long.'*[452]

The creator beings are still regarded as exercising an influence today and not only in ceremonies. In the early 1980s, when visiting Costello outstation, I was told that one of the men had needed to talk to one of the dreamings at a nearby billabong. He had approached the place through water so that the dreaming could not smell his sweat, and he could approach it safely.[453] On another occasion a

[448] Taken from 'Yabuduruwa at Roper River Mission', 1965, by A. P. Elkin, in *Oceania*, vol. XLII, no. 2, December 1971, p. 126.
[449] Elkin, ibid., p. 127-32. Mrs C. Moore, wife of the chaplain at Ngukurr, in a letter to Elkin, traces Nagaran's journey as it was told to her by the men. She also mentions a number of the Creator beings that Elkin also recorded. NTGA NTRS 599/P1, Box 6, Folder 4d, 23rd February 1971.
[450] ibid., p. 131, fn. 15.
[451] Personal communication from John Sandefur.
[452] NTGA NTRS 599/P1, Box 6, Folder 4d., 23rd February 1971, Mrs C. Moore, letter to Elkin, ibid., p. 4.
[453] J. Reid, *Sorcerers and Healing Spirits*, Australian National University Press, Canberra, 1983, p. 51, reports

woman from the same outstation explained to me that she had become ill with rheumatic fever, as she had accidentally seen a female dreaming with a baby.

The creator beings, the myths and rituals associated with them still play an important part in the life of many people at Ngukurr and the surrounding area. Ceremonies with their rituals that re-enact the activities of the creator beings have been performed more frequently in recent years.

**Spirits of the dead**

The second kind of spirits that are recognised by Ngukurr people are the spirits of the dead. Mortuary rites play an important role in ensuring that the spirits of the dead do not stay in the immediate vicinity. Houses, the clinic, shop and office are smoked to cleanse them and to discourage the spirit from staying there. Younger people prefer to say smoking is held to cleanse the building from disease as they are reluctant to admit it is to discourage the spirit of the dead person from remaining in the immediate area. The dead person's belongings are either destroyed or distributed to new owners so that the spirit will become confused and leave.

Agnes Stanley, who was a young girl when the mission commenced in 1908, told me that when the White man first came, Aborigines thought they were spirits of dead Aborigines.

> *'We thought they were the spirits of the dead on big dogs and they thought we were animals.'*[454]

She also stated that the word *munanga*, commonly used for White people, means 'ghost'.[455]

It is believed to be important to sing the spirit of the dead person back to their country. One woman told me that the traditional belief was that the spirits of the dead waited in their country for what would happen next. When her father died, the family did the rituals in the traditional way as that was what the old people wanted. They sang out to his spirit. In response it '*barked there from on top and then the spirit fell down in his country'* (He made a sound in reply from up in the sky and then arrived in his country here on earth).[456] The old people believed when they heard that sound that the spirit had arrived back in its country.

Cherry Daniels reported that when somebody died it was customary to sing their spirit back to their country. When they had finished singing they would sing out 'Goooooo'. Then the spirit would answer 'Goooooo' and they knew that the spirit was no longer hanging around where the person had died.[457]

On several occasions Aborigines at Ngukurr have reported an old belief in a place where the spirit of the dead person went to after death. Andrew Joshua reported that Aborigines of his father's generation, who were among the first to live at the mission used to say that whena good person died their spirit went to a good hunting ground and that the missionary way was much the same, if a

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something similar: 'The risk associated with entering a dangerous Dreaming or burial place may be directly attributed to the spirit beings which dwell there. If a man who is a stranger to a certain area walks through it without permission and ritual protection, the spirit described meldbudjumirn, may steal his spirit or soul. The victim will become thinner and thinner and finally die.'

[454] Personal communication from Agnes Stanley.

[455] Joy Sandefur, 1982, p. 51.

[456] Joy Sandefur, unpublished data paper about Ngukurr, and Ngukurr Field Tape no. 10, Side 2, 1995.

[457] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 5, Side 2, 1995.

person was good their spirit went to heaven when he or she died.[458] Dinah Garadji, Andrew Joshua's sister reported a similar belief to me a number of years earlier. She said that the old people believed that when a person died, that person was judged by a big spirit in the sky. If the person was good he or she went to a good place, if bad to a bad place. Cherry Daniels also reported a similar belief.[459] Another woman reported that before the missionaries came they already knew there was a waiting place for spirits of the dead but they did not know what happened after that. They knew there was one big (important) spirit there.[460] The people mentioned above all regard the old people as had this belief before the missionaries came. Some believed that there were two spirits, one that returned to a person's country and one that went to either a good place or a bad place.[461] All of this points to a belief in a spirit that lives on after death.[462]

**Miscellaneous Spirits**

There are a number of spirits that come under the category of miscellaneous.

*Bush Blekbala*

This spirit lives and wanders around in the bush. It is very strong and extremely dangerous. People are scared of being captured by the *bush blekbala*. When it is rumoured to be around, people are terrified of being caught by it.

*Dwarves*

These live in a cave that only has underwater access at Yellow Water Billabong which is about five kilometres from Ngukurr. I have been told that the Dwarves have been seen fishing in a boat on the billabong just before dawn. They vanish as soon as humans are seen in the area. The Dwarves are regarded as harmful. A car accident that occurred on the main road leading out of Ngukurr was blamed on the driver seeing one of the Dwarves standing in the middle of the road, resulting in him losing control of the car due to the shock he received.

*Little People of Burrinju*

These spirits inhabit Burrinju which is a large sandstone formation that is also known as Ruined City in Arnhem Land, north of Ngukurr. People are scared of these spirits and there was great concern on two occasions in the 1980s when people were lost in the vicinity of Burrinju. People are terrified of being there at night. There are stories of people being lost at Burrinju and never being seen again.

*Large black dogs*

These spirits have been seen near Ngukurr. They are said to be as large as bullocks.

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[458] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no., 1 Side 1, 1995.
[459] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 5, Side 2, 1995. This is disscussed in chapter nine.
[460] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 10, Side 2, 1995. The account of this spirit and the Aboriginal belief that it was the same as the Christian God will be discussed in chapter nine. It is also mentioned in chapter five.
[461] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 5, Side 2, 1995. W. L. Warner reports that the Yolngu in North Arnhem Land believed that a person had two spirits. *A Black Civilization*, Peter Smith, Gloucester, Mass, 1969 (c 1958), pp. 435-7; and J. Reid, ibid., p. 33, says this distinction is not as clear today.
[462] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 5, Side 2, 1995.

*Debuldebul (devildevil)*[463]

This term refers to a number of harmful spirits in the area. Some are regarded as more harmful than others. Some of these *debuldebul* assist sorcerers. There is one that can speak everyone's language. They come at night and can live anywhere. People will often tell their children there is a *debuldebul* in the vicinity in order to dissuade them from wandering away from home. One night Ishmael Andrews was attacked by a spirit that looked like a bear and tried to throw him over a cliff near his home.

Some people sleep with a light on all night to keep the spirits away. Others believe that their dogs bark and warn them when spirits are around. Fear of spirits keeps some people from walking around alone at night.

**Aboriginal Christian View of Spirit World**

Aboriginal Christians have expanded the local view of the spirit world to include God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, angels and Satan. They have a view of the spirit world that allows for the existence of the spirits discussed above. There is debate about who formed the world. One view is that the Creator spirits gave shape to the earth and brought all life into existence. Another view is that the Creator spirits brought everything into existence under God's control. Yet another view is that God made the world and all life in it. Some hold both the traditional view and a Christian view and do not appear to be concerned about the fact that they holding two different views. The view of the church minister and past Aboriginal lay readers and leaders who taught him, is that God is the True Dreaming. It was God who made the earth and brought all life into existence. He is not a God who belongs only to the White man. He is the God of the Aborigines and everyone else.[464]

Aboriginal Christians are not disbelieving when other Aborigines in the community see spirits or have encounters with the supernatural. They have often seen spirits themselves. Nor do they find it surprising when they see angels, have visions or encounter God in some unusual way.

Maud Thompson told me about seeing an angel when her son was very ill. She was sitting by his bed praying. She looked up and saw one angel at the foot of the bed and another at the head of the bed. She regarded this as a good experience and her son lived.

On one occasion some children decided to walk in from one of the outstations. They reached Mission Gorge at nightfall. This is a place feared by some people as spirits are reported to be there. It is also an old cemetery. The children reported that they were not afraid that night as they saw lights travelling with them and thought the lights were angels looking after them.

On one occasion a man from 'Bottom camp' was behaving very strangely in the eyes of the community. He lived out bush and insisted on his wife and children being with him. He allowed his wife to go back to the community to get food from relatives. Eventually they came back to live at Ngukurr in a hut at her brother's camp. Visiting medical doctors diagnosed that he needed psychiatric help. His relatives thought he was troubled by a spirit. He refused to emerge from the hut and would not drink water from a nearby tap as he believed there was poison on the tap. Jessica and others at the

[463] The term in Kriol is *debuldebul*. It has most likely come into Kriol from English as devildevil is a term used for bad spirits throughout much of North Australia.

[464] Personal communication from John Sandefur who reported that on a trip around the cattle stations in 1973 this was the essence of the sermon that Barnabas Roberts, one of the early Christians and the senior lay reader at St Matthew's Church, Ngukurr, preached on every occasion he was asked to take a service by other Aborigines.

camp prayed for him on three occasions. After the first occasion he came out and walked around. The second time he went hunting and caught nothing. The third time they prayed, he came out, went hunting and killed a kangaroo, so they knew that he was all right again and that the spirit had left. Successful hunting was a sign that he was well again and no longer troubled by the spirit.

It is interesting to note that one of the most popular Bible stories in the New Testament that I have frequently heard retold by Aborigines at Ngukurr and elsewhere, is the story of Jesus casting many spirits out of a man from Gerasenes into the pigs nearby who then charged over the cliff into Lake Galilee and drowned.[465]

Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr regard the spirit world as real. It has not ceased to exist because they have become Christians. For them Christianity has to account for and deal with the things that they perceive as happening in the spirit world.

Under Aboriginal leadership the church is dealing with fear of the spirits. Recently Ishmael reported praying for a woman who was too afraid of the spirits to walk to Fellowship. Her fear disappeared after he prayed for her. Ishmael reported that both the minister and himself had prayed for a young man who was scared of spirits. When Christians believe that a spirit is present near their camp they pray to God for protection. They believe that God is stronger than the power of the various spirits. As Aboriginal Christians their approach is not to deny the existence of the spirit world but to find a way to overcome the fear that it creates.

**HEALING AND ILLNESS**

Illness and its causes are a major concern for Ngukurr Aborigines. For routine illness, help is sought from the medical clinic or traditional remedies. When a person fails to recover or suffers from an unusual illness, help is sought from a traditional healer or from the church, and sometimes both. There is a concern about the cause of the illness. Is it due to sorcery, the breaking of a taboo or the activity of spirits? It is anticipated that a healer will use supernatural power to effect a cure.

Aboriginal Christians accept that illness can be caused by spirits and sorcery. To this they have added the retribution of God. A person may be ill because God is punishing them for some wrong doing. I have heard this offered on numerous occasions as the cause of an illness. This does not appear to come from mission theology as I have heard CMS missionaries express concern about this view.

Under Aboriginal leadership the church has incorporated a time of laying on of hands and prayer for healing into some of its services. There is also some healing that takes place at people's homes.

I will give examples of Christian healers at work. A Comparison of traditional and Christian healers will follow. Next I will deal with two traditional healers who became Christians and what they did about their traditional practices. Finally I will discuss the Christian healing and endeavour to account for its emergence.

Illness, physical difficulties and death are often attributed to the results of a curse, sorcery or spirits. When Maud's daughter was ill and not recovering, a traditional healer was called in. He found a tin containing a bit of sweaty material from under the arm of her dress. The tin had been buried under the remains of a fire at a ceremony ground.

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[465] Gospel of Luke, chapter 8, verses 26-39, *Holy Bible*, New International Version, Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, 1986.

People are careful how they dispose of their hair when it is cut, as it is believed that hair can be used to work sorcery against them.

People experience suffering when they are cursed. On one occasion a young mother was cursed by an intoxicated person. The curse meant that she could not touch, hold or breastfeed her baby until a person was brought into the community who could remove the curse.

In 1980 a young man ran away from a punishment ceremony that he was participating in. His family were told that over the next five years he or some members of his family would die as a consequence. Some members of his family did and the family panicked every time one of them became ill.

**Case Histories of Christians Healing People**

Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara reports that he sometimes uses oil or water when praying for healing.[466] He has used water on three occasions and today those people are well and walking around. On one occasion he went from Ngukurr to Numbulwar to pray for a woman. Her family gathered around and he anointed her forehead and the crippled part with water and prayed for her. One month later she was walking around.[467] I understand that the water had not been consecrated or blessed.

Carol Robinson told me a story about the healing of a man who was unable to walk. Gumbuli Wurramara, Carol and Andrew prayed for one hour. Then the man drank some water. They said that God had done something with the water. The man drank it and then walked. He had not been walking for two to three weeks.[468]

Rebecca Dennis said of her parents, Wallace and Dorothy Dennis, that God had given them the healing hand. Wallace her father healed a lot of people. When Elaine could not walk properly Wallace and Dorothy went to her and prayed for her. Wallace held Elaine's legs and Dorothy held her head and they prayed. Elaine felt the cold one[469] going into her. The Holy Spirit went into her and the result was that Elaine walked.[470]

Andrew Joshua an older man told me in September 1995 how he had recently experienced healing.[471] Andrew was very ill in hospital in Katherine. He said that three men had worked sorcery against him. He constantly saw these three men in a dream. Also he had seen them in the hospital but the nurse there had not seen them. A man named Bill Ryan came and prayed for him. Andrew felt the Holy Spirit going into him and freeing him from the power of the sorcery.[472] After this Andrew publicly identified himself as a Christian for the remaining months of his life. Prior to this he had had very little to do with the church for many years. The interesting thing about his experience is that while he was not a well man when I saw him in September, he clearly stated that his healing was due to God's power which overcame the sorcery.

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[466] Joy Sandefur Field Tape no. 1, Side 2, 1995.
[467] Joy Sandefur Field Tape no. 1, Side 2, 1995.
[468] Joy Sandefur, Field Note Book, 1995.
[469] Feeling cold is a good thing and often a sign of good health. The reference here also seems to be to the Holy Spirit.
[470] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 3, Side 2, 1995.
[471] Joy Sandefur, Field Note Book, 1995.
[472] Joy Sandefur, Field Note Book, 1995.

When Maureen Thompson's son was in intensive care in Darwin hospital they told her that he would die. She prayed, went away and saw Jesus on the cross facing her. Maureen believes that if Jesus had showed her his back then she would have known that her son would die. Because she saw Jesus facing her she knew that he would live. She had this vision when she was looking out of the window in the Intensive Care Unit of the Hospital.

Maureen also described to me a dream that she had had two weeks prior to my talking with her in September 1995. In this dream she was standing in the park where the church has fellowship meetings. She saw the Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara standing in the middle of healing water. He was making a sick person wash or immerse in the healing water. It was a billabong. Maureen thinks that this dream has something to do with the park and healing and has told a number of people about it. She is uncertain what the significance of the dream is.[473]

The above case studies are not meant to convey the impression that every illness is treated in this way. There are very many cases where people go to the clinic for routine illnesses. Comparatively only a few calls are made on the healers either traditional or Christian. Regular use is made of Western Medicine and bush remedies. Aboriginal health is poor and many people do attend the clinic on a regular basis. People usually go to traditional healers in situations where people are not recovering as they should be. Reid reported that at Yirrkala

> *When a person is seriously ill, western medicines and treatment are usually sought first. However if the patient does not seem to be recovering the 'marringgitj' [traditional healer] may be consulted.*[474]

**Comparison Between How Traditional and Christian Healers are Recognised as Healers**

There are a number of similarities between how traditional healers become recognised as healers and how some Christians become recognised as healers. These similarities reflect a similar world view and what is accepted as valid experiences. Reid identifies three stages in a person becoming a traditional healer at Yirrkala in North Eastern Arnhem Land.

Typically the *marringgitj* (healer) undergoes, at some time in his or her life, a frightening supernatural experience by means of which he becomes 'clever'. This may involve an encounter with spirits who adopt him and confer on him their powers, a confrontation by the spirits of the dead, an experience such as dying and coming to life again or living for some time in a death-like state.

Secondly, while few, if any, people of Yirrkala dispute the existence of the types of powers and abilities which the healer claims to possess, the actual visitation of such powers on an individual must be demonstrated. He must show that he is in fact able to cure the sick. Thirdly the healer must attract a clientele and establish his practice. Once his claim to the role is validated by those who have seen and believed, the sick begin to seek him out for treatment and his practice gradually expands.[475]

Maureen, when describing her healing activities and work for God, gives an account that has some similarities. Maureen has been baptised and confirmed and is a committed, active member of the church. Two experiences with the supernatural convinced Maureen that God had chosen her in a

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[473] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 3, Side 1, 1995.
[474] Reid, ibid., p. 97.
[475] Reid, ibid., p. 58.

special way. One night in the 1980s Maureen had a dream. She was standing in the park where they have Fellowship meetings singing a chorus in language.[476] God Showed her a light that was in the sky shining on a tree. She reached out her hand and the light came and touched her.

On the second occasion some time later she heard a voice calling out to her on three nights. She knew something was happening at Hodgson Downs. When she got to Hodgson Downs her daughter told her that they couldn't go to Fellowship meetings as the Devil had taken over the church. Maureen replied 'I am going in Jesus name' and went and turned on the light. She heard Satan talking to her from the hill and saw him fly away. Maureen sees these two experiences as God choosing her in a special way.[477] It is interesting to note that Maureen is a jungkayi (boss) for the Hodgson downs area and has authority to deal with problems as a boss for the area. It was appropriate for her to do something about the situation.

While her experience is different to that of the traditional healer as described by Reid there are similarities. There is an encounter with the supernatural, in this case with God and Satan. Maureen is recognised as a Christian healer and some of the case studies I have given are her experiences. There is community recognition of Maureen as a healer. Maureen's credentials consist of supernatural experiences, healing people and recognition that she can heal. Because she is a recognised healer she has been asked to accompany very ill people to hospital.[478] Maureen understands what is happening at the hospital as she speaks good English and is confident around European Australians. Another interesting feature of Maureen's story is that she sees her ability to heal as hereditary. Her mother's brother, Barnabas, a prominent lay reader and evangelist in the church was a healer, and she thinks her children should carry on her work.[479]

There are a number of similarities between traditional healing and Christian healing. One of the similarities between what people reported about Christian Healing at Ngukurr in southeast Arnhem Land and what Janice Reid reported about traditional healing at Yirrkala in northeast Arnhem Land is the use of water. Reid reports a case where two sorcerers were performing sorcery on a woman in order to kill her when they realised that they had the wrong woman. When they discovered their mistake they threw her blood into the billabong to annul the power of the sorcery. If they had buried it she would have died. As it was, she was ill for a long time.[480] Reid also reports a case where plastic bags were forced down a woman's throat by sorcerers. She was rushed to a traditional healer who removed three plastic bags and placed them in a tin of water.[481] Water was also used by traditional healers to massage patients.[482] As mentioned earlier Rev Gumbuli Wurramara has used water on several occasions. A further similarity between Christian and traditional healers is the healing of a person who has had sorcery worked against him or her. Andrew Joshua, mentioned earlier, certainly attributed an improvement in his health to the power of the sorcerers being overcome by God's power.

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[476] The word language is used colloquially by Aboriginies to refer to Aboriginal languages or when something is expressed in an Aboriginal language without naming the particuar language.
[477] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 2, Side 2, 1995.
[478] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 3, Side 1, 1995.
[479] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 3, Side 1, 1995.
[480] Reid, ibid., pp. 39-40.
[481] Reid, ibid., p. 37.
[482] Reid, ibid., pp. 61, 66.

Maureen Thompson reports that God has given her the healing hand. Sometimes when people are very sick and she heals them the sickness comes into her body and she is a 'little bit sick' and then in a couple of days she is OK.[483] Maureen is also able to tell from a dream or vision what will happen to an ill person. This is not unlike what Reid reports about traditional healers in *Sorcerers and Healing Spirits*.[484]

**Traditional Healers After Their Conversion to Christianity**

I have two reports of traditional healers who when they became Christians abandoned their traditional practices. One was Wallace Dennis. He came from a family where all his brothers were traditional healers. Wallace's conversion to Christianity involved a dramatic change in his life. He did not immediately abandon his healing practice. His daughter described his conversion and abandonment of his practice as follows.[485]

> *Wallace was living at Roper Valley Cattle Station. He used to drink a lot. He became very ill and in retrospect saw this as God punishing him. He did not eat, became very thin and was gravely ill. He was sent to the old army hospital in Katherine where he became even thinner. He was very close to death. Darkness was all around him and over him. He stopped breathing and died. He looked at the sky and saw a ladder going up to a hole from which a light was shining. He climbed the ladder and found a wide road lined by lots of pretty flowers and trees. He walked along the road. Next he saw a little road, a track that was very stony. He had passed it when someone called out to him to turn back. He walked up the track and came to a big house. He knocked. Someone spoke to him from inside the house. 'You go back. It is not time for you to die'. He returned the same way he had come, climbed down the ladder and entered his body. He was breathing now. The nurse and orderly were startled as they thought he had died. He returned home to Roper Valley cattle station and then moved to the mission and became a committed Christian.*
>
> *After his conversion he continued to work as a traditional healer until he had a strange experience. He was hunting a kangaroo. Wallace had sneaked up on the kangaroo and was about to kill it when suddenly it turned and attacked him. Wallace fell into the water. Clarry and those with him, pulled Wallace out of the water and revived him by getting the water out of his mouth. There are so many crocodiles at that place they were amazed he was not taken by one.*
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> *After that experience Wallace went home and burnt all his traditional healing paraphernalia and did not practise it again. Later he did function as a Christian healer.*[486]

Laja was a man who was well known and respected for his work as a traditional healer. When he converted to Christianity in the early 1990s he abandoned his traditional healing practice. He gave his paraphernalia away. Laja was described by other Aborigines as totally committed to his new faith. Even when a plane was sent to collect him to go to another community to heal he refused to go. At

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[483] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 3, Side 1, 1995.
[484] Reid, ibid., p. 77.
[485] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 4, Side 2, 1995.
[486] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 4, Side 2, 1995. I have given a free English translation above from the Kriol.

his funeral in 1995, which I attended, he was described as being 'one way' in his Christian belief and that from the day he became a Christian he had abandoned his work as a traditional healer. At the time of his death he had not done any work as a Christian healer. The decision to cease work as a healer was made by Laja.

At the time of his conversion the church had been run by Aborigines for more than twenty years and there was no pressure from Whites for him to abandon his healing practice. It seems that he drew a distinction between traditional healing and Christian healing and the powers involved and did not regard the two as compatible. While Wallace did not abandon his traditional practice immediately, when he did, it was permanent. He did practise Christian healing later on but drew a distinction between the two. Neither of these two men saw the two approaches to healing as something that could be combined.

When I went to Ngukurr in 1976, healing did not appear to be an important ministry of the church. Publicly it was part of the church service in that prayers were said for the sick, and they were named by either name or kinship term. It was in the late 1980s that laying on of hands and praying for healing became a part of church services. St Matthew's Anglican Church at Ngukurr does not belong to the Pentecostal churches. Hence their interest in healing and its coming to the fore under Aboriginal leadership of the church suggests that it reflects their world view and meets important needs for them. The assumption is that Christians should expect God to use his power to heal the sick.

Over time I observed that when people were seriously ill the minister would go and pray for them at the clinic or at their camp if appropriate for him to do so. It also emerged that there were times when the minister or other Christians would go to a person's home and pray for them. Gradually it became clear that some Christians were regarded as having the ability to heal people.

Today when people wish to ask for healing at a service, they usually let Gumbuli know that they will be at the service and desire the laying on of hands and prayers for healing. Typically this occurs at the Fellowship meeting which is held in the park at night. At the end of the service the person desiring healing will come and sit on a chair and most of the people at the meeting will gather around in a circle and quietly sing. Reverend Wurramara stands behind the person and places both hands on their head and prays for them. Sometimes other Christians will join him in the laying on of hands. The prayers are spontaneous and can take five to ten minutes while the rest of the group sings quietly. Other Anglican churches in Arnhem land also have similar rituals for healing.[487]

The above approach to healing is very different to that of the traditional healer who worked publicly but not as part of a 'ceremony'. It occurred at people's camps with witnesses.

Christian healing is not only exercised at Ngukurr in public fellowship meetings. It is also carried out at people's homes. This occurs when a person requests a Christian to come and pray for healing. Usually it will be a person who is recognised as having the 'healing hand'. Sometimes other Christians will accompany them. This approach of praying at a person's camp is much more in keeping with the way the traditional healer worked. A major difference between traditional and Christian healers is that the Christian healers do not use the paraphernalia that traditional healers use.

[487] Minyirri, Kunbarllanjnja (Oenpelli), Numbulwar, Umbakumba and Angurugu Anglican Churches. It is also common in Uniting Church Aboriginal Churches. In Darwin, Aboriginal Catholics also incorporate it into a fellowship type meeting. Their ritual includes a healing song (personal communication from Robyn Reynolds).

They do not use special stones, quartz, spirit familiars,[488] or draw on the power of the dreaming.[489] I have never heard of them removing a stone, piece of wire or other items that are commonly removed from the ill person's body by traditional healers. Their approach is one of touch, occasionally massage, and prayer. Water is sometimes used to anoint the person.[490] Water is also used by traditional healers.[491] Sometimes consecrated oil is used to anoint an ill person.

However the healing done in the camp by a Christian healer who is often accompanied by other Christians is somewhat different. It is more informal. Singing is not involved. Prayer is an important part of it and placing hands on the person is important. This approach to healing reflects more of an Aboriginal style. It is done in the camp. Water is sometimes used. Supernatural power is used and seen as the source of the healing. The Christians identify it as God's power whereas the traditional healer is using power that is regarded as coming from his/her spirit familiars and items they have given him, from spirits of the dead or from the creator beings.[492]

Prayer for healing as part of a service or fellowship meeting at Ngukurr has evolved in the 1980s. It was a part of the Elcho Island Revival Movement which had a great impact on the Uniting and Anglican churches in Arnhem Land from 1979 onwards. There was a lot of visiting back and forth between Aboriginal Churches and people from Arnhem Land churches still attend an annual Thanksgiving Weekend at Galiwiniku on Elcho Island to commemorate the revival.[493] This, and the emergence of Christian Conventions[494] that attract Aborigines from many churches have facilitated a greater awareness of what is happening elsewhere in Aboriginal Churches and allowed for cross fertilisation of ideas.

Healing has not been opposed by the Anglican diocese of the Northern Territory and Bishop Clyde Wood encouraged Aboriginal clergy to consecrate their own oil for use in anointing for healing rather than have it consecrated by him.

The work of the Christian healers appears to have gone on quietly for a long time. Barnabas who came to the mission as a child in 1908 and spent most of his life at the mission was known as a Christian healer. Perhaps Aborigines sensed that, while missionaries talked about Jesus who healed people, they were ambiguous about whether it was right for Christians to ask God to heal in the twentieth century when modern medicines were available. They were aware that missionaries often opposed the work of traditional healers and sorcerers and could have been uneasy about revealing their activities as Christian healers.

While the missionaries did not regard themselves as healers, in the early years of the mission medical help was a long way away. As people who believed in a God who answered prayer it was natural that they should pray when confronted by a medical emergency. There was the case of Hubert Warren's

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[488] Reid, ibid., pp. 58, 61, 62, 64.
[489] Reid, ibid., p. 34.
[490] Joy Sandefur, Field Tape no. 1, Side 1, 1995. Field Note Book, comments by Carol Robinson, 1995.
[491] Reid, ibid., pp. 61, 66, 67, 73, 77. They do not appear to consecrate the water, as they do oil for healing. The consecration of oil is a Christian ritual in some Anglican churches and they have taken it on.
[492] Reid, ibid., pp. 31-2.
[493] 1500 people attended the Thanksgiving weekend in 1996, personal communication from Julie Waddy.
[494] The annual Katherine Christian Convention held in May each year is attended by approximately 800 people, half of whom are Aborigines from all over the Northern Territory. There is usually an Aboriginal and a White speaker. Groote Eylandt Anglican Churches hold a convention every two years with a visiting speaker.

child being healed from a fever after another child had died from a similar ailment. There would have been many occasions when missionaries were seen praying to God requesting him to heal someone. In this way they modelled the role of praying for the sick and expecting God to intervene when their medicines were not sufficient.

Interaction with other Aboriginal churches appears to have encouraged the more open acknowledgment of Christian healers. Also today the role of the traditional healers is more readily acknowledged by the medical profession and they are less likely to be frowned upon.[495] It is probable that a wider acceptance of traditional healers by European Australian society along with interaction with a variety of churches including Pentecostal churches, has encouraged Christian Aboriginal healers to be more open about their work.

As they believe in the use of supernatural power for healing, it is natural that they should expect God to heal. Jesus healed the sick and commanded his followers to do so. If persistent illnesses are caused by supernatural causes, they believe that supernatural power is needed to heal the person who is ill.

The church at Ngukurr has found a public approach to healing that reflects their world view and Christian faith. It is based on the assumption that illness can be cured by supernatural power. Healing is not unknown in the wider church in Australia. What has emerged at Ngukurr is distinctively Aboriginal in the way it is done. It is usually outside, often accompanied by the singing of the healing song, 'Jesus the Healer' and other reverent songs of worship as well as prayer for healing. Participation by others is encouraged in the singing and forming a circle around the person being prayed for.

**DEATH AND FUNERALS**

Funerals are big events at Ngukurr. The manner in which they are conducted is an Aboriginal Christian innovation. It has given the church an important role in the community and has occurred under the leadership of Gumbuli Wurramara. He is often called on by Aborigines in other communities to take funerals as he has a reputation for conducting them well. His has been an innovative approach to dealing with death, which is one of the rites of passage that are marked by ritual in Aboriginal society. Initiation is the other.

During the time that the mission existed from 1908 to 1968, funerals were very small affairs. The Reverend Barry Butler, who was at Ngukurr from 1953 - 1965 and who regularly visited the community from Darwin until he retired in 1994, told me that previously, if a funeral was held at Ngukurr, permission was sought by radio to bury the body straight away as there were no facilities to keep a body in the tropics. There was usually a small graveside service. If a person had been medically evacuated and died in Katherine or Darwin, they were buried there. No traditional mortuary rites were held at the mission.

By 1968 mortuary rites were held at the mission. The Chaplain's report for the Ngukurr church, March 1968, reports the death and burial of Gilbert Blitner. It mentions that nearly all the Europeans and about twenty Christian Aborigines attended the church service and the graveside service. Next

[495] Dr. Eastwell, a psychiatrist, has advocated medical doctors and traditional healers co-operating with one another. H. Eastwell, 'The Traditional Healer in Modern Arnhem Land', in *Medical Journal of Australia*, 1973, 2:1011-17.

day the mortuary rites commenced.[496] This was a small service compared to the large numbers who attend a funeral today. It is not clear in the report if the mortuary rites were held at the mission itself or nearby. Though if mortuary rites previous to this were not conducted at the mission, they were most likely conducted nearby. The report mentioned above was written a few years after Barry Butler left Ngukurr and only a few months before the mission was handed over to the government in 1968. It does show that church funeral services were attended by only a few Aborigines before church affairs became the sole responsibility of Aborigines.

Today funerals are large affairs, usually a service is held in the church, and traditional mortuary rites are also conducted. An event that affected when funerals were held was the opening of the new clinic building in 1975. The facilities included a small morgue. This meant a body could be safely kept until relatives arrived for the funeral. Better communications and roads from the early seventies onwards meant that relatives could receive the news of the death and travel to the funeral. Prior to this pattern emerging they would gather for mortuary rites at a later time. Furthermore the early 1970s saw Aborigines starting to own cars for the first time and so facilitating travel. In the mid to late 1960s Aborigines became active participants in the money economy. This made it possible for them to arrange funerals and to travel to them. Another change was that the government made it possible for bodies sent away for an autopsy to be returned to the community.

Since 1971 funerals have been completely in the hands of Aborigines to organise and Gumbuli Wurramara has been in very high demand to take the funerals of Aborigines. He often travels to other communities to conduct funeral services. This was still the case in September 1996. At the same time people are aware that they do not have to have a minister for a funeral. Lay members of the church have conducted funerals in the minister's absence. They are also aware that they do not have to have a Christian service.

The mourning and funeral typically are as follows. When a person dies, the house where he or she lived and the places that they frequented are closed off. Sometimes 'flags' are strung up to let people know that a death has occurred. People are not allowed to go into these buildings. Then the buildings are smoked. Men dance around the building to the accompaniment of clap sticks. Smoking gum leaves are held in their hands. These are used to cleanse the place. Some members of the community say that the smoking ceremony is purely to make the place free for people to use. Others that it is to discourage the dead person's spirit from hanging around. When a building has been smoked ochre is used to draw a red line right around the outside of the building to indicate that it has been smoked. Smoking is a traditional activity but has been modified to cope with permanent buildings.

After the 'smoking', the shop or other buildings are open to the public. Today, people, except for the spouse, parent and very close relatives will move back into the house. In 1996 Elsie Joshua moved back into her house a few months after her son had died there.[497] A few years earlier Una Thompson did not move out of her house when a close relative died.

When a person's spouse dies, sisters, brothers, sister-in-laws and brothers-in-law usually go into hiding in a widow's camp. This is usually at Yellow Water Billabong, five kilometres from Ngukurr.

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[496] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, Chaplaincy Report, February 1968, in Church Missionary Society of Australia Roper River Mission and Ngukurr Reports 1955-1973, Roper River Mission, Mission/Ngukurr Station Council Minutes 1963-1968, vol 2.

[497] Joy Sandefur, Field Note Book, 1996.

They return to the community after the funeral. They are not allowed to attend the funeral. The same applies to men when their wife or a close female relative dies. The custom of not attending the burial is practised in south east Arnhem Land and I have been told of a similar practice at Groote Eylandt.

I am aware of two occasions when Christian women refused to comply with this custom and attended their husband's funeral. A Christian husband and wife told me that they have agreed that when one of them dies the one still alive will attend the funeral. They feel that they should be allowed to attend the funeral and share those last moments rather than be bound by tradition.

A close relative, is in charge of organising the funeral. This person will decide when and where the funeral will be, and what relatives they will wait for before holding the funeral, as people often have to wait for payday before they are able to travel long distances to attend. The relative organising the funeral also decides what traditional rites will be held and who will conduct them. The same person also arranges with the minister whether it will be a church service and a graveside service, or only a graveside service.

Typically on the day of the funeral, when it is time for the funeral, it will start at the morgue. There the traditional rites that have been decided on will be carried out. Then to the accompaniment of clap sticks, dancing and singing the coffin is placed on a truck and escorted to St Matthew's church. The songs are those that can be sung in public.

The Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara meets the funeral procession at the door of the church. Often the dancers choose not to enter the church and sit outside and listen to the service. Meanwhile most of the congregation will have entered the church while the procession was approaching. While the congregation is singing the coffin is carried into the church. All of the service is typically conducted in Kriol including the singing, prayers, Bible reading, preaching and eulogy. The electronic band accompanies the singing. After some singing, a prayer and Bible reading the Reverend Wurramara preaches a Christian message that often includes what Christians believe happens to the spirit at death. Sometimes this is followed by a eulogy given by a person who knew the deceased well. Then Christian songs are sung, by groups of Christians from different communities that the dead person had strong connections with. During the singing some relatives will give vent to their feelings by wailing, and hanging on to the coffin. The singing continues until the person returns to their seat or is gently led away by a relative.[498] Then follow a few prayers and a final song during which the coffin is carried out. More wailing occurs at this point.

The coffin is then placed on a truck for the trip to the cemetery. It is again accompanied by clap sticks and dancing. On arrival at the cemetery they will complete any traditional singing and rites before handing the body over to the Reverend Wurramara for burial. He will say a few prayers and maybe have one Christian song before the final prayer. After this everyone who is present approaches the grave, picks up a handful of dirt and gently throws it on to the coffin in the grave. More wailing may occur at this point.

Often on the same day there will be a washing ceremony to cleanse those involved in traditional rites and wash the ochre from the relatives who were not allowed to attend the funeral. In some cases a

[498] This is different to what Diane J Austin-Broos reports for church funerals at Hermansburg where people feel they must not make a noise in the church. See '"Right Way 'Til I die": Christianity and Kin on country at Hermansburg', forthcoming in L. Olson, *Social Change and Christian Conversion*.

string necklace known as a widow string is placed around the neck of the widow or widower. This will be removed when the mourning is complete and the person is then free to marry again.

The above description shows that funeral services at Ngukurr are very different to what a typical Anglican burial service in say, Melbourne, would be. There is no compulsion for Aborigines to include Christian burial as part of the burial rites. There was no tradition of a large Christian burial service that saw the church full and overflowing, or the whole community coming to a halt while the funeral was held. It seems that the form of a large Christian service, that exists alongside of traditional rites, has emerged under Aboriginal church leadership. The Christian and traditional religious activities at the funeral are regarded by the local people as representing two different religious views and not variations of one view. Ngukurr people have worked out a way to incorporate both into a funeral where there are traditional and Christian segments. There are very definite boundaries when the event moves from traditional to Christian, to traditional, and then to Christian again. I have always thought of it as a case of mutual respect for two traditions.

Christians can be placed in difficult positions. When a Christian woman died recently her son and daughter-in-law, who were also Christians, saw no reason to have their house, where she had died, smoked. They believed her spirit had gone to be with God and that the house did not need to be smoked. However the grandchildren who did not have the same Christian convictions insisted that the house be smoked. The Christian couple went bush for the day and had nothing to do with the smoking. They moved back into their house the same day.

Before other Aboriginal Anglican ministers were ordained in 1985 Reverend Wurramara was in constant demand to take funerals. He also received requests to take funerals in other communities where there was no Anglican church. These requests were still common in 1996. He conducts what is clearly a Christian service, but one that certainly allows for an Aboriginal way of doing things. This was an innovation by Aborigines. Funeral services that I had attended at other communities prior to living at Ngukurr, were conducted by Whites with little or no recognition of Aboriginal customs and culture.

In a community that was for sixty years a mission, it is not surprising that many people feel a Christian burial is appropriate. What is interesting is that once it was in their hands Aborigines have created a funeral style that was very different to what existed for sixty years. There is respect for Aboriginal customs—wailing is allowed in the church and is not frowned upon. Where there is disagreement about what should happen, there is respect and tolerance for each other's customs and beliefs rather than confrontation.

One reason that I think Christian Aborigines have made funerals into such a big affair is that death is one of the rites of passage that is marked in Aboriginal society. By making funerals into big affairs, usually conducted by an Aboriginal minister, they are saying 'We too regard death as an important event and have an appropriate way to handle it.' By respecting traditional rites they have also gained prestige for Christian burial that has its own ceremonial leader in the person of an Aboriginal minister. Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr have been very active in evolving a form of Christian burial that is acceptable to the community and at the same time achieved an important place for Christianity in the community. Having their own ordained Aboriginal minister has facilitated funerals becoming what they are.

Gumbuli and the church have taken a Western approach to funerals and turned it into something distinctively Aboriginal. It copes with the spirit of the dead, allows for wailing as part of the service and the appropriate relative decides when and how the funeral will be run. Participation is encouraged as relatives from different communities sing Christian songs during the service and close relatives cry and wail at the coffin. The coffin is escorted to the church in an appropriate manner for the person who has died. It is an important occasion and one where the priest always wears his robes. If a church service is held, it is always held in the church building. It fulfils an Aboriginal sense of occasion, death being an important event. The assumptions behind what is happening are that the transition from this life to the next must be marked and that the spirit goes somewhere at death, mutual respect, tolerance and consensus rather than confrontation are used to decide what will happen at the funeral. St Matthew's Church has taken something that its Aboriginal members have encountered in a Western form and created a new version that is distinctively Aboriginal.

## SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In the following paragraphs I will describe how social relationships work at Ngukurr, the way in which Christians observe them and the attitude of missionaries towards the kinship system.

The Ngukurr community defines social relationships from two different perspectives but the same relationship terms are used in both cases. The first perspective involves blood relatives and relatives by marriage. These are the people with whom a person is most closely involved and with whom the person should share and meet their obligations. It is a reciprocal arrangement

The second perspective takes in everyone in the community. This system is referred to locally as 'skins' and by anthropologists as subsections. There are eight subsections each of which consists of a brother and sister pair. There are different terms for male and female 'skins'. People are addressed by the name of their 'skin' or by a relationship term such as aunt and grandfather. This classificatory system allows Aborigines to define how they relate to everyone else in the community and how they relate to Aborigines from elsewhere, as it operates in most of North Australia.

The 'skin' system works like a classificatory kinship system. Once a person's skin is known it is possible to work out the correct relationship term to address the person by. Etiqette and social behaviour are defined by the rules that govern that particular relationship. If a man calls a person mother-in-law then he knows he must use avoidance behaviour. If the person is his uncle then he knows he must pay close attention to the uncle's requests. Once the relationship is established they can proceed to other business.

In the following paragraphs I will present briefly the subsection system and how it works at Ngukurr. The 'skins' and how it worked at Ngukurr was taught to me from a woman's perspective by Kathleen Rami, a long time member of the Church. Kathleen and I related as sisters and called each other 'baba' the term for sibling of either sex.

A person's 'skin' is defined by birth.[499] From a woman's perspective the child's 'skin' is determined by the mother's skin. A woman of one 'skin' can only give birth to children who belong to the subsections of the next descending generation. There are two female cycles of birth that repeat themselves every fifth generation and all women belong to one of these cycles.

[499] The exception is when a non-Aborigine is adopted into the system.

When a man marries a woman who is not ‘straight’ for him, his son will be in the wrong subsection to inherit his father’s land and ceremonies. As the system has five generations for female descent before the same subsection is used again and only three generations of male descent, before the same subsection is used again a marriage that is not straight can result in all kinds of problems. Figure 7 below contrasts the male and female descent lines for a straight marriage between Gojok and Gamian subsections.

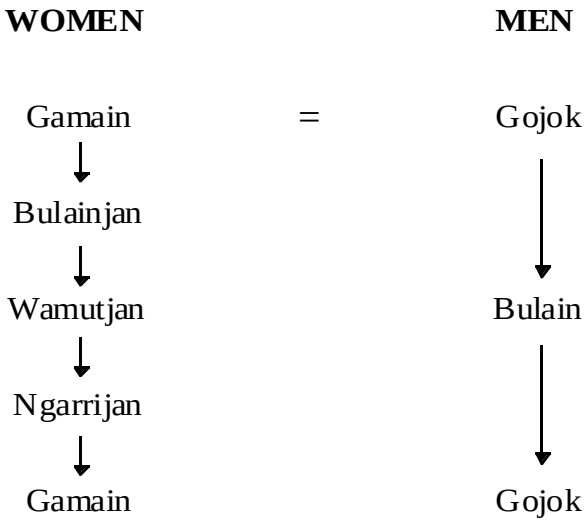


**Figure 7** Generational cycling in the subsection system.

Figure 8 below shows the eight subsections, the two circles of women, their brothers and ideal marriage partners. Male descent can be worked out by tracing the children from a marriage, and then the children of the son’s marriage.

The female cycles and the male cycles work in perfect harmony as long as everybody marries ‘straight’. Confusion about correct ‘skin’ for a person arises when a person fails to marry ‘straight’ as it is referred to locally. The result is the father will be in the incorrect relationship to the children. This raises all kinds of difficulties as to whom the son should follow in relation to land and ceremonial inheritance.

Figure 8 represents how the subsection system is viewed as a whole. It forms the social fabric of society. The ‘skins’ enable people to work out how they relate to other people and how you behave towards them. If Christians choose not to follow the ‘skin’ system they would not be able to operate socially in their own community.

Another part of the social fabric at Ngukurr is that everyone belongs to one of two moieties, Yirritja and Dhuwa. Providing everyone marries ‘straight’, the mother gives birth to children that belong to the other moiety. At the same time they share the same moiety as their father. A person should always marry someone from the opposite moiety.

The two moieties divide the world into two. These two categories will broadly define a person’s role at ceremonies. It decides whether you are a boss or a worker for a given ceremony. If you are a boss for the Yabaduruwa ceremony, then you are a worker for the Gunapapi and vice versa.

The moiety system also divided the whole world into two sections. When I first went to Ngukurr in 1976 older people could identify which moiety animals and plants belonged to. This knowledge is dying out and young people are no longer able to do this.

When a man fails to marry ‘straight’ a problem arises for his son in regards to ceremonies. The son has the wrong skin and the cycle of father, son and grandfather does not occur. The son can end up with responsibilities for ceremonies that are different to the ones he would have had, if his father had married straight. A choice has to be made about whether the son will follow the father’s or the mother’s line. This causes endless debate and much upset and confusion. The attitude of the Ngukurr church to marriage will be discussed later, as it is an important issue.

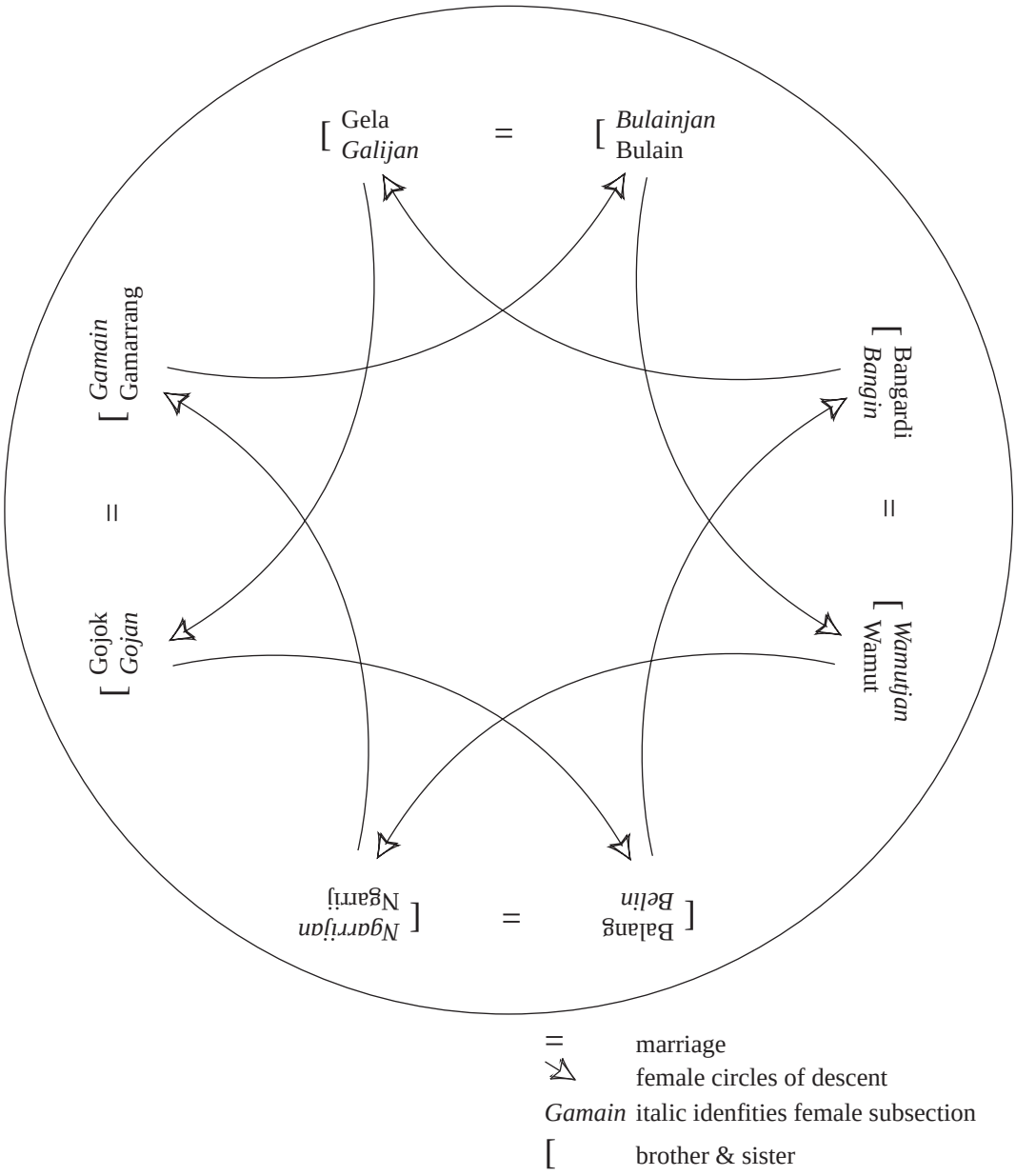


**Figure 8** Eight subsection illustrating marriage rules and descent.

The necessity to work out the relationships, and the active use of the system shows that it is a fundamental part of the way that Ngukurr Christians view the world and how it functions as well as an important part of Aboriginal Christians social identity. 'Skins' are something that they have actively chosen to keep, and in fact if they rejected it, it is hard to understand how they would function in the community. Furthermore rejection of the 'skins' system would mean the loss of an important part of their Aboriginality.

**Attitudes of missionaries to the subsection system**

CMS missionaries, it is reported had different attitudes to the kinship system in North Australia. Some saw it as a good thing and others as evil.[500] I have found nothing in the archives relating to the work at Ngukurr to suggest that CMS officially opposed the kinship system. The constitution and policy of CMS in 1944 stated:

> *All missionaries shall in general study a suitable native language, and native social customs and laws, for it is an essential part of the policy of the society that the natives shall not be cut off from their own tribal life, but rather that the mission shall aim at the far more difficult task of helping these natives to build up the Kingdom of God on the basis of their old tribal organisation and customs, where these are not opposed to Christianity. It shall be a general guiding principle that things evil in the manners and customs of the tribe shall be discountenanced, and any worthy elements in tribal life tending to social cohesion, discipline and moral uplift, shall be preserved as a foundation upon which the ethical principles and wholesome truths of the Gospel are to be built. Great care must be taken not to adopt a merely negative attitude to things the missionary regards as evil.*[501]

Missionaries who opposed the 'skin' system did so on the grounds that they regarded the obligations to share as unduly onerous and they were of the opinion, that if they acknowledged the skin group that Aborigines gave to them in order to relate to them, their ministry would be handicapped as they could not speak to certain 'relatives'. Some on the other hand became so involved in it that it caused problems for them as they found it difficult to ask for things, so were always giving.

**Christians and 'skins'**

Ngukurr Christians have felt no need to refrain from participating in the 'skins' social categories or in the responsibilities involved in looking after their kin. It is part of the social fabric. Frequently a heavier share of the responsibilities falls on them as they abstain from alcohol. This means that often they are looking after nieces and nephews, or grandchildren whose parents are neglecting them due to alcohol addiction. Sometimes they take in children or elderly people who are not 'full' relatives but whom no one else is looking after.

The important point here is that Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians choose to continue to be part of the 'skins' system, seeing no contradiction between it and their Christian faith. If they had chosen to do

[500] Personal communication from M. Rowe, former CMS missionary.

[501] NTRS 870/P1, second file of correspondence, The Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania Missions to Australian Aborigines, Administered by the Aborigines committee appointed by the Federal Council as a Regional committee of the Society, Constitution and Policy, Document dated May 1944, p. 7.

what Aboriginal Christians in other places such as Yarrabah and among the Bandjalang [502] have done and call each other 'brother and sister', while it might have promoted the idea of Christians being one large family, it would have left male and females in Arnhem Land unable to relate to each other in a relaxed manner due to strong social taboos that form part of brother and sister relationships unless that was changed as well.

Aborigines at Ngukurr observe some avoidance behaviours. These are usually observed between brothers and sisters and a mother-in-law and son-in law. The behaviour involves not looking at each other, not speaking directly to each other, and avoiding being in the same room together. In a car the male usually sits in front and the female behind. These behaviours are regarded as showing respect for each other.

Christians have differing attitudes to avoidance behaviours. Some feel that as Christians it is better to show respect by over-riding the avoidance relationship and relating to the person in a way that does not exclude them. When this happens in the church or in the community, the relationship is traced back by a different route. In one case I know of it was changed from mother-in-law and son-in-law to aunt and nephew. When a change is made like this the two people involved will shake hands or put their hands over the other person's eyes to show their agreement to the change.[503] People are under no pressure in the church to change avoidance relationships and their desire in the matter is respected. When one person wants to change and the other does not, it is not changed.

It is not uncommon to observe a church council meeting being held with a woman facing away from the circle so that she will avoid looking at a male person with whom she is in an avoidance relationship. She participates in the meeting, is addressed by others and the person beside her will relay her comments to the person she is unable to address.

If a person is in an avoidance relationship with the minister and does not wish to change it, Holy Communion will be administered to that individual by a lay person.

Members of the church address each other using kinship terms of relationship or 'skin' names. People may be referred to by their English name or nickname but are not usually addressed by them. One of the reasons that the Ngukurr Christians give for saying that they are Aboriginal and Christians is that they teach their children their 'skins', other people's 'skins' and how to behave towards different relatives and 'skins'.

**Marriage**

Marriage is a big issue for the church and the community. Many people have married someone in the wrong category and there is great concern about people marrying someone who is too closely related to their family. In November 1991 a meeting was held at St Matthew's Anglican Church Ngukurr to discuss questions about marriage that had arisen from Bible studies and discussion at Bible Camp in September 1991. People were invited from all the Aboriginal Anglican Churches. People attended from Ngukurr, Numbulwar, and Minyirri. There were four Whites present and one Torres Strait

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[502] Lynne Hume, 'Christianity Full Circle', in *Australian Aborigines and Christian Missions*, edited by Swain and Rose, The Australian Society for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, S.A., 1988, p. 258; and Malcolm Calley, *Aboriginal Pentecostalism: A Study of Changes in Religion North Coast New South Wales*, MA thesis, University of Sydney, 1955, p. 64.

[503] Joy Sandefur, Field Note Book, 1995.

Islander. The meetings were chaired by the Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara. There was a general invitation for older men and women from the communities to attend. Young people were not invited. They were planning to discuss the Christian way and the Aboriginal way and would say things that could not be said in public. These are not recorded in the minutes of the meeting. The following discussion deals with what they talked about and comes from the minutes of the meeting.[504]

After discussing what Aboriginal Christians mean by the word 'marriage' they passed a motion that states

> *Marriage means that the husband and wife must live in a relationship of trust, truthfulness in the home, honesty, repentance and openness so that the children can see the right way to live a married life.*[505]

A problem for the churches and their communities is that there are many wrong marriages. The discussion acknowledged that when people followed the ceremony way marriages were straight. It was suggested that church law and European law made it too easy for today's young people to mix it all up. Another element was that wrong skin marriages have occurred for three generations. A further point raised was that some people, as a result of marriages that were not straight, have two 'skins' because they follow both the mother and the father's way. They should only follow one parent. Gumbuli pointed out that it is difficult to pinpoint when the wrong skin marriages started. In the mission time there were still skin marriages and many wives. Did the old people do the wrong thing or was it the second generation? Or was it because men were greedy and took wives from any tribe? People in their late fifties are a generation from the mixing up of many different tribes. This is due to the fact that 'old mission' had people from a number of different tribes. People have married into tribes that have different ceremonies and different kinship systems. This has also resulted in confusion about whether the child should follow the mother or the father for the handing over of ceremonies land and responsibilities. It is obviously a very complex issue. It was thought that such a discussion needed much wider representation from the communities if the problem was to be dealt with. It was not a problem for the church alone.

One man pointed out that when Christians have married straight, God has blessed them. He seemed to be suggesting that it is good for Christians to marry straight. The general consensus appeared to be that it is good for Christians to marry straight. Also something should be done to sort out which way children of wrong marriages should go. However the whole community should be involved. Marriages that are not straight create problems in relation to inheritance of land, ceremonial inheritance and how people should relate to one another.

The meeting also discussed what to do when there was a second promised wife that they should marry. This is a difficult problem for the communities as many middle aged men have a promise who they have not married and who they could take as a second wife.[506] Often pressure is brought to bear for them to do so. The discussion favoured Christians not taking a second wife. If a Christian man had a 'promise' that he could take as a second wife, it was suggested that he should find her a husband. This was regarded as correct behaviour for Christians.

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[504] Minutes of Ngukurr Meetings on Marriage Issues, 1991, 26-11-1991.
[505] Minutes of Ngukurr Meetings on Marriage Issues, 1991, 26-11-1991.
[506] A 'promise' is a person who was promised to another person as a marriage partner by agreement between the families. This is how marriages were arranged in the past.

It was agreed that the Christian way of one wife was correct for Christians. For a Christian man it was regarded as wrong to take a second wife because the New Testament teaches monogamous marriage. The other reason given goes back to the Biblical story of origins. God made Adam and Eve and their marriage was one man and one wife. That is why a man should have only one wife.[507] This view of monogamous marriage was not imposed on the rest of the community and the traditional Aboriginal way of more than one wife was right for those who did not follow the Christian way. It was up to the rest of the community to decided for themselves what they wanted to do about taking a second promised wife.

The meeting also discussed what should be done when a husband or wife is unfaithful to their spouse. It was felt that the mission way of putting them out of the church and refusing them communion until they confessed was wrong. People often did not come back. A Ngukurr man suggested they should gently help the people in the situation where a partner has been unfaithful. The couple should go to the minister and confess. Then at a service they should say what happened and express their desire to start again. The families of the man and woman should be apologised to as well. It was reported that this was happening at the Numbulwar Church. This was thought to be better than excluding them from the church. The couple should keep coming to church but not take an active role for a while. When people had been excluded from the church in the past for sins such as sexual immorality and gambling, people had experienced great hurt and often did not return to the church.

Another person commented that the church now had a way to deal with this. If people confessed the wrong, and with the help of the church, were reconciled, this was better than the Aboriginal way. The church way meant the matter could end. The Aboriginal way meant that it continued and hurt following generations.

The two day meeting discussed whether there should be special Aboriginal Christian services or ceremonies for future Christian marriages. Discussion was inconclusive. A man from Numbulwar said they had talked about it for two weeks and concluded that the Aboriginal and Christian way can exist side by side. Christians could choose if they wanted a church service. There was a dilemma as lots of people married in the church had separated.[508] A woman asked if because she was not married in the church was she living in sin? This was not directly answered. One man argued that the advantage of getting married in a Christian service was that it gave you some security. Your husband's brother could not pull you out from your husband and take you as his own. The Aboriginal system cannot help a woman with that.

The twenty four pages '*Minutes of Ngukurr Meetings on Marriage Issues'* give a summary of the two days' discussion. Several interesting things emerge from this document. There are a lot of references to the teaching of Jesus on the issues discussed, what the Bible teaches, and only an occasional reference to what the mission taught. They give the impression of Aborigines who think for themselves and are not just following what the mission taught. There are also many thoughtful statements about the Aboriginal way of marriage and the complexity of wrong 'skin' marriages is revealed.

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[507] ibid.

[508] NTGA NTRS 870 P1, Box 2, Certificate of Marriages Book. Of the 16 Aboriginal marriages recorded between 1959 and 1978, I personally know that six have resulted in a formal separation.

On the first day of the conference when the participants were discussing what Aboriginal Christians mean by 'marriage', there are a number of references to God creating Adam and Eve and marriage. Monogamy was argued for by some Aborigines present as God gave Adam one wife. Adam and Eve were to have children and so '*marriage is for making more children*'.[509] It appears to me that they are giving as much weight to the biblical stories of beginnings as traditional Aborigines give to the Dreaming account of origins.

The discussions are focused on how the issues about marriage should be handled by Christians. In other words how should they live. Dogma or what should be the position of the church is important, but how to practise it is the main concern.[510]

As the assumption of many Aborigines is that many things can be accounted for by what happened in the Dreaming the assumption here seems to be that marriage is accounted for by the Biblical story of Creation and the new beginning made by the coming of Jesus.

By keeping the 'skins' system and deciding that it is important for Aboriginal Christians to marry straight, they have chosen to be distinctively Aboriginal in the way they live as Christians.

**CEREMONIES**

Members of the church at Ngukurr hold a variety of views about participation in ceremonies. This is not surprising as they cope well with variation. Ian Keen in his book *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Society* has shown that different versions of myths and approaches to events in ceremonies are accepted among the Yolngu of North Eastern Arnhem Land.[511] This is also in keeping with the fact that Aborigines are not primarily concerned with correct dogma as is Western Christianity. Rather they are concerned with being initiated into religion, religious experience and how religion relates to the whole of life. In other words a holistic religious experience.

The views held by members of the church at Ngukurr range from no participation in ceremonies, to partial participation, to full participation or just going to watch. Views change sometimes according to which ceremony is being discussed. In the following paragraphs I will include a statement by Silas Roberts about the Madayan ceremony and his comments on ceremonies; some comments that came out of two conferences held by Aborigines from the Anglican areas to which the mission chaplains were invited in 1967 and 1968; and views of missionaries and the situation today. My focus will be primarily on what Aborigines have said and see as important and will include where this has differed from the views of missionaries and chaplains.

Silas Roberts, a man from Ngukurr whom I quote at length, as much of what he says is typical of what I have heard on a number of occasions. He grew up at the mission and is the brother of Philip Roberts the health worker who Douglas Lockwood wrote about in *I the Aboriginal*.[512] Silas moved to Maningrida to work with the Fisheries Department. Later he worked as a magistrate and was the first chairman of the Northern Land Council. He worked hard for his people and was awarded an MBE and a medal of the Order of Australia. He was active in Church life at Ngukurr and

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[509] Minutes of Ngukurr Meeting of Marriage Issues, 1991, 25-11-1991, p. 4.

[510] Malcom Calley found among the Bangalang that religious experience was more important than dogma. See Calley, ibid., pp. 4-5, Part IV of thesis.

[511] Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Society*, Clarendon Press, London, 1994, pp. 40-61.

[512] Douglas Lockwood, *I the Aboriginal*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1962.

Maningrida. His father Barnabas Roberts was amongst the first Aborigines to settle at the old mission when it started in 1908. Barnabas was a committed Lay Reader for St Matthew's Ngukurr until his death.[513]

One of the major ceremonies in Arnhem Land is the Madayan Ceremony.[514] This ceremony is held at all the Anglican places in Arnhem Land [515] and at other places in Arnhem Land. Silas's description of the Madayan[516] and comments about ceremonies were taped and transcribed by the editor of the *Arnhem Land Epistle* and appear in the issue dated March 1968.

> *WHEN I FIRST SAW A RANNGA.*
>
> *The Madayan has been set up from way back in the stone age and has carried on until now. In the early days they used to believe that Madayan or any other ceremony like Yabuduruwa or Gunabibi or Ubarr made the country, the people, and left the Aboriginal laws.*
>
> *I could see that my people really believed and used to make these ceremonies their spiritual god. In the Madayan ceremonies, there were many different totems belonging to different people. If one man took someone else's ritual drawing and put it on their rangga or took away someone's rangga, there would be serious trouble like murder. If not murder, then probably the paying of some things. In the early days this was strictly kept.*
>
> *When I first saw a rangga emblem, I went up as a boy after circumcision and this was the beginning of my schooling. At first, I thought that the men were going to kill me or burn me down. But no. The older people explained everything that was there. They taught me everything about our Aboriginal way of living. They said that if I broke the law or played about with these artists' paintings, I'd be killed or if I broke the laws then either I, or another one of my relations[,] would die in place of me.*
>
> *They told me all about the early days when my grandfathers used to worship idols and worshipping this dreaming one rangga, like Madayan. They told us we must believe in it, must take it, because it will help us through. Then I became more interested and believed in this Madayan, thinking I'd be made someone big. This Madayan might help me out, make me a smart man, doing things like being a good hunter.*
>
> *At that time, I was going through the different ceremonies like a trainee, through Yabuduruwa, Madayan, Larrkan, Ubar. I learnt that each one had the same meaning, exactly the same, no difference. You know how the Ten Commandments gives all*

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[513] The Reverend Michael Gumbuli Wurramara in 'Who Were the Special Examples in the Early Days?', in *Ngukurr Stories*, Nungalinya College, 1996, p. 19.

[514] Also referred to as Maraian. See Llyod Warner, *A Black Civilization*, 1969, p. 264.

[515] 'Notes from a conference on ceremonies held at Numbulwar from 19th to 24th July 1968'. Typed notes, no author, probably Barry Butler, one of the Chaplains who attended the conference.

[516] Often spelt *Maraiin*. W. Lloyd Warner says the word 'is a general word meaning, as nearly as can be translated, powerful, sacred, taboo, or spiritual. It is used to describe anything that is taboo to women and uninitiated boys.' *A Black Civilization*, p. 254. At Ngukurr it was always referred to in a hushed manner in my presence.

*different laws. Well the ceremonies are like that, only they go on further and have other laws. When the old people showed me the rangga they said to me "You mustn't steal, you mustn't take someone else's wife, you mustn't say bad words". But there were other laws which aren't in the Bible or in Australian laws(,) laws about customs.*

*With the ceremonies, the older people especially, really look at the Madayan or Kunapippi or any other ceremony as their own god. Now a lot of younger men look at it as their god too. When we think of other things in the European way, like money… We like plenty of money, tobacco, drink. We go for them, we forget about God and we make these things our god.*

*THE CEREMONIES ARE LIKE A MEMORIAL NOW.*

*When we come to know God we can see where the truth comes in. We can see only one God who made heaven and earth, human beings and everything on the earth today.*

*We believe that Christians who've turned to follow God, shouldn't worship Madayan, Yabuduruwa, Kunapippi or any other ceremony. They should not take it as their proper God. They might like to keep up the history alright, but not keep at it all the time.*

*At Roper, the Christian folk decided to follow God and they did, they followed God, But looking back in the history we keep learning things to show our little ones, to teach them so that they will know what the natives in our Aboriginal way used to do. They use the ceremonies alright to teach the children. It's like schooling to teach our way of living.*

*A lot of bad parts in our ceremonies have been washed out. In Gunabibbi, in the old days, men used to lend their wives to others for payment. We have finished with bad parts like that, but we keep the good part.*

*Today I don't take my Aboriginal religion as a true one, I may go up to the ceremony ground to see what's going on and it's like looking back into the history to my father's and grandfather's life. I'd like to keep the totem as a design but not openly, just as a drawing that we can remember the old folks who used to believe in them. We don't believe as they did; we believe in a spiritual god, the True One I believe in the True One, not because I'm saying this in front of you, but I'm saying this before God from my heart.*

*The ceremonies are like a memorial now. We remember the dead person and the ceremony that he's left until his son grows up: and we remember his grandfather's away back.*

The same *Arnhem Land Epistle* reports that when some Aborigines were asked '*Should the Madayan System Stand for Ever?*' They replied:

'*Yes alongside the Holy Bible.*' (District Village Council)

*'Yes, as a history and a memorial to the old Aboriginal people, but not as a religion.'* (Silas Roberts)

The lengthy quote from Silas Roberts has a number of points of interest. Not everyone shares his view. He refers to young people who make the Kunapippi, Madayan and other ceremonies their god. By this I understand him to mean that they follow the ceremonies exclusively. Silas says that he worships the True One (God) and sees the ceremonies as a memorial. In rejecting the ceremonies as a religion he is not rejecting them out of lack of knowledge of the ceremonies. He has been through all the ceremonies. Most of the men in the church at the time who shared his position of not participating in ceremonies had an intimate knowledge of them as they have been through them and were in a position to make a judgement about what they think a Christian should do.

He draws a comparison with the teaching of the Ten Commandments and the moral teaching of the ceremonies. He refers to an overlap between the two religions and I have often heard the similarities between the two referred to. It is likely that most of the missionaries saw the moral systems as totally different, instead of exploring the similarities of moral teaching. However the Aborigines have noted the similarities for themselves.

Silas states that a lot of the bad parts of the ceremonies have been 'washed out' and refers to men lending their wives during the Gunapipi.[517] I have often heard comments like 'all the dirty sex was removed from the ceremonies'. By bad parts I take him to mean more than sexual immorality as the other comment that was frequently made was that all the murdering business was removed. This I have understood to refer to capital punishment or sorcery being used to kill a person or one of their relatives because they did something incorrectly at a ceremony.

Silas's comments about the ceremonies are of interest because they are documented and he was not the only one of that generation to hold such a view. His view is also of interest as it was his father and men of that generation who 'cleaned up' the ceremonies and stopped some of them. The men who are commonly referred to as stopping the ceremonies are Barnabas Roberts, Mordacai Skewthorpe, James Japanma and Joshua, who were all leaders of their clans. The only ceremony that I have been told of that was completely stopped was the Ubar ceremony. The reason given was that it was a 'dirty' ceremony. Gertie Huddlestone told me that it was stopped by the Christian men including her father Joshua. The other men involved were Barnabas, James Japanma, Walker, Caleb, Moredecai, Isaac and Lambarin.

Others were not performed by church leaders but they did not prevent other people from performing them. I have been told that the men who 'cleaned up' the ceremonies had the appropriate power to do so.

John Bern in his PhD thesis refers to claims by the Ngukurr people to have made their cults 'clean'.

> *The Ngukurr people stated that most sorcery was initiated within the context of the major cults. In the 'old days' their predecessors had passed such judgement using the authority of the Jabuduruwa and Gunabibi, but these cults were now 'clean' at least within Ngukurr. Therefore the cult, or cults, which still permitted the old ways to*

[517] Warner, ibid., pp. 296-8; and R. Berndt, *Kunapipi*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1951, pp. 50-3. Both mention the ceremonial exchange of wives for sexual intercourse towards the end of the Kunapipi ceremony.

*continue must have been practised outside Ngukurr. The Balgin was the logical prime suspect...*[518]

Ngukurr people regarded the Balgin ceremony, of the Roper Valley and Elsey Station area as *munj*. Bern defines this as follows.

*The term includes killing by physical attack and through the use of mediating agents such as spells. The term also refers to the process by which an order to kill is initiated and passed on from the source to the actual assassin or sorcerer.*[519]

Ngukurr people suspected the Balgin cult members were responsible for the initiation and execution of sorcery throughout the area as Ngukurr Aborigines claimed not to practice sorcery. The members of the Balgin cult denied they were responsible and said that a fine was the most the exacted for wrong doing or error.[520].

When I saw Andrew Joshua in 1995 he was perturbed as the things that his parents generation had closed off in the ceremonies including the 'murdering business,' had been opened up again that year, by the young people.[521] He was of the opinion that this could only bring harm to the community. It is a widely held belief at Ngukurr that their predecessors did in fact remove a lot of harmful business from the Gunabibi and the Yabuduruwa.

**Conferences on Ceremonies**

In 1967 and 1968 the Anglican Aborigines of Arnhem Land organised two conferences to discuss Christianity and ceremonies. They were attended by Christians and those who did not consider themselves Christians. The meetings were chaired by Aborigines and the European Chaplains were invited to attend. The 1967 conference at Ngukurr was attended by 21 men[522] and the 1968 conference at Numbulwar was attended by
52-62 men.[523]

The 1967 report acknowledges that most of the questions were raised by the chaplains. The discussions included the following questions.

*What kind of ceremonies are held? Seasonal? Teaching? etc, what is the connection between a death and a ceremony? Are Christian Aborigines finding they cannot take part in some ceremonies? What are some of the ways missionaries can learn Aboriginal manners? Are there special customs to be followed in talking to old people or women?*[524]

The points made by the conference were far ranging. Missionaries should learn the local language so that they could become closer to Aborigines. Monogamous marriage should be taught. Aborigines

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[518] John Bern, PhD thesis, Whitefella Law, Blackfella Business, Macquarie University, 1974, pp. 282-3.
[519] ibid., p. 282, fn. 7.
[520] ibid., pp. 281-3.
[521] Joy Sandefur, 1995, Field Tape no. 6, Side 1.
[522] Report on a conference to discuss the relationship between the Christian Faith and Aboriginal ceremonies held at Roper River Mission from 12th to 17 of April 1967.
[523] Notes on a conference on ceremonies held at Numbulwar from 19th to 24th of July 1968.
[524] Report on a conference to discuss the relationship between the Christian Faith and Aboriginal ceremonies held at Roper River Mission from 12th to 17 of April 1967.

agreed that there was great value in keeping the ceremonies as they were a kind of memorial to the old people. They were also important for teaching law and discipline. Christian Aborigines should be free to go, look at, or take part in ceremonies. The Aborigines attending the conference said that they believed God was the only creator and not the Dreaming. The chaplains were invited to attend part of the Yabaduruwa ceremony so that they could better understand the discussion and this invitation was accepted. During the next year, chaplains attended ceremonies whenever it was possible. It was agreed that ceremonies should not finish on Sunday mornings and that a boy's father could decide if he should be circumcised by a medical doctor or as part of a ceremony.

The promise system of marriage was discussed as it was causing a lot of trouble but it was decided that more discussion was needed. The Chaplains were given advice about etiquette when approaching Aborigines.

> *The notes for the 1968 conference show that the main concerns were death reports and punishments and marriage matters. Several days were spent discussing death and punishments.*
>
> *'Men spoke freely about the troubles that they had from ceremony business, and they all agreed ceremonies should be kept clean from murder business.'*[525]

Barnabas Roberts argued strongly that Christians should not spread rumours and murder troubles and that Christians should not be afraid of anything. The men agreed that if reports of trouble were sent or if troubles came they should not blame one another and there should be no threats of murder at all. I understand that the men were referring to the situations where a man or a member of his family are threatened with death because the man has broken a taboo, done something incorrectly at a ceremony or failed to do something. It can also apply to a woman if she does not prepare food in a satisfactory manner for ceremony participants. I conclude that while Aborigines at Ngukurr had removed the 'murdering business', from the ceremonies they held, they had no control over what happened elsewhere, hence the continuing death threats.[526]

Once again the conference discussed the promise system and the Australian laws about marriage and whether a girl could refuse a marriage partner. Again this was not resolved. Marriage laws are part of the Gunapipi and so part of a discussion about ceremonies. Furthermore when people do not marry 'straight' there is confusion about a son's ceremonial responsibilities which is why discussion about marriage comes up at these conferences.

It would appear that the missionaries were concerned about Christian teaching and where it might clash with traditional religion and what should happen. On the other hand Aborigines were concerned with 'cleaning up the ceremonies', how to handle death threats and sorting out marriage problems. Two such different perspectives illustrates that the missionaries' perspective was dominated by correct dogma and the Aborigines by experience and practice.

Christian Aborigines are insistent that it was Aborigines and not the missionaries who cleaned up the ceremonies and stopped some of the ceremonies. In fact the missionaries could have done no more than forbid ceremonies to be held on mission property and that would have merely driven them

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[525] Notes on a conference on ceremonies held at Numbulwar from 19th to 24th of July 1968.
[526] ibid., pp. 281-3.

underground. Given that the missionaries themselves knew so little about the actual ceremonies and what happened, only the Aborigines could have cleaned them up.

A number of people have told me that there were no ceremonies at old mission, or at Ngukurr when the mission moved there in 1940 after the flood. Only circumcision ceremonies for initiation were held at the mission. It does seem that, apart from initiation circumcision ceremonies, no ceremonies were held on the mission for a number of years.

It does seem contradictory that Christians who no longer participate in the ceremonies should have their sons initiated, yet they do. Part of the reason is that it is viewed as making boys into men. If a boy has not been circumcised, which is part of the initiation activity, he is not a man and cannot marry. Today the time devoted to initiation is often only a couple of weeks. This is very short when compared to the months of time that was involved in the past, and so nowhere near the same amount of teaching about Aboriginal religion takes place. There is also the view of Silas Robert quoted above, and others that it is good for young people to know something of their history.

**Attitudes of Missionaries**

Barry Butler, writing some notes after one of the conferences on ceremonies, comments that the attitude of missionaries to ceremonies have been varied. However he believed that in the mind of most Aborigines '*it is quite clear that all missionaries frown upon corroborees*'. He believes that there has been a great difference in the degree of frowning by individual staff. He also muses:

> *I think there is a lot of unwise generalisation on the part of staff. Some may have read the book* Kunapipi *for example by the Berndts [sic] and from then on perhaps their own minds have been completely closed to any possibility of understanding or appreciating any ceremony... have failed to realise how sensitive the Aboriginal is to this important aspect of his life. There have been different views on stations, sometimes depending mainly on the attitude of the Superintendent at the time.*[527]

In order for missionaries to understand the significance of the rituals and ceremonies they needed to speak the language and to have spent some considerable time witnessing the ceremonies. It was difficult for missionaries to do this. They were often understaffed and worked long hours in the tropical heat providing basic services and producing food to supplement the supplies brought in by boat. There were no formal language schools for them to study the language. With the appointment of full time chaplains in the fifties and years following it was possible for the chaplains to devote some time to these things and their attendance at the ceremonies conference is one example of this.[528]

It appears that for Christian Aborigines who in the past were leaders of their tribal group their response to ceremonies was to 'clean them up' and not to stop them completely. Even though they chose not to continue to participate in them, this meant that with the removal of the killing business etc, they were safer for those who did participate. They dealt with it in an Aboriginal way and focused on the situation and the problems rather than the dogma.

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[527] Barry Butler notes on one of the two conferences on ceremonies in 1967 or 1968.

[528] Report from Earl Hughes in Field Report, October 1967. Earl was chaplain at Numbulwar. He reports he attended a *Ngarrag* or law Corroboree at Numbulwar as it was the only one he had not attended.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has been concerned with whether Aboriginal Christians who make up the church at Ngukurr live as Christians in an Aboriginal manner.

Continuity in change is a feature of life at Ngukurr today and this is also true of the church. The church practises Christianity in a way that gives continuity to their Aboriginality while still identifying as Anglicans. The 'skins' and all its attendant responsibilities are observed. Their children are encouraged to marry 'straight.' An Aboriginal style of conducting funerals has emerged. Differences within the church and with other members of the community are not dealt with by confrontation. They are discussed and discussed again until agreement is reached. If agreement is not reached each other's position is respected. The church does not force its view on others. Often in stating their view an Aboriginal Christian will say 'I can't force you'. [529]

There is more continuity with an Aboriginal way of doing things, than with the missionaries' efforts to assimilate Aborigines into a 'civilised way of life. A number of Aborigines have accepted the gospel that the missionaries brought but have chosen to practice it in their own way.

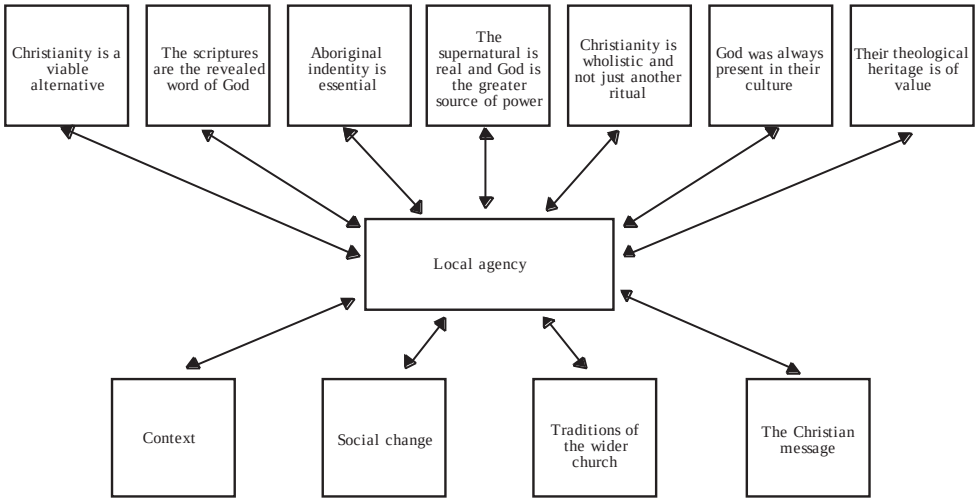


**Figure 9** Model of contextual theology as practised at Ngukurr.

Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians live in a way that is distinctively Aboriginal. They have contextualised Christianity in a way that has allowed them to continue to regard themselves as Aborigines. They have incorporated Christianity into the context of their daily lives and separated the gospel from the White man's culture that it came wrapped in. Their response to how to live as Christians in an Aboriginal context has been distinctively Aboriginal.

To return to the model that I suggested in chapter five, it is now possible to start identifying some of the presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians bring to the contextualisation process.

They have continued to acknowledge the reality of the Aboriginal view of the spirit world and added to it God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Satan, angels and demons. Ngukurr Christians have sought to find ways of dealing with situations where people are frightened of spirits by praying for

[529] This autonomy is a feature of the Aboriginal way to life. Fred Myers also found it among the Pintupi in central Australia. F. Myers, *Pintupi Country Pintupi Self*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, 1986.

them to be safe and telling them that God is stronger than sorcery and can protect them from it. Traditionally illness had a supernatural cause and needed to be dealt with on that level. Christians also accept that it could have a supernatural cause, such as sorcery, or from breaking a taboo, and they expect intervention by God in answer to prayer. Some Christians are recognized as Christian healers.

The above indicates that one of the presuppositions that they bring to the contextualisation process is that the supernatural world is real and that God is a God of power.

They approach Christianity in an Aboriginal way and expect it to apply to the whole of their lives and do not compartmentalise it. Holistic religion is what they are interested in. This indicates that one of the presuppositions that they bring to contextualisation of the Christian message is that Christianity is holistic.

Relatedness is an important feature in how Ngukurr Aborigines view the world around them. The data presented on 'skins' shows that it is a very important part of life for Christians at Ngukurr. At times they struggle with how to show love and respect in relation to avoidance relationships but are finding ways to deal with them. They teach the 'skin' system to their children and encourage them to marry 'straight'. Marriage is seen to be related to the subsections and moieties, land ownership and management, obligations to other people and ceremonies. It cannot be viewed in isolation from the rest of life and demonstrates that in Aboriginal society nothing is compartmentalised and handled separately from the rest of life. This suggests that one of the presuppositions influencing Ngukurr Christians is that Aboriginal identity is important.

Local theology is present as a presupposition in their approach to contextualisation. There are two strands to Ngukurr local theology. There is the theology that they were taught by the missionaries. This was an evangelical theology and it is evident today in some of the ways they approach contextualisation. An example of this is in their approach to ceremonies where they have tended to see them as representing a separate religion. The other strand is the local theology that is emerging as a result of their contextualisation of the gospel.

Their belief that God was always present in their culture is demonstrated by their claims that God is the True Dreaming, that their moral code is similar to the Ten Commandments and that they knew God before the missionaries came suggest that this is another presupposition that they bring to contextualisation.

From the data presented in this chapter it would seem that the people who are best able to contextualise the Christian message at Ngukurr are the Aboriginal Christians who live there. They are the ones who best understand the context and can contextualise the gospel in a way that preserve their Aboriginality.

The four things included on the bottom of figure 9 are part of the contextualisation process. It is obvious from what has been discussed in this chapter that they are very much aware of the cultural context they live in and that they are seeking to live culturally as Aboriginal Christians. Material presented above such as that on funerals demonstrates that they are conscious of social change as part of their lives and that they can introduce change. The influence of the wider church has not figured prominently in this chapter but it is present in what they have learnt about healing from other churches and what they have learnt about how Aboriginal Christians elsewhere have handled sorcery and funerals, but on the whole in the five areas presented in this chapter they have worked in

isolation. The Christian message is an integral part of the contextualisation process as it is what they are contextualising.

It is difficult to identify a trend in how they approach contextualisation at this point. However it seems to be emerging that they are more concerned with religious practice than religious dogma and this does suggest that praxis could be characteristic of how they approach contextualisation.

In the next chapter I will discuss Aboriginal agency and how it functions in St Matthew's Church at Ngukurr.

## Chapter Eight

# ABORIGINAL AGENCY AND THE NGUKURR CHURCH

Contextualisation of the gospel means incorporating the gospel into the whole of life in such a way that it becomes interwoven into it. If this is to happen it must be done by local agents as they are ones who understand best how their cultural context works. In this chapter I intend to examine Aboriginal agency from 1971 onwards, in changing their church services and activities from a situation where it was very similar to any Anglican church in Australia to one where it can be characterized as an Aboriginal way of doing things. Contextualisation of the gospel includes worship and church activities done in a way that they are familiar with.[530] In 1971 they gained control of their church affairs and ran everything, so thisis an appropriate starting point.

Change has been introduced slowly over a period of time to St Matthew's Church. In 1967 a year prior to the mission being handed over to the government, church services were conducted in English and very much in the style of other Anglican services in Australia. By 1991, while St Matthew's still identified as an Anglican church, things were done in a manner that represented an Aboriginal way of doing things and everything was done in Kriol, the main language of the community.

In order to understand how they are exercising agency I will examine four different areas of church life: fellowship meetings, Bible camp, Bible studies and Sunday morning service. The fifth area to be covered is the impact of the Scriptures being available in Kriol and the recognition of Kriol as a modern Aboriginal language. Language is included for three reasons. It is an exercise of agency to use your own language when English has been used for many years. The use of a people's own language within the church gives a sense of ownership of theology and tradition. It also best expresses the deep interests and concerns of the people who make up the local church.

At the end of the chapter I will refer back to the model that I introduced in chapter five and see if any of the presuppositions can be identified from the data presented. I will refer to the data to see if the four important elements of Bevans' contextual models are present. Finally I will comment if how they contextualise the gospel can be characterized in any way.

Church affairs at Ngukurr are run by the local church and its Aboriginal minister. While Reverend Wurramara gives leadership, it is usually based on the consensus of the local congregation. Without their support new initiatives do not go far. This is one reason that the change from a White way of functioning as a church to one that has an Aboriginal way of doing things has taken a number of years. Aborigines are traditionalists and lean towards doing things in the way that they received them,

[530] Other Aboriginal churches have also worked to Aboriginalise their church activities. An example of this is the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry in Victoria. 'Vicki Walker, Appendix 6 to Chapter 12: Vicki Walker', in *My Story Our Stories*, eds Paul Rule and Kathleen Engebretson, Social Science Press, Wentworth Falls, NSW, pp. 168-73.

especially in matters of religion. However this does not prevent change but it occurs at a slower rate than it might in other societies.

It would be easy to look at the Ngukurr Church and think that Christianity is not in the process of becoming contextualised. There is a well kept church building, an electronic band and music is Western in style. There is no traditional Aboriginal music or dancing. At a glance it appears Western. A closer examination reveals that many Aboriginal notions of how to do things are present.

John Pobee warns that in situations like Ngukurr that have been exposed to considerable Western influence we should not have a fossil view of culture and religion.[531] Neither culture or religion are static and as Bevans points out the church should not work with romantic ideas of the past.[532] Contextualisation of the gospel has to occur in the present and in a way that people see as culturally appropriate. The focus of contextualisation is on how to live culturally as an Aboriginal Christian at Ngukurr today. Their expression of Christianity needs to reflect their Aboriginality as well as being recognisable as Christian by the wider church. This is what contextualisation is about.

Contextualisation today is happening in a situation that is vastly different to the way they lived as Aborigines a hundred years ago. Nevertheless, the way they do many things reflects their Aboriginality. Aboriginal notions of occasion, location, time and participation will be discussed below.

While the community is in a remote location, the advantages of modern technology have been quickly grasped. At the same time Ngukurr people are proudly Aboriginal and much of their values, behaviour and lifestyle reflects their Aboriginal identity. Therefore we should expect to find that their style of worship and church life will reflect both the Aboriginal and White Australian way of doing things. It would be unrealistic to expect them to contextualise Christianity into a traditional way of life that they are no longer living. While it would seem appropriate to expect that the best way to contextualise music would be to use traditional instruments such as clapsticks and the didgeridoo, it has to be acknowledged that they might choose not to do so.

The following is an examination of four activities of the church and the use of Kriol as mentioned above to examine the way they are exercising agency.

## FELLOWSHIP MEETINGS

Fellowship Meetings are an important part of Church life and are a good example of Aboriginal agency in contextualising their Christian faith. These meetings are commonly referred to as ‘Fellowship’ and will be referred to in that manner for the rest of this chapter.

‘Fellowship’ emerged as a regular nightly activity after the Elcho Revival Movement which swept through the Uniting and Anglican Churches in Arnhem Land in 1979.[533] This movement was an

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[531] J. S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology*, Abingdon, Nashville, 1979, p. 44.

[532] Steven Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 20.

[533] Robert Bos, Jesus and the Dreaming. Religion and Social Change in Arnhem Land, PhD thesis, University of Queensland, 1988a. The thesis is an examination of the revival movement. See also his article ‘The Dreaming and Social Change in Arnhem Land’ in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Adelaide, 1988b, pp. 422-37; John Harris, *One Blood*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, 1990, pp. 848-51; Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, pp. 202-3; D. Gondarra, *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, Bethel Presbytery, Northern Synod of the Uniting Church of Australia, 1986.

Aboriginal led movement that gave a strong impetus to Aboriginal leadership of churches.[534] Nightly meetings held out of doors in the community were a feature of this movement.[535] These meetings are still held by Anglican and Uniting Churches in Arnhem Land in 1998, 20 years later. Once a year at Elcho Island there is the annual Thanksgiving celebration of the movement. In 1996 about 1500 people attended.[536]

At Ngukurr 'Fellowship' is usually held in the park next to the town Council Offices. Recently a small building was erected there consisting of a stage and storage rooms for band equipment and amplifiers. The stage is designed to facilitate the electronic band and sound system. There is a sign in bright lights that proclaims in Kriol, 'Jisas im laibala' (Jesus is alive). The lights were designed to flash in a way similar to disco lights. However, people found it hard on their eyes, and the lights no longer flash. The band uses the stage, while the singers usually stand or sit in front of the stage area or beside it, as does the person who speaks that night. Most singers bring their own microphones. People usually sit on the grass in small, scattered family groups facing the stage. Often a group of men will sit together. This is similar to the way people sit at film nights, concerts and at community meetings.

Bos in his 1988 article 'The Dreaming and Social Change in Arnhem Land'[537] has pointed out that the 'Fellowship' meetings at Elcho Island and the way they were conducted have features that are more similar to traditional ceremonies than to the forms of worship introduced by the Methodist missionaries. At Ngukurr it would be more accurate to say that 'Fellowship' has similarities to the way informal singing of traditional songs takes place, and how other activities in the community are conducted. This is especially so in things like not commencing until it is deemed that enough people are present, holding it outside, people coming and leaving as they wish, and people sitting in family groups.

Prior to 'Fellowship' commencing as a nightly event, some church meetings were held outside and away from the church building. These meetings were known as 'Village Service' and were held on the old basketball court. The singing was in English and film strips were often shown. From 1967 the preaching was usually in Kriol, unless Whites were present and then English would be used. The services are described in the church minutes as the most popular and best attended services.[538] This indicates there was already a preference for services held out of doors. They took place every second Sunday night, although I remember them occurring weekly in the late 1970s. Older Aborigines trace the origins of 'Fellowship' back to when they were schoolgirls and there was a dormitory system. One of the missionaries would often lead a time of lively chorus singing in the evening.[539] It appears that at Ngukurr 'Fellowship' has built on the foundation of these earlier meetings.

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[534] D. Gondarra, *Series of Reflections of Aboriginal Theology*, Bethel Presbytery, Northern Synod of the Uniting Church of Australia, 1986, p. 10.

[535] Gondarra, ibid., p.10; and R. Bos, 1988, p. 426.

[536] J. Waddy, personal communication.

[537] Bos, ibid., 1988b, p. 428.

[538] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, D. Woodbridge, Report of Chaplain to Church 1969, and Chaplains report to Annual meeting of St Matthews Church, Ngukurr Church Minute Book.

[539] Canon Barry Butler told me that this kind of activity occurred frequently when he was a young missionary in the 1950's.

‘Fellowship’ is constructed around Aboriginal notions of occasion, time, location and participation. This is what makes the meetings different from how Whites would run a similar type of activity.

**Aboriginal notions of occasion and time**

Aborigines are night people and hold ‘Fellowship’ in the evening. This is the traditional time for song and dance. Chaseling writes of Eastern Arnhem Land ‘*Most of the night was spent in singing and dancing.*’[540] Elkin refers to the difficulty of filming Aboriginal dancing as ‘*dancing, filled with zest and meaning almost always occurs at night time*’.[541]

My observation of Ngukurr is that evening, after the heat of the day, is the time for sociable activities such as visiting, basketball, gambling and discos, as well as traditional ceremonies.

Holding ‘Fellowship’ outside at night suits their notion of occasion as does holding ceremonies at night to start when they are ready rather than at a fixed time. Both demonstrate Aboriginal notions of occasion and time.[542] This arrangement also lends itself to people arriving and departing without feeling conspicuous (as they might in a building), when they are ready to, rather than going by the artificial time of the clock.

The outside location results in less disruption. Children, as they tire, fall asleep on a blanket with their family. Active toddlers are less of a distraction. Noise is not a problem as people are not enclosed by the four walls of a building. The sound system means that everybody present can hear what is happening (as well as those who live close by!). People can sit in the shadows and observe what is happening if they do not wish to be noticed.

‘Fellowship’ demonstrates an Aboriginal sense of time and occasion in another way. At Ngukurr the meetings have three phases to them. Phase one is when people are gathering together, the band is tuning up, followed by cheerful, light-hearted singing and often includes songs with actions After up to an hour and a half of singing, the leader will move the meeting to phase two. At this point the songs become more worshipful. They entail a notion of entering God’s presence and are directed to God. After twenty to thirty minutes of this, the evening moves into phase three. This consists of a Bible reading, a short sermon, sometimes somebody will share something about their experience as a Christian, prayers including prayer for healing, and a closing prayer closes the meeting formally.[543]

‘Fellowship’ often finishes late. People have often had a sleep in the afternoon and don’t mind late evening activities. It is often 11 p.m. or later when the meeting finishes, particularly on the nights when there is a good crowd which sometimes starts singing again after the meeting has been

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[540] W. S. Chaseling, *Yulengor*, The Epworth Press, London, 1957, p. 29.

[541] A. P. Elkin, *The Australian Aborigines*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974. Berndt also refers to ceremonies happening at night. R. M. Berndt, *Kunapipi*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1951, pp. 41, 45, 52.

[542] John Bern reports that he experienced difficulty in finding out when a ceremony would be held at Roper Valley and when it actually started. See his PhD thesis, Whitefella Law, Blackfella Business. I observed many times the same to be true of funerals, ceremonies, community meetings and church meetings.

[543] Bos, ibid., 1988b, pp. 427-8. When discussing Galiwinku Fellowship meetings, Bos describes four phases, but I regard three phases as a true representation of the Ngukurr Fellowship meetings. Phases one to three are similar at Ngukurr and Galiwinku. However, Galiwinku has a fourth phase that follows the sermon. Occasionally singing will recommence at Ngukurr after the closing prayer, but not very often. In phase four at Galiwinku the singing recommences and is more fervent, people come and kneel in the middle of the circle which has re-formed and wait for hands to be laid on them in prayer. Finally the meeting closes with the minister pronouncing the blessing.

formally closed. White Australians are far more worried about the lateness of the hour than are Aborigines.

Holding 'Fellowship' nightly reflects Aboriginal notions of time and occasion. The reason given for nightly meetings is that it gives people something to do. It is an alternative to gambling, drinking and boredom. Nightly gatherings also reflect the pattern of ceremonies where activity occurs nightly during the weeks and months that a ceremony is in progress.

While Fellowship meetings are generally held nightly, they are not held every night of the year. Often no meeting is held on Saturday. There will often be a break at different times for a few weeks. This reflects the pattern of ceremonies, where there is daily activity while the ceremony is in progress and when the ceremony's end is marked by a break before another one commences (although today it appears that more ceremonies are being held and the time between is shorter). Fellowship meetings seem to come to a natural halt and then start up again when people are ready to do so. There are no prearranged finishing and recommencing dates. The clearest discernible pattern is that, if 'Fellowship' ceases activity after Christmas, it will always have started again before Easter; but how long before Easter is variable. In 1998 they started in January with up to two hundred people including many young people attending.[544] The wet season could cause the break. However it is also holiday time with the school and community offices closed in January.

One of the reasons for the lasting popularity of 'Fellowship is that it follows Aboriginal notions of time and occasion.

**Location**

The church at Ngukurr has chosen to have 'Fellowship' outside rather than in the church building and this is a popular choice. People sit in family groups on the ground. They avoid the confines of a building, where people sit in rows, noise is amplified and it is more difficult to observe avoidance relationships. Children play contentedly and sleep when they are tired. There is little disruption due to noise or tired children. Many other activities in the community are held outside such as ceremonies, discos, gambling and community meetings. So it is understandable that church people are more comfortable holding 'Fellowship' out doors. The outside venue gives more flexibility as to where they are held. While usually held in the park, they are occasionally held outside a home.

The outside location is appropriate for a religious occasion. It is difficult to conceive of the Kunapipi or Yabaduruwa ceremonies being held at Ngukurr inside a building.[545] Thus it is appropriate that Aborigines have enthusiastically embraced the idea of holding most of their church activities outside. It demonstrates that they are contextualising their Christian activities into their idea of what it means to worship as a Christian in a culturally appropriate way.

**Participation**

The style of Fellowship meetings allows for greater involvement by a variety of people and more physical participation by those attending. It differs from a church service as they were conducted prior to 1971 where one person might lead and another preach (or the one person do both). One person no

[544] Personal communication from the Reverend Wurramara.

[545] The Kunapipi and the Yabaduruwa are the two main religious cults in the Ngukurr area. R. Berndt, *Kunapipi*, F. W. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1951; and A.P. Elkin, 'Yabuduruwa at Roper River Mission 1965', *Oceania*, vol. XLII no. 2, December 1971, pp. 112-67.

longer dominates. Different people will play in the band, lead the singing, read the Scripture and speak.

Physical participation occurs in a number of ways. At times there will be what is called ‘action dancing’. This is done mainly by older children, though a number of adults participate enthusiastically. Dancers line up in rows and perform stylised actions for particular songs. It is an impressive sight when there is a large number of participants. Then there are the other cheerful songs when everybody joins in the actions and there is a relaxed and happy atmosphere. Clapping in time to singing is also common.

When prayer for healing and the laying on of hands occurs, participation by people present is encouraged. They are asked to form a circle and quietly sing songs of worship to God. This gives a sense of participation to all those who form the circle. These are very reverent moments.

People are comfortable with greater physical participation, as this is common at traditional ceremonies where different groups of people are responsible for dancing, singing, body painting, organising and managing the ceremony. This is in marked contrast to the older style of church service, where people sat in rows and one person dominated the service from out front. While ‘Fellowship’ participation is not as rigidly defined as ceremonial action, the same feature of participation by many different people is present.

**Creativity**

Fellowship meetings have created an atmosphere where creativity flourishes. One example of this is the use of languages. The meeting is conducted in Kriol, which is the first language of most people at Ngukurr. Songs are enthusiastically sung in Kriol, English, Nunggubuyu, Alawa, Anindiliwaga, Kunwinjgu and Ritharrngu.[546] If the song is a long one it will be sung entirely in all the languages they choose to sing it in. If it takes fifteen minutes to do so nobody is upset. This is something that is thoroughly enjoyed. In the past Aborigines often spoke several languages and today still enjoy learning what they can from other peoples languages. A number are still multilingual.

Singing Christian songs is a feature of churches worldwide. The choice of the Ngukurr people is a modern style of singing that is common in a lot of churches in Australia. They have adapted it by choosing to sing some songs in as many languages as they are able to. They also write a number of their own songs. The songwriters’ workshops run by the Summer Institute of Linguistics have been immensely popular with many Aboriginal Churches, including Ngukurr. Even though the idea of songs set to traditional tunes has been encouraged at these workshops, the Ngukurr people have chosen to pursue a modern style and prefer their electronic band to clapsticks or the didgeridoo. Traditional songs are usually owned by clans who can say when and where it can be sung. If Christian songs were set to these tunes, people outside the church could say when and where the song

[546] If they do not understand the language they will still learn the song in it.Today at Ngukurr most people speak Kriol as their first language and if they speak a traditional language it is a second language. Thus only a few people will understand the words of the ceremonial songs as the songs have not been translated into Kriol. However, the songs are still sung in the traditional language they have always been sung in. The dreamtime stories are taught to children in Kriol and discussion about what should happen at a ceremony usually takes place in Kriol unless all the participants in the conversation speak the same traditional language, which is becoming less and less frequent as the older generation dies.

could be sung or demand payment when the music was used. Conflict is avoided by using a modern style of music that is common to all.[547]

Their love of singing was obvious before 'Fellowship' became a feature of church life. Before any Christian songs were available in Kriol, they would sing hymns in English enthusiastically for over an hour at the start of village service. The length of time people enjoy singing is much closer to that of the singing of traditional songs with clapsticks of a night, than to that of most church services in Australia.

Creativity is also apparent in the introduction of the popular and much enjoyed action dancing mentioned above. This parallels their appreciation of dancing at ceremonies and the enjoyment of modern dancing while also being very different. It also encourages physical participation. The introduction of the optional healing segment is another innovation in keeping with the Aboriginal perception that the supernatural is involved in illness and healing. It is a more familiar way of praying for the sick than using the formal prayers for the sick in the prayer book. When church activities take place in a manner that is congenial to its members, creativity and enthusiasm flourish.

Fellowship demonstrates that people are contextualising their Christian faith. 'Fellowship' is markedly different to ceremonies, but it also incorporates Aboriginal notions of time, occasion, location and participation. It is a framework that feels normal and as such encourages creativity. It is a far more appropriate form of worship, than the church services introduced by Anglican missionaries. All of the changes discussed above have been initiated and implemented by Aborigines. Few White Christians would be comfortable with what they perceive as vague starting times, long meetings, use of several languages and people arriving and leaving at different times.

**BIBLE CAMP**

Bible Camp is an annual event in the Anglican Churches of Arnhem Land. People from the churches in the communities of Umbakumba, Angurugu, Numbulwar, Oenpelli, Ngukurr, Minyirri and Lake Evalla also attend. Bible Camp has been a feature of Aboriginal Anglican life for at least twenty five years. It was started when the communities were missions but today is wholly organised and run by the Aboriginal churches. There is now a marked difference in how Bible Camp is organised. People used to pay so much per person for transport and meals. The 1971 program for Bible Camp[548] shows that there were two sessions in the morning of about an hour each, another session at 1.30 p.m. and a further session in the evening. These were taken by the White Chaplains to three of the churches, B. Butler, E. Hughes and D. Woodbridge.

Today people organise their own transport and prepare their own meals. All sessions are taken by Aboriginal clergy or lay people. The morning session starts at approximately 9 a.m. and goes for three hours or more. The afternoons are free for hunting, sleeping or visiting Numbulwar for shopping or whatever people want to do. Around 7 p.m. the band starts to tune up and after a while Fellowship gets under way. It will last until midnight or later. The pattern in 1996 was that each church was responsible for one day. On that day they would introduce the Bible study topic and lead 'Fellowship'. Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara of Ngukurr was responsible for the overall running of Bible Camp.

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[547] Copyright rules are observed in the publication of song books.
[548] NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 25, Church Correspondence.

**Bible studies at Bible Camp**

The Bible studies have evolved into a format that people are comfortable with. They are held out of doors in a pleasant bush setting by a billabong. The sessions start with singing as people arrive. People come when they are ready. The singing is usually in all the main languages represented. Next either the clergyman or a lay person from the church in charge for that day introduces the passage to be studied. People from each church then form themselves into a group for discussion. The passage is read and discussed in their language. The Ngukurr people prefer to read the passage out loud together which is their preferred way of reading Scriptures in church and at their twice weekly Bible studies, as nobody stands out as a poor or a good reader. Aborigines do not like to appear to do something better than others.[549] It has become a group activity in which most can participate. It also overcomes the difficulty that existed in trying to get one person to read the Scriptures publicly as is customary in most church services in Australia. Reading out loud together is an example of how Aboriginal people in the Anglican churches have kept what is a feature of church services worldwide, but practise it in a way that is comfortable for them. After the Bible passage has been read, they discuss a set of questions and a person is chosen to report back to the larger group. In 1996 the New Testament book of Philippians was studied and the questions were prepared by Lance Tremlett, a CMS staff person, at the request of the Reverend Wurramara. The questions are focussed on discovering what the passage actually teaches. It is expected that each group will consider if the passage gives any guidelines for living.

I observed that the most animated discussion occurred on the day when the issue arose from discussion of Philippians chapter three about where the spirit of a Christian went at death. The discussion centred 'did a person's spirit go to Heaven when they died?' Some wondered about which spirit went to heaven as traditionally they believed that two spirits left the body one of which would wander around on earth as a trouble maker and the other went to a place for spirits. Others had the idea that the spirit had to go to a place to wait for Jesus to return. At the end of the Bible study one old man, Dirridjuna, told a story from the Numbulwar area. The old people who were alive before the missionaries came to Numbulwar in 1952 believed that the spirit, that went to the place for spirits could end up in one of two places.

The old people had taught him that people had two spirits. *Mawurr* was a good spirit that went to the place in the sky for spirits. *Nangurr* was a bad spirit, a troublemaker that wandered around the earth. *Mawurr* went to a place in the Milky Way. The place is heart shaped and can be seen in the Milky Way in the middle of the night. He had located it in the sky the night before and others agreed you could locate it. This place is guarded by *Wingare* which he compared to the 'light' in Revelation. When your spirit arrives there you have charge of yourself, nobody tells you where to go. If you go to the place where *mawurr* (dragonfly) is in charge you will be well looked after and life will be pleasant. If you go to the place *lirrat* (blue tongue lizard) is in charge of, life will be very unpleasant, as the blue tongue lizard is at a place that is a hot desert and you will burn. He does not look after you. Dirridjuna went on to say he had wondered for many years about that story and the Bible study that day had helped him understand where the spirit waited for Jesus to return and take it to be with him.

[549] M. R. Ungunmerr, *Nature of Aboriginal Children*, Department of Education, Northern Territory Division, 1976, p. 6.

It is apparent that he is bringing other ideas to the text as that passage is referring to heaven and not a waiting place for spirits. Nevertheless it is an interesting exercise in contextualising. He is seeking to reconcile the two beliefs and saying the missionaries had the story about heaven and hell and we also had a story about a good and a bad place where spirits go.[550] This exploration of ideas and what the Bible teaches is all part of the contextualisation process.

When the groups have finished their discussion, each group reports back to the larger group. No group is highlighted as presenting better answers than another group. Each church's contribution is treated with equal respect. This is in keeping with groups on good terms with each other not appearing to be competitive.

Thus the teaching at Bible Camp has moved from a situation where it was done by outsiders to one where it is done by each of the churches represented. It is done in a way where all can contribute and all are listened to. People have chosen to use Bible Study as an important means of teaching, along with preaching. All are free to contribute. It is held outside with people sitting contentedly on the ground in the shade. People's own language is used as much as possible.

The importance that Anglican Aborigines attach to Bible studies reflects the theological approach of the Church Missionary Society which placed a high value on Scripture. Scripture assumed an important value for Aborigines when they had it available in their own language. Their focus then shifted from trying to understand the English to understanding what the text was saying. One of the criteria for what they study at Bible Camp is that it be available in all four languages.

The conduct of Bible studies at camp reflects an Aboriginal approach to things. It is held outside, though not at night, as fellowship has priority then and people in any case need light for reading at Bible studies. People are happy to report back to the larger group when they are chosen by their group to do so. Usually another person will write down what is to be reported. A different person is chosen each day and so participation by as many as possible is encouraged. The morning session formally gets under way when enough people are deemed to be there. It finishes when everything is done and not according to a set time.

The above demonstrates that Aborigines are changing what they received from the missionaries to their own style of doing things. Most White Christians would regard 30-60 minutes as more than adequate for a Bible study. A three hour session is unheard of.

**Fellowship**

'Fellowship' at Bible Camp strongly resembles Fellowship meetings at Ngukurr. The format of the meeting is flexible but follows the same general form of local Fellowship meetings. There is the singing at the start, on this occasion led by the players and singers of the church responsible for the day's Bible study and 'Fellowship'. Then there is the move to songs addressed to God which is followed by the person who is speaking that night. Then there is a time of prayer for healing. After that, each church leads the singing for a while. This is usually when the action dancing takes place.

There are however some differences. The meetings are longer as people do not have the constraint of going to work the next day. Traditional languages are more prominent as the other Anglican communities are more homogenous and a different traditional language is the first language of each

[550] Dirrijuna tells this story on the video tape, 'Arnhem Land Anglican Bible Camp 1996', available from Nungalinya College, Darwin.

community. Even though people do not know another language, they are content to listen to the particular group singing in it. This is also true of traditional ceremonial songs when the language is archaic or in a language they do not speak.

The differences between 'Fellowship' at Ngukurr and at Bible Camp, are that at Bible Camp there is an opening ritual that takes place on the first night; one night there was a welcoming of new Christians; the healing segment was longer and a more notable part of the evening than at Ngukurr. The discussion will be confined to these differences. It was interesting to note that while not everyone attended the morning Bible studies, nearly everyone attended the Fellowship meetings.

*Opening ritual*

This was referred to as the opening of Bible Camp. It occurred towards the end of the Fellowship meeting on the first night. The Reverend Wurramara asked everyone to form a large circle and join hands. People then sang songs of worship, followed by a prayer and Bible Camp was declared open. It was done in a most reverent manner. The opening was the climax to the first day's activities which had started with Holy Communion, followed by Bible study and then fellowship. This represents another example of Aboriginal occasion and timing. It is for Aborigines more appropriate to lead up to the 'opening' at the end of the first day rather than actually start with it.[551]

*Welcoming ritual*

Halfway through the 1996 Bible camp a couple arrived from Ngukurr who declared that they had decided to become Christians. They had been considering such a decision for some time and talking to Ngukurr Christians about it. The woman had had a bad dream which frightened them considerably.[552] They had driven four hours to Bible camp to talk about it and to identify with Christians. It is not unusual for Aborigines to be influenced in their decision making by dreams. Many Aborigines will talk about how God spoke to them in a dream or that a dream influenced them to think about becoming a follower of Jesus Christ.

At the evening 'Fellowship' Gumbuli decided to welcome them as people wanting to identify as Christians. At the end of the time when prayers were offered for healing, he introduced them to the gathering, placed his hands on their heads prayed for them and welcomed them. This was the first time that I had seen this take place. It demonstrates that the churches are innovative and experimenting with new ways to express and contextualise their faith. The couple involved in this ritual will be baptised and confirmed after a period of teaching.

*Healing Ritual*

At Bible Camp prayer for healing took place each night. Those prayed for included sick babies and people with long term illness. The format was similar to a normal fellowship meeting, with people asked to form a circle around those requesting prayer. Gumbuli was in charge of this section but was careful to include other clergy who were present, in the laying on of hands and praying for the sick.

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[551] There is also a closing ritual but I was unable to observe this. I understand that on the last night singing will go until almost dawn and then people form a large circle holding hands for the final singing and prayer. This closing ritual has been introduced to the Katherine Christian Convention where it is a moving finish to a convention that is attended by approximately 200 Aboriginals and 200 Whites.

[552] I enquired privately from the people she had talked to if they could tell me the content of the dream. They preferred not to discuss it.

He also invited church wardens and church council members to assist. He always made it clear that it was God who healed people and not him. I was impressed by the sense of reverence during these sessions. The singing was quiet and reverent. The children were quiet. It seemed that this was the most holy moment of the evening's activities. It was obvious by the acceptance of this segment and the participation of the different church groups in it, that this occurs at all the Anglican Aboriginal churches represented there.

The opening and welcoming rituals are recent innovations that the Aborigines have made to Bible Camp. While Bible camp was introduced by missionaries, innovations such as these show that people have made it part of their church life. They are not blindly continuing on with something started by missionaries. Instead they are constantly adapting it according to changing circumstances. In the days when people had no transport, it was probably practical for missionaries to organise transport and the provision of food. Today, when people own vehicles and are part of a money economy, it is appropriate for them to organise these things themselves. If no change and innovation was occurring, Bible Camp would have stagnated and ceased to function without the missionary impetus. With 150-200 people attending the 1996 camp, Bible Camp is in fact a vital part of Anglican Aboriginal church life. It lasts for a week and is held at Wumatjba billabong. People camp under bough shades and cook on open fires. There is plenty of time for socialising and it is run according to Aboriginal notions of location, occasion, time and participation. As such it fits an Aboriginal way of doing things, and with its daily activities, is similar to how a short ceremony is run, even though what happens at Bible Camp is simultaneously very different.

**BIBLE STUDIES**

These occur twice weekly at Ngukurr. They are similar in style to the ones at Bible Camp. The pattern is to select a book that is in the Bible and to work through it. People read the passage for the day out loud together. Younger people who started attending in 1997 prefer to have one person at a time read. Gumbuli usually leads the study, though others may do so. A study booklet is used. The study booklets are prepared by an Aboriginal Christian woman at Ngukurr. She has studied the passage and composed questions that will assist people to understand the passage. Twenty different study booklets have been produced in Kriol.[553] The studies are checked and approved by Reverend Wurramara before they are published.

While these Bible Studies do reflect the approach of the CMS missionaries, which was to give a high priority to Scripture and its understanding, it has become a distinctively Aboriginal way of doing things too. The Bible studies are in the local language; they are outside; people read out loud together and the discussion is relaxed and can become animated when it deals with an issue that is relevant to people's lives at that particular time. Topics that arise are wide-ranging, and include participation in traditional ceremonies, marriage, taboo relationships, death, the spirit world, dealing with anger and revenge, to name a few. The process of contextualisation is occurring as people discuss the Bible passage, how it relates to their lives and start to put their conclusions into practice.

One of the reasons for the popularity of the Bible at Ngukurr is that it is regarded as giving access to 'inside knowledge' to everyone. Inside knowledge is a term used in traditional religion to refer to the knowledge that is only available to those who are initiated into it. Before they had the Kriol *Holi*

[553] Joy Sandefur, 1996, Field Note Book no. 2

*Baibul* they only had the outside knowledge about the gospel and it was like stories. They did not realise that there was an inner meaning behind the stories and that there was religious teaching in the Bible as well as stories. The inside meaning is the teaching about God and his power over spirits and the supernatural, and includes his ability to heal people. Just as most Whites do not really understand the teaching of the Dreaming because they only have the outside story, so it used to be with the Aboriginal Christians at Ngukurr. Once the people had access to the Scriptures in their own language, however, the teaching was there for everyone who wanted to study and learn, whereas it had been too difficult to understand it fully in English.

When I moved to Ngukurr in 1976 Bible studies had a very low profile and were mainly attended by a few women for a number of years. It was when all of the New Testament along with a third of the Old Testament was published in Kriol in 1991 that Bible studies took on a life of their own. The twice weekly studies replaced the weekly men's and women's Bible study groups as people decided that men and women should meet together and that it would be twice weekly. Also a new technique has had to be learnt. Previously a lot of the time went into explaining what the English text meant but since it was published in Kriol they do not have to worry about what the words mean and have had to learn to deal with the text itself and what it confronts them with.

While attendance at Bible studies is not as large as at 'Fellowship', it is important to those who attend and yet another activity of church life that they have taken and changed to fit into their way of life. It is also a valuable forum for discussing how to incorporate their Christian beliefs into their daily lives. They have lively discussions about how to live as Aboriginal Christians. They often do not agree and this means that issues will be taken up again on other occasions.

One of the reasons that they are keen to relate the Scriptures to their experience of life is that people are more concerned with religious practice than with dogma. This does not mean that they have no interest in understanding traditional church doctrines, but a higher concern for them is how to practise their Christian faith in everyday life. This is also true of traditional Aboriginal religion where the beliefs are accepted as a given and energy is put into following what the Dreaming taught, such as observing fertility rites, looking after your country and its sacred sites, keeping the social rules and taboos and ensuring that ceremonies are conducted in a satisfactory manner.

Bible studies using a written text are radically different to learning by experience, observation and through an oral heritage which was the traditional way of learning. However in the context of today's situation it is not surprising. There has been a primary school at Ngukurr since 1908. Many have had some secondary education and a few adults have a bachelor degree in education. A good number of adults have undertaken a number of short courses in a variety of areas. Most people connected with the church and many others have learnt to read Kriol. Working from a written text is now accepted as one of the skills that Aborigines need today.

## SUNDAY MORNING SERVICES

This is where the most similarity to the mission church services lies. Yet here again people have taken it and over a period of time made it their own. This is one activity that occurs in their well maintained church building.[554]

[554] Maintenance is paid for from funds gained by renting out accommodation.

The Sunday morning worship service is a service of Holy Communion one week and, on the alternate week, one of morning prayer. This service bears the most resemblance to the formal worship service that was introduced by the Anglican missionaries. Today the service is in Kriol, not English and follows an order of service, including prayers in Kriol. Likewise, there is a Kriol *Song Buk* that contains more than two hundred songs. Favourite hymns in English are sung on some occasions The minister follows the lectionary in his preaching. The lectionary follows a three year cycle of Bible passages that can be read and expounded on. It incorporates passages for all the main events on the church calendar, and readings are from the gospels, epistles, psalms and old testament passages. When it is followed the result is a good knowledge of orthodox teaching. It ensures that the preaching is not at the whim of the preacher and his favourite texts. This has resulted in the church members having a reasonable understanding of orthodox Christian beliefs. The minister also follows the lectionary when he speaks at 'Fellowship'.

In many ways the service resembles an Anglican service in many places in Australia. This should not be regarded as unusual, as the church is an Anglican church and chooses to identify as such. The major change here is that since 1967 there has been a shift from the use of English to Kriol. This has taken time to include the whole service. The local minister believes that a strong church is one that worships in its own language. Over the past twenty five years he has received support for this belief from, the CMS, the Summer Institute of Linguistics, the Bible Society and the Northern Territory Anglican Bishops. People are more comfortable worshipping in their own language. It means that people understand what they are saying, singing and hearing. This is essential if Aborigines are the agents who contextualise the gospel in their lives and communities.

While the more popular church gathering is the Fellowship meeting, people have chosen to keep the Sunday morning service. This service is the only time that communion is administered, apart from the annual confirmation service and Good Friday. The church has been encouraged by the Anglican church to have communion at 'Fellowship', but has chosen not to do so.

It could be argued that people keep to the traditional way of doing things because that is how they received the gospel. But this does not really fit the situation. The first communion services were held in 1908 at old mission under a tree on the banks of the Roper River and there was no church building for ten years.[555]

In keeping the more formal Sunday morning service, people are preserving their identity as Anglicans. They can comfortably attend an Anglican service in Katherine and Darwin. They are aware that they are part of an Australia-wide Anglican church and that this is part of the context in which they operate. They have expressed no desire to withdraw from the Anglican Church. Repeatedly the Reverend Wurramara has said that the most important thing for the church is to have all of their worship in their own language. This has been achieved and is an important part of the journey of contextualising the gospel.

**USE OF THE VERNACULAR**

An important indicator of whether Christianity is contextualised in the local community is the use of the vernacular language. If people are living culturally as Christians one would expect that their faith

[555] St Catherine's Church was built by the Reverend Hubert Warren and dedicated in 1918 by Bishop Ebb. Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, Church Missionary Publications, Melbourne, 1971, pp. 17-18.

is expressed in their mother tongue. The language that is spoken in the home is the language that best expresses the deep concerns, beliefs and religion of a people. When the vernacular language is the mode of communication, the gospel is expressed in the local modes of thought and idiom. This opens the door for it to become contextualised. It will only do so as people incorporate the gospel and its teachings into their daily lives and perceive themselves as living as Aboriginal Christians in their local community.

St Matthew's Church at Ngukurr has over the last thirty years made a complete change from English to Kriol[556] for all its activities. This has been a significant change for two reasons. When Chaplain David Woodbridge decided to learn Kriol so that he could preach and minister to people in it, he acknowledged that Kriol was the language of the community. His decision was a radical change from the policy in 1944 which said that at Ngukurr English was to be the language of communication.[557] It also communicated that Kriol was a language in its own right and one that you could pray and worship in. You did not need to use English, the language of the dominant culture. Secondly, it sent a message that, in order to be a Christian you did not have to assimilate to the dominate culture. Your own language and culture were adequate.

St Matthew's Church has enthusiastically embraced the use of Kriol, their first language, in all church and worship activities. They encourage the other Anglican churches in Arnhem Land to get on with completing Bible translation projects in their languages. The level of enthusiasm suggests that the use of the vernacular has played a significant role in contextualising people's faith. This will be examined below and I will show that the gospel has always been amenable to being translated into the vernacular language of a people and that this assists the gospel to become inculturated in different ways of life.

**Vernacular languages and missions**

Language is the means by which a people '*express their way of perceiving things and of coping with them*'.[558] It has been a tenet of the church from its start that its beliefs could be expressed in vernacular languages. Pentecost in the book of Acts is about the coming of the Holy Spirit and people hearing the gospel in their own language.[559] Sanneh argues that the success of Christianity in the Third World is due to the fact of its translatability.[560] Dana Roberts writing in *Christianity; A Social and Cultural History* also picks up on this theme.

> *By adopting vernacular languages as the means of transmitting the Christian message, missionaries were forced to employ indigenous modes of thought. Whether it was of the Bible or the catechism and liturgy, translation meant that indigenous concepts of God and human nature were carried over into Christianity. The fact of translatability gave every language group a sense of ownership over Christian theology and tradition. An additional benefit of translatability is that it helped to*

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[556] For a detailed discussion of Kriol and its use at Ngukurr, see John Sandefur, A Language come of Age: Kriol of North Australia, MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1985.

[557]NTGA NTRS 870/P1, second correspondence files, section IV, point 2 of 'General Policy and Methods' of the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania, Missions to Australian Aborigines, Federal Council, May 1944; and NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 14, Folder labelled minutes and correspondence 1937-38.

[558] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, SPCK, London, 1986, p.3.

[559] Book of Acts, chapter 2.

[560] Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West*, Orbis, Maryknoll, New York, 1993.

> *preserve many native languages from destruction. Just as Martin Luther's translation of the Bible became the basis for modern German so has Bible translation become the basis for a number of African and Asian languages.*[561]

Christianity proved from its inception to be translatable into other languages and cultures. Early in its history it abandoned the Aramaic language of Jesus, adopting instead Greek in its 'Koine' and Latin in its 'Vulgar' forms.[562] The significance of the early move to Koine Greek is that the whole of the New Testament Canon of Scripture is written in a language different to the one that Jesus taught in. Once Christianity had moved out of Palestine it adopted the vernacular of where it was. Right from the start Christianity was expressed in the common language of the people. Religious language belonged *'to the ordinary commonplace world of men and women, and even children'*.[563] In the fourth century A.D. Christianity in Egypt abandoned the use of Greek for the Coptic language.[564] By the middle of the seventh century in Ethiopia 'the great vernacular work in Amharic and Ge'ez within the Ethiopian Orthodox church had been accomplished.'[565] This resulted in Ethiopia having *'a powerful national and cultural sense of her heritage and was an effective barrier against wholesale Islamization.'*[566]

Following the Reformation and Luther's translation of the Bible into German, the Bible was translated into a number of European Languages. These were Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Finnish and Hungarian. In English the seventeenth century King James Translation became the standard English translation.[567] French, Dutch, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian translations were also published.[568] As a result the gospel became so contextualised in Western cultures that many people had difficulty separating them. As the modern missionary movement spread throughout the world the Bible was translated into the languages of India, Africa, Asia, indigenous North and South America languages, and Pacific languages.[569] Today the centre of gravity of Christianity is shifting from the Northern continents to the South and today the Christian religion is recognised as a non-Western religion.[570] Kwame Bediako argues that that the translation of the Scriptures into the idiom of the people has made this possible:

> *There is probably no more important single explanation for the massive presence of Christianity on the African continent than the availability of the Scriptures in many African languages. By rejecting the notion of a sacred language for the Bible,*

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[561] Dana L. Robert, 'Christianity in Asia, Africa and Latin America', in *Christianity: A Social and Cultural History*, edited by Howard Clark Kee, Emily Albu Hanawalt, Carter Lindberg, Jean-Coup Seban, Mark A Noll, Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991, p. 759.

[562] For an account of the language issue in the Bible, see Matthew Black, 'The Biblical Languages', *The Cambridge History of the Bible: vol i, From the Beginnings to Jerome*, eds, P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, Cambridge University Press, 1970, reprinted 1988, pp. 1-29.

[563] Sanneh, ibid., p.119.

[564] ibid., p 78.

[565] ibid., p. 78.

[566] ibid., p. 78.

[567] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, Harper and Row, New York, 1953, pp. 719-99.

[568] S. L. Greenslade (ed), *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, 1963, vol. 3, pp. 339-60.

[569] ibid., p. 383-414.

[570] Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa. The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*, Edinburgh University Press and Orbis Books, Edinburgh, 1995, p.173; and Dana Roberts ibid., p. 757.

*Christianity makes every translation of its Scriptures substantially and equally the Word of God. Thus the existence of vernacular Bibles not only facilitates access to the particular communities speaking those languages, but also creates the likelihood that the hearers of the Word in their own languages will make their own response to it and on their own terms. Probably nowhere else in the history of the expansion of Christianity has this occurred quite as widely as in modern Africa. The well-known diversities within African Christianity - between churches of missionary origin and independent or African instituted churches - may well be the best indicator that African peoples, as John Mbiti argues have taken seriously to the message of God as they have heard it. The phenomenon of African Christianity in the twentieth century, therefore, far from signifying an acute Westernisation of African life, may rather be the evidence of how much African peoples feel at home in the gospel of Jesus Christ.*[571]

There is a strong tradition of Scripture being translated into vernacular languages and missionaries learning the language. But missions were reluctant to become heavily involved in Bible translation projects in North Australia for a number of reasons. They thought they were smoothing the pillow of a dying race which would not survive to use the translation. Also there was a large number of small language groups which made it difficult and expensive. Furthermore, it was thought that the best hope for Aborigines who survived would be to be assimilated into the White culture and for this they would need to speak English.

Bible translation received a lot more attention from 1961 onward when the Summer Institute of Linguistics commenced Bible translation projects in a number of Aboriginal languages and offered technical support to missionaries who had already commenced Bible translation projects in their areas. Since then work has been done in more than thirty languages and a number of New Testaments and other Scripture selections published.

**St Matthew's Church and Kriol**

At Ngukurr, Kriol was first acknowledged as a viable vehicle of communication by the church before it was acknowledged by other institutions in the community. In 1967 the chaplain, the Reverend David Woodbridge, decided to learn the language and preach in it. Mrs Kathleen Rami taught him Kriol and assisted him in making sure his sermon was well expressed in Kriol. This was a brave and significant step for the church. Kriol was still a despised language and yet it was the mother tongue of most of the community.

When Roper River mission was established in 1908 remnants of nine tribes came to live at the mission. Nine different languages, with a few speakers of each, made it difficult for the missionaries to know which language to learn. English was used instead. Furthermore the nine languages were highly divergent languages thus making communication between the resident groups at the mission difficult.[572]

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[571] Bediako, ibid., p. 62; also pp. 172-86 and John Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, Nairobi, Oxford University Press, 1986, no page reference given (cited in above quote by Bediako).

[572] See discussion in chapter one and Geoffrey Heath, *Basic Material in Mara; Grammar and Texts and Dictionary, Pacific Linguistics*, C 60, 1961, p. 4; and John Sandefur, A Language Coming of Age, MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1984, pp. 235-8.

Meanwhile the children from the different tribal groups took the pidgin that they all spoke and creolised it into a mother tongue. Today there are fifth generation speakers of this language and it is widely recognised in North Australia as a major Aboriginal language.[573] In spite of the opposition to Kriol, Aborigines at Ngukurr and elsewhere continued to use it as their preferred language and avoided speaking it to Whites: a case of Aborigines choosing to do what they wanted to do.

The missionaries had not completely ignored Kriol. They differed about whether or not to use it, but often found it necessary. Keith Langford Smith, a missionary who arrived at Old Mission in the early 1930s commented '*that most of the White men spoke pidgin [Kriol], which we picked up from the natives'* and that '*all instruction was done in English or pidgin [Kriol].'*[574]

During the early 1950s several CMS staff used Kriol when preaching and teaching in the daily services and generally received a good hearing.[575] There is also a number of references to the use of Pidgin [Kriol] in the *Mission Reports and Station Minutes of Roper River 1936 - 1973 Vol 1.*[576] There is a reference in 1947 to Kriol being used and in 1968 there is mention of the chaplain preaching in Kriol.[577] As the church is interested in effective communication, it is not surprising that Kriol was used at various times.

While some missionaries understood the communication difficulty of using English, they experienced difficulty in doing anything about it. On January 3rd 1938 the Bishop of Carpentaria wrote to the secretary of the Church Missionary Society, who had raised the matter with him, saying that he insisted that pidgin English [Kriol] not be spoken on the mission stations.[578] In the 1940s when the CMS was starting to encourage Bible translation into the traditional languages,[579] Kriol was still frowned upon. The official policy of the mission in May 1944 stated that:

> *the use of pidgin English [Kriol] shall be discouraged, and in any region where it is impracticable to base educational work on the use of any one native dialect, English shall be used, and the native trained as far as possible to speak correct English.*[580]

In 1965, linguist A. Capell recommended that English was still the best choice for Ngukurr.

> *'The suggestion here would be therefore…concentrate on standard English for the children, checking the tendency to pidgin as far as possible.'*[581]

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[573] Sandefur, ibid., p. 361.

[574] Personal communication to John Sandefur from Keith Langford-Smith, quoted in A Language Come of Age: Kriol of North Australia, MA thesis, University of Western Australia, 1984, p. 250.

[575] John Sandefur, 1984, p. 292.

[576] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, vol. 1. There are also references to Aborigines preaching or interpreting in an Aboriginal language for the benefit of visiting Aborigines.

[577] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, vol. 1. See June 1936, February 1937, February 1941, December 1944, June 1945, April 1947, July 1947, December 1947, April 1949 and Chaplains report 1968.

[578] NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 14, Letter from the Bishop of Carpentaria to Mr. Ferrier.

[579] Len Harris had done some translation into Nunggubuyu between 1939 and 1945. See Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, 1985. Mrs Nell Harris translated Mark's Gospel into Gunwingu in the early 1940s. This was checked by Dr Capell who also translated some selections of Scripture into Gunwingu. Cole, ibid., 1985, p. 126.

[580] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, second correspondence file, section IV, point 2 of 'General Policy and Methods' of the Church Missionary Society of Australia and Tasmania, Missions to Australian Aborigines, Federal Council, May 1944; and NTGA NTRS 873/P1, Box 14, Folder labelled minutes and correspondence 1937-38.

[581] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, second file of correspondence, p. 417, A. Capell, September 1965, Document dealing

In fairness to the missionaries, it needs to be pointed out that worldwide pidgins and creoles were not regarded as viable languages until the 1960s. Prior to this they were usually regarded as unworthy of linguistic investigation.[582]

In spite of the efforts to discourage Kriol, it thrived as a language. People would use what English they had to speak to White people and speak Kriol to one another. In a multi-tribal situation people needed a common language and Kriol met this need. They did not share the missionaries' view that English should meet this need. English was to them a foreign language and Kriol a mother tongue. In a situation where linguists regarded Pidgin and Creole languages as rubbish it is unlikely that the missionaries would have realised that a new language was emerging. John Harris says of the situation at Ngukurr.

> *In this context, the missionaries could not have deduced that a new and viable language was coming into existence. No more insightful than contemporary linguists, the missionaries persisted in discouraging the use of Kriol, banning it in school and especially avoiding it in religious contexts.*[583]

This is another situation where Aboriginal agency is apparent. People chose not to adopt English to meet the need for a common language between the nine tribal groups that lived at Old Mission and later at Ngukurr. Kriol was much more suitable to their needs because, as a modern Aboriginal language, it reflected the way they thought and expressed themselves, whereas English was a foreign language. When Kriol was regularly used in the church regularly and later in a Bible translation project, it met with acceptance as it allowed them to express their Aboriginality. Using their own language said something about their identity and this is a major reason why Church members at Ngukurr say they are Aboriginal and Christian. In Arnhem Land, speaking an Aboriginal language is part of a person's identity, and today Kriol is widely accepted as an Aboriginal language. Before its recognition, Ngukurr people who spoke Kriol but no traditional language, felt inadequate in a situation where Aboriginal languages were acknowledged and they were labelled as speaking bad English.

When the Chaplain Ben Moore was unable to return to Ngukurr for health reasons, Gumbuli Wurramara was commissioned as Church leader on the 12th of January 1971 by Bishop Mason[584] and ordained as a priest in November 1973. A strong feature of Gumbili's ministry has been his use of Kriol. Gumbuli preached and offered spontaneous prayers in Kriol unless there were visiting Whites in the congregation and then he would switch to English. He has encouraged the Kriol Bible translation project and uses the Kriol *Holi Baibul* in church. Today he rarely preaches in English. It was St Matthew's Anglican Church at Ngukurr that took the first step towards Kriol being

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with Problems of Education in North Australia

[582] Sandefur, ibid., p. 1-3.

[583] John Harris, 'North Australian Kriol and the Kriol "Holi Baibul"', in *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, ed by Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Bedford Park, S.A., 1988. For more detailed discussion see John Sandefur's MA thesis, A Language come of Age, University of Western Australia, 1984.

[584] NTGA NTRS 870/P1, Box 2, Ngukurr Register of Services 1965 to 1982. The same book records that Gumbuli Wurramara was ordained a deacon on Saturday 3rd of November 1973 and ordained to the priesthood on Sunday 4th of November 1973. NTRS 873/P1, Box 25, A letter from David Woodbridge to the Bishop of Carpentaria Rt. Reverend S. J. Matthews recommends that Gumbuli be made a lay preacher.

recognised as a viable language.[585] The translation of the Scripture into Kriol and the production of a song book containing over two hundred songs in Kriol, a prayer book, and order of service for funerals, baptism, communion and morning prayer have brought prestige to the use of Kriol. The church at Ngukurr regards itself as responsible for completing the translation of the Old Testament into Kriol.

When my husband and I left Ngukurr in 1990 after overseeing the translation of the New Testament and a third of the Old Testament into Kriol, the church expressed a desire to continue with the program. The Summer Institute of Linguistics assigned another translator Jean Kirton. Unfortunately she died of cancer in 1992. Undaunted, Gumbuli Wurramara called a meeting of all those involved in the translation on the first weekend of May 1993. It was decided that the project would continue. Gumbuli said he knew that the White people could see lots of problems to be overcome. That was okay. The Aborigines were going to make it happen and wanted to use the resources that the White people could offer.

Since then new Aboriginal translators from other communities where Kriol is spoken have enthusiastically participated in the Certificate in Translation course run by the Summer Institute of Linguistics and two have completed the course. Lance and Gwen Tremlett, who work under Gumbuli at Ngukurr and coordinate the translation work in the area, have commented that this is the first time in their long missionary career that all their work has been driven by Aboriginal direction. They are delighted to truly function as servants to the Aboriginal church.

The church at Ngukurr made the initial move to recognise Kriol as a viable language, but there have been many other entities and people who have worked to raise the prestige of Kriol. These include the Barranga School, which has a bilingual programme in Kriol and has published a large amount of reading material. Batchelor college has taught many students to write in Kriol. The Bible Society of Australia has also done much to encourage the acceptance of Kriol which is spoken by at least 20,000 Aborigines in the North of Australia. The CMS and the Anglican Diocese of the Northern Territory have actively supported the translation of the Bible into Kriol and its use in the church. Once there was linguistic evidence that Kriol was indeed a proper language, many were willing to support its use.

When the gospel is expressed in the language of the people it loses the Western packaging that it arrived in. When missionaries learn the vernacular they open themselves to local modes of thought and expression, and an understanding of the local culture. Terminology for God and religious activities is often drawn from the local religion and its activities. When the gospel is expressed in the local vernacular it communicates that God does not regard one language as superior to another. People do not have to learn the language of the dominant culture in order to pray and worship God. Nor do they have to deny their cultural background in order to identify as Christians. In the case of Aborigines who had been a minority culture in Australia and pressured to assimilate to the dominant culture using the vernacular it has given a positive message of identification and self-esteem. This goes to the heart of the matter of why Aborigines at Ngukurr say they are Aboriginal and Christian.

[585] In this context I am talking about the church and in no way ignoring the work of educators like Dorothy Meehan and Holt Thompson and others. David Woodbrige and Gumbuli Wurramara were using Kriol in the church at Ngukurr before the Bilingual program in Kriol got under way at Barranga.

The result of the change to Kriol has been not only to raise the prestige of the Kriol but also to reinforce their sense of identity as Aborigines.[586]

**Kriol Bible Translation**

In the Kriol translation every effort has been made to use terminology that communicates the original meaning clearly. It was recognised from the beginning that few readers would have access to material that would define things like High Priest, temple, altar and sacrifice. The approach to deciding what would be appropriate religious language was to discuss the problem with Aborigines from a number of different places in the Northern Territory and the Kimberleys where Kriol is spoken. The function of the examples mentioned above were described in Kriol and, to avoid biasing the results towards English, the Greek and Hebrew names were used. After discussion it was decided that the area where the temple was built should be referred to as '*serramoni pleis'* (ceremony place), and the temple as '*sigridwan haus'* (sacred house). '*Serramoni gulum Pasoba'* is used for the Passover. The altar is referred to as '*speshalwan teibul'*. The Holy of Holies in the inner sanctuary of the Jewish tabernacle and temple is '*brabli sigridwan pleis'* - the most sacred place. The High Priest is '*boswan haibala serramonimen'* - the highest of the boss ceremony men. Priests are referred to as '*serramonimen'*. Jewish men who were authorities on the Jewish law are '*laumen'* - lawmen. Prophets are referred to as '*speshalwan mesinja'* - special messenger.

The above terminology is used when Kriol speakers talk about Aboriginal religion. Sacred places, lawmen, ceremony place, ceremony men, working men, boss and high ceremony men are all part of the language that is used when describing ceremonies. In the Kriol translation its application has been extended and it has been successful in translating religious activities. Kriol speakers have shown a great deal of interest in the law of God in the Old Testament and how the Hebrews observed their law. Exodus from the Old Testament has been translated and this no doubt helps their understanding. They are fascinated by the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, which talks about why Jesus is the fulfilment of the law of Moses and its religious ceremonies, and therefore a perfect high priest who offered a perfect sacrifice. They do not find it as difficult to grapple with as the average White reader. Their knowledge of their own law perhaps gives them an insight into understanding the book of Hebrews that most Whites do not have. One of the women insisted on teaching the Sunday School children about the book of Hebrews and the children sat quietly and listened.[587]

One of the difficulties for the translation was the problem of what to use to translate the word 'God'. It was impossible to come up with an Aboriginal name, as Kriol was spoken across such a large part of Australia and what was appropriate in one area would be unrecognised elsewhere. '*Yawei det trubala God'* was an expression favoured by the Aboriginal translators when they discovered Yahweh was one of the Hebrew names for God. I recall that when one older Aboriginal man first heard of Yahweh as a name for God, he commented: 'I have often wondered what His name was.' It was decided to use the above expression where appropriate. Elsewhere 'God' would be transliterated into Kriol, as most people were familiar with the term.

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[586] Lamin Sanneh argues strongly that in Africa the use of the vernacular and the production of mother-tongue translations of the Bible contributed to the fostering of African nationalism. See his book *Encountering the West*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1993, especially chapter two.

[587] Ngukurr Christians also find the epistle to the Romans and its references to the law of great interest.

At Ngukurr it seems that the early Christians connected the missionaries' talk of a God that they called father with their belief in a spirit whom they called father. This spirit was remote, above all other spirits and said by some to be responsible for creating the Dreaming.[588] Today this spirit being is known of mainly by older Aborigines. It appears that Aborigines equated the two as they say 'We knew God before the missionaries came.' The term '*Dedi la Top*' (father in the sky) is often used to address God in prayer and to refer to him in preaching. Another expression that is often used of God in preaching at Ngukurr is, '*God is the true Dreaming.*' Barnabas Roberts[589] who came to the mission as a child in 1908, used to use this when he was preaching and especially when pointing out that God belonged to Aborigines, Whites and all races.[590] It was decided not to use these terms in the translation as they were used mainly in the Roper area. The terms used in the translation needed to be acceptable over the large area where Kriol was spoken.

The Kriol translation has made every effort to convey theological and religious terms in an accurate manner that conveys their meaning. It was not possible to have conferences or workshops to discuss every theological term, though this has been used where possible. After a book of the Bible has been translated, it is circulated in manuscript form for comments and to establish that it is understood. Any needed revision occurs before a specialist consultant checks it with native speakers.

The Epistle to the Ephesians, chapter one, verses four to ten, is a passage that contains many theological terms.[591] I have given the passage in English and Kriol in order to demonstrate how some theological terms are translated. The English is from the New International Version and the Kriol from the Kriol Baibul.

> *(4) For He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love (5) he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ in accordance with his pleasure and will (6) to the praise of his glorious grace, which he had freely given us in the One he loves. (7) In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. (9) And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, (10) to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.*

**Holi Baibul**

> *(4) Wal bifo God bin meigim dis wel, imbin pikimat wi blanga joinimap wi langa Jisas Krais en meigim wi jidan im ronwan pipul nomo garram enijing rong.*

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[588] This is discussed in chapter nine.

[589] Barnabas Roberts is the father of Silas and Philip Roberts, two well known Ngukurr men. Barnabas was able to read and write, contrary to what Douglas Lockwood claims in *I the Aboriginal*, Rigby, Adelaide, 1962, p. 65.

[590] Personal communication from John Sandefur.

[591] I am aware that John Harris uses the same passage in his article 'North Australian Kriol and the Kriol "Holi Baibul"' in *Australian Aborigines and Christian Missions*, 1988. It is an excellent passage to deal with theological terms in a short amount of text and I have chosen it for that reason.

*(5) Longtaim God bin jinggabat blanga meigim wi san blanga im, dumaji imbin meigim we im san wen imbin joinimap wi langa Jisas Krais, dumaji imbin gudbinji blanga dum lagijat, en imbin meigim im ronwan plen.*

*(6,7) Wal wi garra preisim God en gibit im teingks, dumaji imbin abum detkain filing blanga wi, en imbin shoum wi det filing blanga im wen imbin gibit wi ola enijing friwan thru Jisas Krais det brabliwan san blanga im, dumaji wen Jisas Krais bin weistim im blad, imbin meigim wi fri, en God bin larramgo wi fri brom ol detlot nogudbala ting weya wi bin oldei dumbat.*

*Trubala ai dalim yumob. God im brabli kainbala, (8) en imbin shoum wi im kainbala brabliwei. En God im sabi ebrijing du, (9) imbin dum wanim imbin wandi dum, en imbin shoum wi det plen blanga im weya imbin jinggabat blanga dum garram Jisas Krais. Nobodi bin sabi det plan basdam. Bat wi sabi na. (10) Wi sabi wen det rait taim garra kaman, God garra joinimap ebrijing weya imbin meigim langa dis wel an langa hebin, en Jisas Krais na garra jidan boswan blanga olabat.*

Theological terms, their Kriol equivalent and an English translation are given below:

**predestined -** Longtaim God bin jinggabat blanga meigim wi san blanga im, (A long time ago God decided to make us his children).

**adopted as his sons -** meigim wi san blanga im (he made us his children).

**glorious grace -** imbin abum detkain filing blanga wi, en imbin shoum wi det filing blanga im wen imbin gibit wi ola enijing friwan thru Jisas Krais det brabliwan san blanga im, (he had that special kind of generous feeling for us and he showed that feeling when he gave us the free gift through Jesus). The whole passage needs to be read in Kriol to understand the full meaning in context.

**redemption through his blood -** dumaji wen Jesus Krias bin weistim im blad, imbin meigim wi fri. (Because Jesus Christ poured out his blood he caused us to be free). Note weistim in Kriol means pour.

**forgiveness of sins -** Larramgo wi fri brom ol detlot nogudbala ting weya wi bin oldei dumbat (he let us go free from the wrong we had done).

**Under one Head, even Christ -** en Jisas Krais na garra jidan boswan blanga olabat (Jesus Christ will be the boss of everything).

As in many other languages worldwide the Bible has proved itself to be translatable into Kriol in a way that communicates its meaning accurately. Clarity of the text is important as the meaning was often obscure and not understood when only available in English. If the translation is of a poor quality and does not communicate well, little is gained from having access to it.

The Scriptures in Kriol have been well received. People make comments like ‘it is so clear all I need to do is read it to the congregation. I don’t need to explain it.’ This has given rise to a new style of preaching where the focus is primarily on what the text says and not on explaining the meaning of the English before you get to the meaning of the text. When the Bible was only available in English, most people found it difficult to understand. Occasionally the comment is heard when someone has read some of the Scripture in Kriol: ‘It is too hard.’ On investigation this was found to mean that now the person understood the teaching of Jesus, it was too demanding to follow.

The Kriol *Holi Baibul* has generated a lot of interest and many people have been keen to learn to read it. This suggests that the translation is idiomatic due to the large amount of Aboriginal involvement in the translation. No translation ever takes place unless an Aboriginal translator was present. Every effort was made and still is made to avoid imposing White expressions and ideas on how it is expressed in Kriol. At the same time stringent checks for accuracy of translation have taken place again with Aborigines assisting the consultant.

## CONCLUSION

There are three things that need to be dealt with in this section. Firstly what does the data tell us about how Ngukurr Christians are exercising agency in their church life? Secondly does the data reveal any of the presuppositions that they are bringing to contextualising the gospel? Finally can any general tendency in how they approach contextualising be discerned from the above data?

### How they are exercising agency?

The above data highlights three ways in which they are exercising agency. The change from English formal Anglican services to a situation where everything is in Kriol, Bible studies, Bible camp and fellowship meetings are now run in a way that conforms to an Aboriginal way of doing things has been a gradual one. It was not a case of when they were given full control of church affairs of them saying that from today this is how we are going to do things. Rather it has been slow, a case of feeling their way and gaining momentum as their confidence grew that they could do it in a way that they felt comfortable with.

The only master plan that I have discerned emerging is that the Reverend Wurramara has for many years been convinced that a strong Aboriginal church must do everything in their mother tongue. This includes Scripture, singing, prayers, liturgy and all other church business. His other conviction is that leadership must be in the hands of the local congregation.[592]

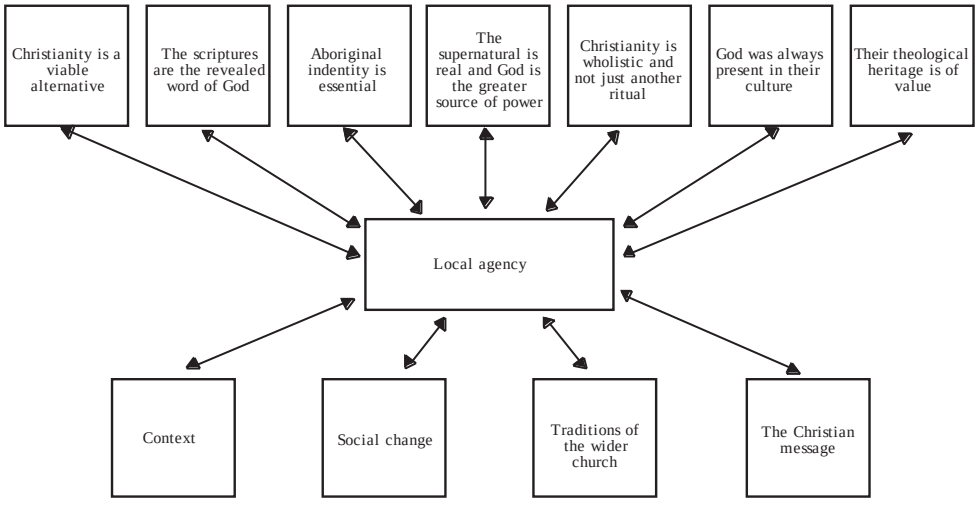


**Figure 10** Model of contextual theology as practised at Ngukurr.

[592] CMS MA, Series 66, Box 69, Folder 27, Report on conference on ministry in Aboriginal Communities of East Arnhem Land, December 9 and 10, 1983. At a conference of Arnhem Land Anglican Churches in December 1983 at Numbulwar all the churches, with the exception of Oenpelli, said that they wanted Aboriginal clergy for all their churches and that no more White replacements were required.

Secondly the move to do things in a way that makes use of Aboriginal notions of time, location and so on, demonstrates that they have exercised agency to identify as Aboriginal Christians. While they have assimilated things like electronic bands and literacy skills in a situation of change, they identify as Aboriginal Christians and see no need to conduct their church activities in a European way.

A further factor that has contributed to their successful exercise of agency, is an outside factor, the Elcho Island revival movement. This started in 1979 and from the beginning it was led by Aborigines. It had a big impact on the Arnhem Land churches and demonstrated that Aborigines could exercise agency in how they conducted their church activities and that things could be done in an Aboriginal way. Their visit to Ngukurr gave impetus to the changes that Ngukurr Aborigines were experimenting with.

**Presuppositions**

In changing their church life to one that reflects their way of doing things they are contextualising it so that it becomes part of their way of life today. While the focus of this chapter has been on establishing that the local church does exercise agency in running its affairs and contextualising its activities. Some implicit presuppositions have emerged and these will now be identified.

Their interest in using their language and running most of their church activities in a way that uses Aboriginal notions of timing, occasion, location, participation and creativity demonstrates that an important concern to them is their identity as Aborigines.

The discussion about what name to use for God and the reference to their claim that they knew God before the missionaries came, reveals that this is a presupposition that shapes their approach to Christianity. Likewise the healing that is described as part of ‘Fellowship’ points to another presupposition that God is a God of power.

Their enthusiasm for having the Scriptures in Kriol and the authority that they seem to give the Bible is pointing towards a presupposition that Scripture is the revealed Word of God and is to be taken seriously. It also suggests that the evangelical theology of the missionaries influences the presuppositions that they bring to contextualisation. Their continued use of the lectionary each year shows that they have a high regard for orthodoxy and this too is part of their local theology.

Their presupposition that Christianity is holistic is not so clearly discernible from the above data. It is there to the extent that they are concerned to make their practice of Christianity as Aboriginal as possible.

The four elements that Stephen Bevans identifies as important to contextual theology and different ways of doing it are clearly present. Their concern to do things in an Aboriginal way demonstrates the importance of their cultural context. Awareness of social change is demonstrated by their ability to change the way things are done, and by the way they have assimilated things like electronic bands, and Bible studies that require literacy skills. At the same time they have introduced Aboriginal notions of how things should be done in their situation.

The Christian message is part of what is happening, as this is what is being contextualised. It is present in their use of the lectionary, and in that they regard the Bible as an important resource when discussing how they live as Christians in an Aboriginal community. Their awareness of the wider church is represented by their continual involvement with the Anglican Church and its teachings, their interaction with Uniting Church members in Arnhem land involved in the Elcho Revival movement,

and their involvement with para church organisations like the Bible Society, WBT, Nungalinya College and their on going relationship with the CMS.

It is difficult to identify a general tendency in how they approach contextualisation from the above data. The attitude of Ngukurr people to the Bible suggests that they could be following a translation approach and at times they probably are. Their approach of dealing with things as they arise, introducing change over a period of time, waiting for everyone to agree, experimenting with one thing and then revisiting it later suggests that perhaps praxis best describes what is happening. This will be examined in more detail after the data in the following chapter has been presented.

It is now appropriate in the next chapter to examine their Christian beliefs as these influence what they bring to the task of contextualising the Christian message.

## Chapter Nine

# NGUKURR CONTEXTUALISED CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

'The Anglican Aboriginal Church has not yet produced a theologian.' This is a comment that has been made from time to time in relation to the Aboriginal Churches. If this means that none of the churches has yet produced a person who has a degree in theology that is true. If it is referring to the absence of written documents setting out an Aboriginal theology then there is no theology. However I would dispute that the absence of a professional Aboriginal theologian or the absence of written theological texts means the absence of theology.

In this chapter I will start by discussing what is meant by local contextual theologies. This will be followed by an examination of Ngukurr Christian belief. I will limit myself to dealing with their understanding of God, healing, peace, moral code, sin, redemption, payback/sorcery, death and the after life, the spirit world and power. Then I will discuss their response to God in terms of the sacraments, worship and discipleship. This will be followed by a discussion of ongoing contextualisation and how the next generation will probably do things differently. In conclusion I will discuss the presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians bring to contextual theology and in particular those that can be identified from the material presented in this chapter. I will also refer to the role of the local agent as the catalyst in contextualisation of the gospel at Ngukurr and what role context, social change, the gospel and the wider church have in what is happening. Finally I will identify any emerging trends in their approach to contextual theology.

There are some ambiguities in some of their beliefs but I will not attempt to reconcile ambiguities that they have not clarified and reconciled at this point of time. There is at Ngukurr an emerging local theology and as such it will continue to develop. It is not as developed and sophisticated as the theology in *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, but it is a local theology.[593] My concern has been understanding how they are contextualising the gospel and the beliefs that shape their local theology, not what their beliefs should be, or how the ambiguities could be clarified.

### Local Theology

Ngukurr local theology has some similarities with what Gustavo Gutiérrez says of theology in a seminal article 'Towards a Theology of Liberation':[594]

> *First of all let us examine what we mean by theology. Etymologically speaking, theology is a treatise or discourse about God-which really does not tell us very much. The classic meaning of theology is an intellectual understanding of the faith-that is,*

[593] Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology*, Harper Collins Religious, Blackburn, Victoria, 1997.
[594] Gustava Gutiérez, 'Toward a Theology of Liberation' (July 1968), in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, ed Alfred T. Hennelly, S. J., Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1990, pp. 62-3.

> *the effort of the human intelligence to comprehend revelation and the vision of faith. But faith means not only truths to be affirmed, but also an existential stance, an attitude, a commitment to God and to human beings. Thus faith understands the whole of life theologically as faith, hope, and charity.*

Gutiérrez argues that when we talk about theology we are not talking about an abstract and timeless truth. Instead we are talking about an existential stance which tries to understand the commitment to God by faith, that expresses itself in love of God and neighbour.

If faith is commitment to God and human beings, and theology is the intellectual understanding of faith, then faith is an understanding of this commitment. Faith is more than affirming that God exists. It is faith that tells us that God loves us and expects a response that demonstrates love of God and neighbour.

Because faith is above all an existential stance, Gutiérrez argues that it admits to differentiation according to different circumstances and different approaches to commitment to God and human beings.[595]

If theology is an understanding of an existential stance then it is progressive, as understanding of the commitment varies according to the situation. The commitment to God and neighbour is not the same today as it was centuries ago. So if theology is the intellectual understanding of a commitment and the nature of the commitment changes with time then theology must continuously accompany that commitment.

Gutiérrez in the above article is pointing to what later became known as contextual local theologies.

Schreiter has developed this approach further in his book *Constructing Local Theologies.* He defines local theology as the product of the dynamic interaction among gospel, church and culture, and that is facilitated by the local community as theologians. In identifying the local community as theologians Schreiter reminds us that local contextual theology is for the local community itself, to enhance their understanding of their Christian commitment. He also points out that the expression of faith should make a difference in peoples lives otherwise '*it is a mere beating of air*'.[596] He further cautions us against regarding everything that a community does as theology. To do so would make theology an empty shell. Schreiter suggests that, when possible, use should be made of a professional theologian, but care should be taken that the professional theologian does not introduce a new hegemony.

Bevans when discussing the contextual model he identifies as praxis, has also developed the idea that theology comes out of understanding one's Christian commitment. He expresses it this way:

> *Within this way of understanding, theology becomes much more than simply thinking clearly and meaningfully. It becomes a way of articulating one's faith that comes out of one's Christian commitment to a particular way of acting and sets the agenda for an even more thoughtful and committed plan of action in the future.*[597]

For the Praxis model of contextual theology the central insight is that theology is done not simply by providing relevant expressions of Christian faith but also by commitment to Christian action.

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[595] ibid., p.64.

[596] Robert Schrieter, *Constructing Local Theologies,* Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, p. 16.

[597] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology,* Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 65.

Thus a local theology is shaped by people giving expression to their Christian commitment to God and their neighbour in a way that is appropriate to their situation. The expression consists of actions and words. The actions are the outworking of their faith in their community. The words come from discussing what their faith is and means in a particular situation, and reflecting on the action.

Many local theologies are emerging around the world. Some have been formally written down and published. Many have not. At Ngukurr a number of their theological beliefs are in written form. These can be found in the Kriol prayer book and in the many songs in Kriol. In English they can be found in the prayer book. Aboriginal society was an oral society and knowledge was passed on orally. Many of the beliefs of Ngukurr Christians are expressed in discussions at Bible studies sermons and informal discussions, but have not been given written form. When Aborigines at Ngukurr say they were taught about the Christian faith by older Christians they are not only referring to what the older Christians told them. They also mean what they learnt by watching these older Christians live as Christians. In Aboriginal society an important way of learning is by watching someone else do something. My understanding of their local theology has come from listening to them, watching them in action, discussing it with them and from their songs, sermons and prayer book.

The Ngukurr church is not practising their Christianity in a situation where they are new converts. They already have a heritage of Christianity that can be called a local theology. There are two aspects to this local theology.

The first is the evangelical theology and teachings of the Anglican church that they received from the CMS missionaries. This is what they accepted and what the missionaries taught for sixty years. As they are more concerned with practice than dogma, they are not primarily concerned with articulating the dogma and interacting with it in an abstract manner. They accept it as received in the same way that the teachings of the Dreaming are accepted as received. Much of this theology is maintained and taught by the minister's regular use of the lectionary. The lectionary not only identifies the main events on the Christian calendar but also ensures that the main beliefs of the church are taught regularly. To this they have added the evangelical interpretation that the missionaries taught.

As well, they have the heritage of how the early Ngukurr Christians understood the gospel and contextualised it into their lives. Today's middle aged and older Christians often comment that it was Christians from the previous generation such as James Japnama, Joshua, Barnabas, Elizabeth and Deborah who taught them what they know about Christianity.

The second aspect is largely concerned with the practice of Christianity today. As this is not written down it consists of oral statements and what can be learnt from what they are actually doing. This approach to theology is largely concerned with concrete issues involved in living out their faith in today's context and is ongoing. It is from their practise of Christianity that we can learn more of what their beliefs are and what they are contextualising.

In broad terms their approach can be described as starting from an awareness of a particular situation and the teachings of the gospel and the church. After talking it through over a period of time, they decide on an appropriate Christian behaviour. This is often reconsidered and modified later. Much of the contextualisation happens informally as a person or family decides that a certain behaviour is appropriate for them. Others become aware of it and consider whether or not it is appropriate. Often

the same issue will emerge during a Bible study and be considered by the group. Occasionally a more formal discussion will take place on issues, such as has occurred on marriages and ceremonies.

**Understanding of God**

I have chosen to start with their understanding of God as this is an important part of any theology and influences in many ways how they approach other issues.

The terms that Kriol speakers use to address and refer to God tell us something of their understanding of God. In prayer, God is addressed as, *Dedi God* (Father God*), Dedi God la Top* (Father God Above) and *God*. The terms used to refer to God in preaching, teaching and discussion are *Dijan la Top* (The One Who is Above), *Yawei det Trubala God* (Yahweh the True God), *Dedi God* (Father God), *Tru Drimin* (True Dreaming) and by the term *God* which has been taken over into Kriol.

*God is the True Dreaming*

The expression 'God is the True Dreaming' was a favoured expression of the first generation of Christians at Ngukurr, and I have heard it used on a number of occasions over the last twenty years, though it does not appear to be as common today. It is used to describe God as the Creator, the source of origins. He made the earth and the heavens, the features of the earth, people, plants, animals, languages and gave people their country to look after. I have been told that God must have created people out of dust because when a person dies their body returns to dust and not to what their dreaming is made of (kangaroo, snake and so on).

Their approach is that religion is revealed in the Scriptures and you accept that as authoritative, just as many Aborigines accept the authenticity of the mythology of the Dreaming. A number of the core Christians do see creation as a question of accepting that God created the world and not the Dreaming. Most of the Ngukurr Christians regard the biblical story of creation as an alternative to the Dreaming rather than as a universal that goes back beyond the Aboriginal creation stories.

The expression '*God is the True Dreaming'* focuses attention on God as creator. When referring to *God as the True Dreaming* they usually go on to state emphatically that God made us, not *The Dreaming*. The early Ngukurr Christians had taken the term Dreaming which in traditional religion is used to account for the origins and continuance of everything and decided that this was a fitting way to refer to God as the originator and sustainer of everything. There is a sense of universalism as God is credited with the creation of other races such as Chinese and Caucasians. God is regarded as being responsible for the creation of the wider world rather than just for the creation of their immediate area.

The first generation of Christians at Ngukurr and some of the next generation also used the expression *God is the True Dreaming* when advocating their view that Christianity was preferred to the traditional religion. They regard the Christian faith as a viable alternative religion for Aborigines.

In practice this results in many of them feeling it is no longer necessary to participate in ceremonies as they now worship and follow God who is the creator. An alternative minority position at Ngukurr is that God created the Dreaming and gave the ceremonies to Aborigines.[598] After nearly thirty years of Aboriginal leadership and control of the church, most of the church members still see the two religions as separate and regard Christianity as a viable alternative to traditional religion.

[598] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tape no. 6. This is very much a minority position in the church.

Their position that Christians do not participate in ceremonies and that God and the Dreaming are different has been both challenged and affirmed by other churches. On the one hand the other Anglican Aboriginal church leaders agree with Ngukurr. On the other hand their view has been challenged by some (but not all) Uniting Church Aborigines and some lecturers at Nungalinya College. Ngukurr and the Anglican Aboriginal Christians have remained steadfast in their conviction that the two are different. Theologically they point to passages such as John chapter fourteen verse six:

> *Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me.'*

They interpret this as teaching that Jesus is not one way among many, but the way. This is consistent with the evangelical exclusive theology that they have adopted.

Amongst the Christian men who see them as two religions and that loyalty should only be given to one, are men who have been fully initiated into the ceremonies. Their decision to be loyal to Christianity is not an uninformed one. This position has been maintained in the face of a renewal of traditional Aboriginal religion in the area.

The way in which the term, *God is the True Dreaming*, was used, reveals that they perceived Christianity as a viable alternative to Aboriginal religion. The *expression Yahweh the True God* is discussed in chapter eight. The ones referring to God as Father are discussed below. *Dijan la Top* is simply used to refer to God above.

*They knew God before the missionaries came*

A number of people at Ngukurr have said that they knew God before the missionaries came.[599] Before the missionaries arrived they knew of a spirit that was above all the other spirits and the Dreaming. It appears to have been rather remote and I am unaware of any ceremonies connected with it.[600] There are some variations in what I have been told and this could be due to the fact that the people who became long term residents at the Roper River Mission, were from a number of different tribes. Those who have told me about this spirit are the middle aged and elderly children of the first generation of mission people and are adamant that it came from their parents and not the missionaries.

Cherry Daniels told me that before Christianity came to Australia, Aborigines believed that there was a place where an important *Bangkawa* spirit (an important boss spirit) was all the time. They did not know who it was. When Christianity came they recognised God as *Bangkawa.* Other tribal groups in the Roper area who believed in *Bangkawa* were the Nunggubuyu, Ngandi, Wandarrang, Rembarranga and Ngalakan people. Cherry is insistent that the old people told her about *Bangkawa* and that the people made the connection between the two when they heard what the missionaries were saying. Cherry insisted that the Christian term for God, *Dedi la Top,* refers also to *Bangkawa.* She said He had a lot of names, but did not name them. I understood her to mean different languages used different names to refer to *Bangkawa.*

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[599] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tapes nos., 1, 5, 6 and 10. Lance Tremlett a CMS missionary told me that he had been told similar things about this spirit on a number of occasions.

[600] As a woman I was much less likely to be told of any ceremonies or rituals in relation to this spirit. The church preferred that I had little to do with ceremonies and I respected their wishes.

Cherry also told me that before the missionaries came people believed that when a person died, their spirit went to a big hole. If the person was bad the spirit would stop there at that bad place and it could also walk around on the earth again. If the person had been a good person their spirit went to a good place further on in the sky and that was where *Bangkawa* was. Joshua's son Andrew gave me a similar version.[601] In chapter seven Dirridjuna's account is recorded of these two places and how the good place is in the care of a dragon fly and the bad place is in the care of the blue tongue lizard.

The story of how Cherry's grandfather converted to Christianity makes a connection between *Bangawa* and God.

> *He and a group were in the mission area when they met a man riding a horse. It was Joshua, one of the early converts to Christianity. He told them that he had come to take them to the mission so they could have teaching.[602] That night they saw a picture of the crucifixion. They looked at Jesus on the cross and cried for him. Her grandfather's group asked why are they killing him? It was explained to them. For two whole days they talked. Then they spoke. We have a story like that. We believe. We have something like that. 'Dijei wi Dedi.' Cherry comments that they called* Bangkawa *daddy before missionary time.[603]*

Cherry believes that when her grandfather and relatives heard the story of God the Father and Jesus, they joined their story and Christianity together. She further comments that a lot of people believed even though they were not baptised or confirmed.[604] The above account is interesting as it was the one of two occasions on which I was given a story about how the old people became Christians. The other is the story of the conversion of Wallace which is given in a previous chapter where healing is discussed.

Cherry's account is the fullest description of *Bangkawa* that I have been given. Another woman reported that Dinah, one of Joshua's daughters, told her that before the missionaries came, somebody was there who was higher than all the Dreaming, and that we call that one *Daddy God*. A number of Joshua's children are still alive and have not contradicted this. One of Joshua's grandaughters told me that before the gospel came they knew there was a waiting place for spirits and that one important spirit was there. They believed that the spirit could see them from where it was in the sky. When the old people heard the gospel it was like finding the next piece of the story. The grandaughter also commented that different languages have different names for that important spirit and that the old people had believed before the missionaries came that an important spirit was above the Dreaming and he had sent the Dreaming spirits to this earth. Reverend Wurramara has also stated that God was present in the area before Aborigines came to it.[605]

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[601] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tapes no. 5, Side 2, and no. 6, Side 1.

[602] NTGA NTRS 1102/P1, vol. 1, Mission Reports and Station Council Minutes of Roper River 1936-1973. There are a number of references to Aborigines using Bible pictures to talk to Aborigines about Jesus from 1936 onwards. Joshua is mentioned in September and October of 1944, and as preaching in December 1944 and January 1945. Joshua is acknowledged as bridging the gap between missionaries and Aborigines in the report for March 1945.

[603] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tape no. 5, Side 2.

[604] ibid.

[605] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tape no. 1, Side 2.

An early report from the mission refers to a *Good Spirit on Top.* I quote from the 1908 annual report which was written a few months after the mission commenced and quotes Mr Huthnance as writing[606]:[607]

> *The blacks have grasped at least the primary truth that there is a God (Good Spirit on Top) and also of a life after death. They are, but grown-up children and need firmness with kindness. 'We all believe in the black man here: he is a lovable, simple, ignorant child, as easily led astray as a child, as responsive as a child…'*

While it could be possible that the missionaries equated the two, it is more probable that Aborigines in the Roper River area made the equation. Given their adamant claim that they knew God before the missionaries came I think they connected the two. The above quote does not suggest that the early missionaries gave much credit to Aborigines for being able to think intelligently or credited them with having any concept of God before the missionaries arrived with news of His existence. In the Roper area it is a firmly held belief that they knew of God before the missionaries came. It is possible that looking back at the past, Ngukurr Christians constructed this belief of God and *Bangkawa* being the same. However, Joshua, a leading Christian at Ngukurr during his lifetime, and who is reported as endorsing this belief, was baptised in 1921 and so goes back to the early history of the mission.

James Noble, an Aboriginal missionary from Yarrabah is credited locally with bringing the gospel to the Ngukurr area. I wonder what contribution he made to the discussion about *Bangkawa*, but there is no record of what he said and taught

It is likely that because the Ngukurr Aborigines concluded that the God the missionaries were talking about was the same as *Bangkawa la Top* that this has influenced their local theology. This could be why they have not sought to integrate God into the Dreaming. They have located His participation in their history in a different place. When they say *God is the True Dreaming,* they seem to be saying, God is the true creator and separate from the Dreaming. This could be why they regard Christianity as a separate religion and not part of the Dreaming and the ceremonies. If this perception of two different religions was only the view of the missionaries it would probably have disappeared by now, twenty seven years after Aborigines have become responsible for St Matthew's Church.

People who practise both religions and go back and forth between the two, are referred to by some Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians as 'two way'. It is not used to describe people who have their sons circumcised, which is regarded as an open and public ceremony that all boys go through, at the appropriate age. Nor is 'two way' used to describe people who are Christians and go and watch the ceremonies. Rather it is used of Aborigines who practise both religions. Ngukurr Aborigines who are strongly committed to the traditional religion encourage those who are not strongly committed to either religion to make a strong commitment to the traditional religion. The Ngukurr approach of seeing the religions as separate, is part of their evangelical heritage. However they have chosen to continue with it since they gained control of the church in 1971.

Many Ngukurr Christians would say that the Dreaming spirits do exist, but before they did not know the true story. Some believe that the Dreaming spirits were created by *Bangkawa* who was over them. Others hold the view that stories of the Dreaming are just stories and hence have no spiritual

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607 CMS MA, Annual report of the Church Mission Association Victorian Branch, 1908, p. 36.

power, but should be preserved as stories for their children. While a number of them as mentioned above regard it as a case of giving loyalty to either God or the Dreaming.

From a Western point of view it is problematic for Ngukurr Christians to say they believe *Bangkawa* and God are the same, that Bangkawa made the Dreaming Spirits and yet regard Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion as separate religions. This kind of ambiguity is not a problem for them and they feel no need to reconcile the two. There are similar tensions in the Stories about the Dreaming such as knowing when the main actors are functioning as the Ancestral spirits or as the totem that represents them. Aborigines feel no need to reconcile the two.

The above discussion demonstrates that Roper River Aborigines did not accept the missionaries message passively. Rather, reflecting on what they knew about a good boss spirit, they made a connection between the two. As the missionaries were concerned to take primitive Aborigines to a higher way by Christianising and civilizing them, it seems reasonable to suggest that it was the Aborigines who did the contextualising.

**God as Father**

The terms in most common usage in relation to God as father, are *Dedi God*, *Dijan la Top* and God. God is perceived as being like a father. This is in agreement with the teaching of Jesus in the New Testament when the disciples asked him to teach them to pray. The Lord's prayer teaches the followers of Jesus to address God as Father. Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara in a sermon on prayer on the seventh of October 1979 described this prayer as a very important prayer for Christians to know by heart before being baptised. It is Jesus' prayer and in it he taught his disciples to address God as Father. The prayer also teaches us that God's name is *nyukurr* (holy, sacred). [608]

In another sermon during October 1979 Gumbuli taught that God acts like a Father as He hears our prayers and responds in his way. He refers to Jesus saying if a son asks for a fish will his father give him a snake?[609] Gumbuli says that if an Aboriginal man catches a lot of fish he will give his son a fish. God is like that. We are his children and God will not treat his piccaninny in a bad way. God is a Heavenly Father. We are all his children in a spiritual sense. It makes no difference if we are old, or belong to different races. This points to acceptance of the universalism of Christianity. It includes all people regardless of colour or age.

It is interesting to note that while God is constantly referred to as *Dedi God*, He has not been given a skin group. The reason for this appears to be that if he was he would only be the father of one sub-section group and not everybody. If God had a skin group, it would take away the universalism of Christianity that is appealing to Aboriginal Christians in Arnhem Land.[610] While they found it necessary to give the missionaries 'skin groups' in order to relate to them, they put God as father in a universal category where no skin group is needed to relate to him.

[608] *Nyukurr* is the word that is used to indicate that a particular place or item is sacred. It is is also used to describe communion.
[609] Gospel of Matthew, chapter 7, verse 10.
[610] Ian Keen, *Knowledge and Secrecy in an Aboriginal Society*, Clarendon Press, London, 1994. Keen in this book discusses how the universalism of Christianity is attractive to some Aboriginal Christians.

**Jesus**

Jesus is known as God's Son and boss (Lord). He is also referred to as *baba* (sibling) but has not been given a skin group as he is everyone's sibling or brother. Sibling refers to Jesus in the primary sense of family. This is in keeping with the previously mentioned teaching that all Christians are God's children. Jesus is God's son and can therefore be referred to as the sibling of all Christians in a spiritual sense. While the term *baba* is used to refer to Jesus, Jesus is seen as different to ordinary men and women. As God's son he is both God and man. It is accepted that God is his father and Mary his mother and that He rose from the dead three days after he was crucified, and forty days later ascended to heaven. They believe that Jesus will come again.

At Bible Camp in 1996 Dirridjuna from Numbulwar, spoke to the group and drew a parallel between a belief that the Nunggubuyu people had and the resurrection of Jesus.[611]

He was taught when he was young, that a man called Nyarlik who was respected by his people had died at his country near Mumba Mumba. People thought that he would rise from the dead when the full moon appeared. Nyarlik did not come back to life, nor did he do so on subsequent full moons. Diridjuna heard the story about Jesus and his rising from the dead and discovered later that it happened at the time of a full moon. He realised that both stories had some similarities. He did not say that they were the same story, but that they were similar and that the Christian one was the one that was fulfilled.[612] He seemed to be suggesting that the traditional story was pointing to something that would happen later, but never did.[613]

Jesus is also described as a healer and worker of wonders. There is a strong interest in Jesus' work as a healer as recorded in the New Testament. Aboriginal society in the Ngukurr area has traditional healers who are an important part of their society. Jesus as a healer is something that they could easily relate to as power over illness is a subject of great interest. There is also great interest in the power of Jesus over spirits. It is interesting that one of the most popular Bible stories is the story of Jesus casting many spirits out of a man from the region of Gerasenes, and into a herd of pigs.[614] This suggests that an important focus for them in the identity of Jesus, is his power in the supernatural realm.

One aspect of their understanding of Jesus is concerned with him as a healer and as one who has power over spirits and sorcery. This appears to be meeting a felt need. Jesus is seen as having power over the things that threaten their lives. In this situation the issues that arise from their experience of the supernatural world influence what they see as important in their theology of Jesus. This view of Jesus has become more evident since Ngukurr ceased being a mission.

However it would be wrong to assume that other aspects of Jesus life and teaching are ignored. Easter is celebrated as the major event in the Christian calendar. The nativity, baptism of Jesus, the ministry of Jesus and his anticipated return, are also taught. A number of sermons are preached on the teaching of Jesus each year. They possess a broad understanding of Christian belief about Jesus and about his teaching and this is what they are contextualising.

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[611] Dirridjuna, Arnhem Land Anglican Bible Camp 1996, Nungalinya College, Darwin 1996, video tape.
[612] ibid. I also have an audio tape of Dirridjuna speaking and have his permission to quote him.
[613] Dirridjuna, ibid.
[614] Gospel of Mark, chapter 5, verses 1-2.

**Holy Spirit**

The Holy Spirit is associated with power. I have never heard a kinship term used in reference to the Holy Spirit as with Jesus and God the Father. The Holy Spirit is associated with coldness, a good concept in regard to health at Ngukurr. When your 'blood is cold' it means you are well. Several people who experienced healing through Christian ministry, described the experience as one of a feeling of coldness entered their bodies.[615] The Holy Spirit belongs with God the Father and Jesus. The Holy Spirit is more powerful than other spirits and does not appear to be identified with other spirits who inhabit the spirit world.

The three members of the Godhead are accepted as what the missionaries taught them and as part of the teachings of the Anglican church. There appears to be no debate at Ngukurr at this stage about the three members of the trinity as there has been elsewhere in the church throughout history. They are more interested in the practice of Christianity than in abstract doctrines. The doctrine of the trinity and all the debate that surrounds it in western theology is not an important concern.

The above discussion of their understanding reveals that they have articulated Christian beliefs about God the Father, Jesus and the Holy Spirit and God as creator. Their beliefs about God in relation to healing and the realm of the supernatural, points to a belief in God as a God of power. It is also clear that they claim to have had some knowledge of God before the missionaries came.

**Healing**

In the previous chapter the importance of healing for the Ngukurr community and the church was discussed. When a person becomes ill and does nor recover, explanations are looked for. Is the illness caused by sorcery, the breaking of a taboo or offending a spirit? If so it needs to be dealt with by a healer so that harmony can be restored. Healing has emerged as an accepted part of church life under Aboriginal leadership. Their culture acknowledged a need for some illnesses to be dealt with on a supernatural level. Western medicine does not deal with spiritual causes of illness. For Christians their practice of healing is influenced by their understanding of God and his power. They are aware that Jesus healed the sick and commanded his followers to do so.

When talking about Jesus they sometimes use the word *klebabala* (worker of wonders) to describe what He did. This is a term used to describe traditional healers and the wonders they sometimes perform. An example of such a wonder was an occasion when a lot of people saw a star or a light come from the east and stopped over a house. It entered a male person who felt strange from that moment. Laja saw it and removed the star. A lot of people were watching and they saw it fly up into a tree. The people watching found a red crystal stone in the tree.[616] While the wonders that Jesus performed were different, a similarity between Jesus and *Klebabala* men when they do good works was identified. A similarity was seen between the two and the meeting of felt needs. The difference between Christians and traditional healers revolves around power. They argue that the use of spirit familiars in healing is not appropriate for Christians.

Acknowledgement that it is God's power that heals is important to them. When they are involved in healing, while water, or oil may be used the important element is the laying on of hands (placing their hands on sick persons) and praying and asking God to heal. Rebecca told me that whenever her

[615] Refer to discussion on healing in chapter seven.
[616] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tape no. 9.

parents healed someone, they always told them that it was God's power that had healed them. Gumbuli is always careful to acknowledge that it is God that heals people and not him. When the laying on of hands and prayer for healing is part of a Fellowship meeting, there is an atmosphere of great reverence as they sing songs of worship to God. The focus is on God, the power of God and the expectation that he will heal. It is important for them to make clear that it is God's power that is involved and no other power. This practice of their faith also reveals something of their understanding of God. God's power is not to be confused with the power of traditional healers. They do not deny that traditional healers have power to heal. Rather they perceive a choice to be made and if Christians are involved in healing it is God's power that is at work.

As the role of healing in the church has emerged under Aboriginal leadership it is difficult to say that missionaries have persuaded them to see God's power in such exclusive terms. Rather it seems to come from their concept of God and His power. Also healing seems to have emerged to meet a need that was not often addressed by missionaries. Missionaries usually addressed healing in terms of germs and medicines but not at a supernatural level. There were times when they prayed fervently for God to heal when medicine did not achieve healing or in times of crisis.[617] Aborigines looked for supernatural answers for the cause while happily accepting western medicines for the symptoms.

Their approach to healing reveals a belief in a God who is powerful and able to deal with supernatural causes. It also reveals that they regard Christianity as a viable alternative to the traditional religion rather than bringing the two together.

**Retribution**

Ngukurr Christians do not view their culture or White culture through rose coloured glasses. In seeking to allow the gospel to permeate the whole of their culture they do not accept that their culture goes unchallenged by the gospel. The practice of payback is something they see as challenged by the gospel.

When a family suffers a misfortune it is often referred to as payback for something a family member is accused of doing in the past. It often goes back to something that happened at a ceremony more than twenty years ago. Often it is handled by getting someone to work sorcery against the person accused of payback. Thus it is often not a once only event, but a cumulative back and forth of payback.

Most Aborigines feel that the only way to deal with payback successfully is to arrange a payback against the suspected perpetrators even though they regard it as socially harmful. Ngukurr Christians are of the opinion that if they engage in payback they are denying God as all powerful and that they are not fulfilling the teaching of Jesus to love their neighbours and enemies. One person told me of how her family wanted revenge for the death of a family member and the grief that the family had experienced. One night at Fellowship, the Aboriginal minister in his talk, had referred to a Bible passage that taught that vengeance belonged to God.[618] After reflecting on this, the person decided not

[617] A well known example of this was in April 1921 when the Reverend Warren's daughter died from an unknown epidemic at Roper River. Twelve hours later his only son Bill lay at death's door. Warren summoned everyone on the station to prayer and made a desperate appeal to God to spare his son. Their prayers were answered and the boy recovered. Keith Cole, *Groote Eylandt Pioneer*, Church Missionary History Publications, Melbourne, 1971, p. 35.

[618] Romans, chapter 12, verse 19.

to engage someone to work sorcery as payback, but to leave it in God's hands rather than perpetuate the back and forth of payback which had gone on for at least twenty years. Christian practice has resulted in a new approach to dealing with misfortune and one that results in more harmony in the community.

The way they handle payback reveals that they have beliefs about God's judgement, wrong doing, God's power and prayer.

Payback has influenced the way they view the death of Jesus. In a sermon one Sunday night the minister preached about Jesus and payback. He preached that when Jesus died for the wrong doing of humankind he took care of the payback for wrong doing. Here they see Jesus as a liberator who frees them from payback for wrong doing. Here the doctrine of redemption is expressed clearly in local thought patterns.

It is to other Aboriginal churches that they look in seeking to understand what is good Christian practice in these types of situations. This is well illustrated by what happened when the Anglican church at Umbakumba was cursed, which meant that anyone entering it risked personal harm. The Aboriginal minister was in the unusual position under the traditional law of being the person who could remove the curse in a traditional way. He perceived this as compromising his position as a Christian minister and discussed the situation with the other Anglican Aboriginal ministers on the two way radio. Their conclusion was that he should take a group of Christians, go into the church, then pray and ask God to remove the curse. This is what he did and no harm was suffered by anyone.

The practice here reveals a belief in God as a God of power and that Christianity is a viable alternative for dealing with curses.

**Death and the after life**

Death, as discussed in the previous chapter under funerals, is an important issue. Traditional mortuary rites play an important role in Aboriginal life and on the whole missionaries took little interest as they failed to understand the significance of them. When someone died at the mission the small Christian burial service did not meet people's emotional and spiritual needs in dealing with death. This, as discussed in chapter eight, has changed under Aboriginal church leadership.

The minister of the church and a number of its adherents follow traditional Christian teaching of a person having one spirit and that when a Christian dies their spirit goes to be with Jesus. In chapter eight, I also mentioned, that a number of Christians regard the spirit as going to a waiting place, to wait for Jesus to come back to earth. Some have equated a traditional belief in the Roper area of a good and bad place that a spirit can go to, with the story that Jesus told about Lazarus the beggar and the rich man, and their spirits being in two separate places.[619] These are referred to as the places where spirits wait for the return of Jesus.

The way that Ngukurr Christians handle death, reveals a belief in spirits of the dead, a place where the spirits go and a belief in the return of Jesus. It also shows that they no longer fear the spirits of the dead.

[619] Gospel of Luke, chapter 17, verses 19-31.

**Moral Code**

The Ngukurr community is made up of people that came from different tribal groups and all of these groups had a moral code. It taught that a person should respect their parents and elders. That a person should not steal or commit adultery. Nor should bad things be said about their relatives. It also taught that it was necessary to share with and look after one's relatives.

People at Ngukurr point out that their moral code has many similarities to the ten commandments and have commented that they could not understand why the missionaries taught that people should only follow the ten commandments and abandon their own laws of behaviour. They were after all very similar.

Missionaries often assumed that Aborigines had no moral code and so needed to be taught one in order to understand what sin was. Whereas Aborigines already knew that the breaking of their own moral code was wrong. Ngukurr Christians believe that because they already had a moral code that was similar to the ten commandments that it must have come from God. I understand them to be referring to *Bangkawa* who they say was above everything else and was responsible for making everything and who they have identified as God.

As has been shown on a number of occasions in this study a key question for Ngukurr Christians is how to show love in the various situations in which they find themselves. How to demonstrate love characterises their approach to family difficulties, taboo relationships and social issues. In doing this they are following Jesus' summary of the ten commandments that people should love God and love their neighbour. That this has become a basic part of their moral code is demonstrated by the fact that if Ngukurr Christians are perceived as failing to do this, it is pointed out to them by other members of the community.

The moral code at Ngukurr recognises the teaching of the ten commandments and the moral code that their community always had as its ideal. The church believes that love should influence the way the code is applied rather than a harsh judgemental approach.

**Redemption and sin**

It is best to deal with redemption and sin together. This is because Ngukurr Christians always talk about redemption in terms of Jesus dying on the cross to set them free, to give them new life and to bring them closer to God. They understand the death of Jesus on the cross as setting them free from the wrong things they had done and giving them new life.

Redemption and sin are not discussed in the abstract. Redemption is always discussed specifically in terms of Jesus' death to set people free from the wrong things they have done. I have heard the Reverend Wurramara say that Jesus took care of the payback for the wrong that a person has done. The word redemption is seldom used but the concept is present when people talk about Jesus setting them free from the wrong things they have done and giving them a new life that has changed them. On occasions I have also heard it expressed that Jesus paid the price so they could be free.

Sin is talked about in terms of the wrong things that a person has done, living in a wrong way, and that it is the wrong things that people do that separate them from God. They strongly believe that Jesus' death on the cross made it possible for them to be forgiven and reconciled to God.

Redemption and sin are always discussed together. This is clearly seen in a number of songs that they have written in Kriol, and in which redemption and sin are clearly linked. These songs have been

written with no outside input and reflect their beliefs. When Irene Andrews an active church member was asked if any songs were about sin or redemption she immediately identified seven songs.[620]

While their approach to redemption and sin is clearly representative of their theological heritage, the fact that they have written songs in Kriol about these two doctrines strongly suggests that it is also their theological belief.

**World of the supernatural**

From the discussions in chapters six and seven it has been established that Ngukurr Christians believe in the spirit world and have included God the Father, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Satan, angels and demons in their view of the spirit world.

An outcome of their belief in the supernatural is that they expect God to operate in this realm. For them the belief in an all powerful God means that He is stronger than the other spirits. He can also heal people and he can overcome sorcery. This is an important part of how they view God and means that they are working out a theology of God and power. It is articulated and discussed in terms of how and where they have seen God at work and in the stories they tell about God healing people and overcoming sorcery. I became aware of this by sitting and listening to them talk on many occasions. They expressed it in terms of what God has done rather than starting from an abstract concept.

**Peacemakers**

Ngukurr Christians often find themselves in the role of peacemakers and this is in keeping with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. They are often the ones who settle family differences and who seek to prevent physical conflict between family members. Many times before the community was a dry community, Gumbuli, Wallace and Gordon were called on to settle drunken fights.

The most notable occasion on which Christians took a role as peacemakers was after a murder. After much negotiation it was decided that the man who committed the murder should face a spearing before he was sent to Darwin for trial. On the Saturday relatives of the man and his dead wife arrived by road and plane with many spears. Reverend Wurramara and his brother (later also ordained a minister) were in charge of the spearing in order to ensure that it did not get out of hand. Late that afternoon Gumbuli arrived at the house we were renting, with a Toyota utility full of spears. These were locked in the church shed so that no one could use them during the night. Later he arrived with more spears and guns from people who had arrived later and locked them in his office.

Next morning the participants assembled on the old airstrip. The accused had to run in a certain area while one at a time the relatives threw a spear at him. Gumbuli and Aringari had ensured that the spearheads had been removed from the spears being used. Whenever the accused became weary from dodging spears, a relative of the man would run in his place. After several hours the spear throwers were allowed to throw spears with spearheads on them. The man failed to dodge one and received a flesh wound which drew blood. Once blood was shed, the matter was deemed complete.

[620] The examples that she gave are songs nos. 100, 136, 159, 182, 186, 222 and 224 in the *Kriol Song Buk* published by St Matthew's Church, Ngukurr.

In the above instance it was Christians who supervised the event. There was a lot of outrage in the community over what was widely regarded as a cold blooded murder and the planned spearing could easily have gotten out of control.

The Sunday morning service was cancelled in order to allow the Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara and his brother to supervise. The most important thing to be dealt with that day was maintaining the peace. It demonstrates their beliefs that Christians should be peacemakers and that Christianity should affect all of one's life.

## RESPONDING TO GOD

St Matthew's Church Ngukurr responds to God in a number of ways It observes the sacraments, it worships God and its members seek to live a life of discipleship. These three ways of responding to God are discussed below.

### The Sacraments

In keeping with the teaching of the Articles of Religion of the Anglican Church, St Matthew's Church observes the two sacraments that Article 25 teaches were ordained by Christ in the Gospel. These are Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Anglican Church also recognises five sacraments that have become part of the traditions of the church. These are, Confirmation, Penance, Orders (ordination), Matrimony and Extreme Unction. Of these Confirmation, Ordination and Matrimony are recognised by the Ngukurr church.

*Baptism*

Adult baptism by immersion is the usual form of baptism at Ngukurr. Baptisms until 1997 were usually in the Roper River. However in 1997 the presence of large numbers of crocodiles in the river caused them to use the local swimming pool instead.

Baptism by immersion was introduced by the missionaries and the church has carried on this tradition. This partly related to the view that people should decide to become Christians when they are old enough to understand what is involved. It is in my view, also influenced by the Ngukurr approach to autonomy, that you do not speak on behalf of another person and that nobody should be forced to act in a particular way. When a person decides to be a Christian they are expected to join in with other Christians at Fellowship, church and so on. They are also expected to follow a Christian lifestyle. Once a year a baptism class is held over a number of weeks by the minister or one of the church members where instruction is given on the beliefs of the church. If the minister is satisfied with the person's Christian commitment they are baptised. Often a biblical name is taken at baptism. Sometimes this name becomes the name by which the person is commonly identified. Baptisms usually occur a week or two before the Bishop visits for confirmation.

*Confirmation*

As confirmation usually takes place right after baptism there are not usually any confirmation classes apart from instructions on what to do and say during the service. Christian teaching is given during the baptism classes. In accordance with Anglican teaching and tradition, it is the Bishop who lays hands on a person to confirm them in the Christian faith and as members of the Anglican church. The confirmation service is held in the church, usually on a week night to coincide with a visit by the bishop to the Aboriginal churches.

One of the interesting things is that baptism and confirmation have not come to be regarded as an important occasion in the same way as initiation into traditional religion is. This could be because it involves both male and female, whereas traditional initiation in the area was only for men. On the other hand it could be that they accept that this is how the Anglican Church in our experience has always done it and it should continue in that way with nothing else added.

*Communion*

Holy Communion is regarded as an important sacrament. It is held every second week as part of the Sunday morning service that is conducted in the church. The communion in keeping with Anglican teaching must be conducted by an ordained minister. He may be assisted by a lay person. Communion is available for all church members regardless of denomination.

One of the difficulties for an Aboriginal minister at Holy Communion is what to do about giving communion to a person who is in an avoidance relationship with him. Traditionally he should not hand anything to that person or look directly at them. As mentioned earlier in this thesis this has been resolved in two ways. Either the bread and the wine will be handed to that person by a lay person, or alternatively the relationship will be restructured so that the avoidance does not have to be observed.

A difficulty that they have had to work through was that in mission days a church member who committed adultery, was promiscuous or gambled, was excluded from communion for a period of time. This was known by everyone and people were deeply hurt by this practice. Often they did not return to the church. Under Aboriginal leadership if a church member is regarded as having failed the church badly, the minister will privately ask that person to keep coming to church but not to take communion for a while.

Once the problem was solved by no communion service being held for a number of months. A number of church members were regarded as embarrassing the church by gambling which is regarded by the church as unacceptable behaviour. By not holding communion while the problem was being worked out, confrontation was avoided and the persons could still come to church without being embarrassed. One Sunday morning the people who had been gambling spoke up during the service, and said that they had stopped gambling. Following this, communion services recommenced.

In the above situation consensus and harmony were regarded as very important. This is not surprising as the ceremonies that are held as part of Aboriginal religion cannot take place unless there is consensus by all those involved in holding the ceremony. However it also meant that most church members were denied communion for some months. I have not known the same situation to occur again. The current approach is one of talking with the person and trying to resolve the difficulty privately.

*Ordination*

Ordination is accepted as an important occasion in the life of the church. Under Aboriginal leadership it has occurred once at Ngukurr. This was when the current minister was ordained in November 1973. This was an auspicious occasion with people flying in for the occasion from Darwin and other places. It was the first ordination of an Aborigine in the Anglican Church in the Northern Territory. It was conducted along the lines of traditional Anglican ordination to the order of priest. Since then, when other Aborigines have been ordained in Arnhem Land, there has been more Aboriginal

involvement with clan leaders escorting the person to the church and in the case of Aringari Wurramara of Angurugu he was freed from his traditional religious responsibilities.

Ngukurr people were extremely proud when Gumbuli Wurramara was ordained an Anglican priest in 1973. For years afterwards they referred to him as the Reverend Michael Gumbuli while referring to White ministers by their names or nicknames.

*Marriage*

There has been resistance to marriages taking place in the church, and only one took place during the thirteen years I lived in the community. People that are married in the church are recognised as married, but there appears to be a preference for marriages occurring in the currently recognised way. With their parents approval, a couple starts living together at one of their parents' homes. If the parents object, they run away together and when they return they are accepted as married.

There has been encouragement from the Anglican church from time to time for church members to marry in the church or have their marriages blessed by the church, but people seem to regard it as too much effort and fuss. I have been told that some people regard it as too difficult to get a divorce if you are married in a church.

To them it is more important to be married straight as discussed in chapter seven, than where and how you are married.

Their observance of the sacraments reveals that they accept much but not all, of the traditional teaching of the church associated with the sacraments and that it is part of being an Anglican.

**Worship**

Fellowship meetings and the Sunday church service have been discussed in chapter eight. They believe it is important for Christians to come together to worship and learn about God. It is their firm belief that worship should be in their own language as this makes it most meaningful.

A sense of reverence is most noticeable when they are praying for healing. At that time there is an atmosphere of reverence in the songs they sing that are addressed to God and in the prayers.

It is surprising that they have not adopted the liturgy of the church in a more enthusiastic manner, as rituals are important in traditional Aboriginal religion. There are probably several reasons for this. For many years it was in English and was probably largely irrelevant to them. The CMS missionaries were from the low evangelical wing of the Anglican Church, and as such did not place a large emphasis on liturgy and ritual. This probably communicated itself to the Aboriginal church. Then there is the problem, as mentioned in chapter eight, that if they adapt traditional rituals into the church service, who will own them and will they always be allowed to use them? There is also the further difficulty that if they use traditional tunes, will the tunes remind them of things they don't wish to associate with Christian worship? Only Aborigines can answer such questions.

Meanwhile they show little interest in using traditional Aboriginal music. They have developed some discernible rituals in how they run Fellowship, and show a strong preference for modern Christian music, guitars and keyboard.

**Discipleship**

At Ngukurr one of the ways they respond to God is by seeking to incorporate Christianity into their lifestyle. This means that they allow their way of life to be challenged and modified by what they

understand of the gospel. In doing this they are taking account of three things. Firstly there is an expectation that their will be a change in how they live. Secondly autonomy is still regarded as important and no one is forced to behave in a certain way. Thirdly the maintenance of relationships is essential.

*Christian lifestyle*

At Ngukurr it is expected that when a person becomes a Christian it will impact on their lifestyle in a number of ways. Some who were experiencing a dysfunctional lifestyle due to alcoholism, violence, excessive gambling or broken relationships become Christians with the expectation that God will help them overcome their problems. For some, this does happen and they are able to be free from alcoholism and so on. Others find they need to work at it before they are able to leave the problem behind.

Others find that it brings healing to broken relationships. One woman tells of how after she became a Christian, the bitterness that was consuming her gradually disappeared. She had been abandoned as a child and had grown up harbouring a lot of anger. As she came to understand the teaching of Jesus on love, over a period of time she was able to re-establish relationships with her parents and family. Many people in the community commented on how much she had changed and this resulted in a number of other adults in their late twenties and thirties becoming Christians.

For some at Ngukurr the evangelical theology that characterises the church, results in them no longer participating in the ceremonies. This has been the attitude of the core Christians for two generations. One man told me that after he became a Christian he started to read the Bible and the more he understood about his new faith the less interested he was in the traditional religion. In spite of enormous pressure for him to return to the ceremonies he refused to do so, as he no longer regarded it as necessary.

Christian discipleship has at times resulted in Ngukurr Christians taking a role in community matters in order to try to improve the welfare of the whole community. Church members have on a number of occasions, decided to oppose the issue of a licence to sell alcohol at the Roper Bar Store or for a club to have a licence at Ngukurr. They have done this out of a desire to overcome the social disruption of binge drinking in the community rather than out of a sense of wowserism. The disruption was real. It was difficult to sleep, church members were among those called on to stop the many fights and settle people down, children were hungry, church members and others found themselves looking after grandchildren, nieces and nephews while their parents were binge drinking. This could mean ten or more extra mouths to feed on a limited income. There was a need for someone to always be home to protect property from damage. Life was severely disrupted.

It was decided that the only way to restore peace and harmony, a traditional Aboriginal value as well as a Christian one, was to oppose the sale of alcohol. They joined the health department, the police, Urapanga cattle station and others on several occasions in opposition and won. It was not an easy decision as it meant family members opposing other family members in the public discussions. Traditionally a person supports their family members. They were difficult times. But the church members had concluded that the only way to stop the community self-destructing was to oppose the application for a licence to sell alcohol. They succeeded on the majority of occasions and reduced the disruption in the community.

The church members acted out of a belief that you should love your neighbours. Love in this case involved speaking out, sometimes in the face of opposition from the drinkers in their family, in order to gain a more peaceful and harmonious life for everyone.

Ngukurr Christians are concerned with the practice of their Christian faith. As they understand their faith more, they are concerned to contextualise it into their way of life. This is of more interest and concern to them than formulating a theological statement. Their approach to contextual theology is to take what they understand of their Christian faith and endeavour to incorporate it into their lives. Their approach is one that is best described as praxis as they reflect on the gospel and Scripture and then act, reflect again and then act again, in an ongoing process.

*Autonomy*

In following a Christian lifestyle they are careful not to impose their beliefs on others. They believe that they are free to live as Christians and tell others about their faith. However they refuse to impose it on others who are equally free to choose or reject Christianity. This is illustrated by the situation that arises when a Christian dies and some members of the family wish to observe traditional mortuary rituals. The Christian members of the family often will not join in the mortuary rituals but they will not stop others from joining in. Parents will teach their children about Jesus and the Christian faith but they will not force them to be Christians. Ngukurr Christians expect to be given the same autonomy by other members of the community.

*Importance of relationships*

As discussed in chapter seven, the observance of relationships with close family members and the rest of the community are important to Ngukurr Christians. They observe them and would find it difficult to live in the community if they did not do so. The biblical story of Ruth who looked after her mother-in-law is a story that they enjoy and approve of. The importance of relationships to them is demonstrated by the way they call Jesus ‘baba’ (sibling). [621]

They understand the teaching of Jesus and the ten commandments to mean that you should look after and care for your family. Often, at great personal cost, they take on caring for relatives who no one else wishes to look after. Their action here reflects a Christian belief that God gave people a free will and they make their own choices.

## ONGOING CONTEXTUALISATION

Contextualisation will be an ongoing process at Ngukurr. The same issues will be revisited from time to time as attitudes change, things are perceived differently due to social change, they gain new insights into the gospel and what Scripture teaches and from contact with the wider church.

I anticipate that the next generation of Christians will probably challenge some of the ideas and assumptions of their parents. As the next generation is becoming increasingly secular, the world of the supernatural will be of less importance to them. They will probably be less inclined to view illness or misfortune as a result of divine retribution or sorcery. It is also likely that they will not have such a literal view of Scripture. At this point in time it is difficult to tell if they will maintain the same exclusive theology of their parents towards Aboriginal religion and ceremonies. Only time will tell whether the current revival of ceremonies will continue or if as the young people of Ngukurr become

[621] Gospel of Mark, chapter 3, verse 35; Galatians, chapter 3, verses 26-8.

more and more secular, they will become disinterested in maintaining the ceremonies. If the ceremonies continue, the next generation of Christians will have to decide whether to continue with the view of an exclusive Christianity or modify that view.

It is also probable that as they take over the reins of leadership that they will do things differently. The group of young adults who attend Bible studies now prefer to read out loud individually rather than as a group like the older ones, and are more confident about leading a study. This group is more professional about their music and one of the things that have drawn them into the church has been a middle aged man Ishmael, spending time with them encouraging them in their music and talking with them about the meaning of the songs and the Christian faith.

In a situation of rapid social change, contextualisation must keep pace with social change which means that there will be new issues to be dealt with and new ways of perceiving reality. If contextualisation does not continue to happen their understanding of the gospel will stagnate and become irrelevant.

## CONCLUSION

A number of presuppositions that Ngukurr Christians bring to their contextualisation of their faith are becoming apparent from the material presented above.

They have a strong assumption that they knew God before the missionaries came. While they did not know a lot about *Bangkawa* they credited this spirit with being responsible for the origins of everything. It is difficult to tell if this spirit was some kind of high God or a sky spirit, but they are adamant about equating it with God the Father. This view also allows them to situate God back where everything started. He was always there.

That Christianity is holistic is another presupposition that is clearly discernible. It takes in the whole of life and is not just applicable to Christian rituals. They are incorporating the Christian message into the whole of life.

A third presupposition that has emerged is their belief that the supernatural is real and that God is a God of power. This is clear from their continuing belief in the spirit world and the supernatural, as well as their belief in the spirits of the dead and where they go. Their interest in God healing people and overcoming harm done by sorcery or spirits also supports this presupposition.

Fourthly, they are concerned with maintaining their identity as Aboriginal Christians. If this was not the case there would be no need for them to be working out how they are going to live as Christians. Without this assumption there would be no reason to contextualise the gospel into their way of life. Instead they would be abandoning their culture and assimilating to the White way of life.

Another presupposition that they bring to their contextualisation process is that Scripture is the revealed Word of God. This has not been highlighted so much in this chapter as in a previous chapter. Nevertheless it is present in their attitude that Scripture is to be taken seriously when contextualising the gospel.

A sixth presupposition is that they bring their local theology to the contextualisation process. This local theology as discussed above has two aspects to it. One is the evangelical exclusive theology that they inherited from the missionaries and the early Aboriginal Christians, and have chosen to continue with. The second aspect is the local theology that is emerging from the contextualisation process. They do not come to each issue cold but bring all that they know to it.

Seventhly, they see Christianity in terms of a viable alternative to Aboriginal religion. Their evangelical theology means that they see a choice to be made between Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion. Their seeking to incorporate Christianity into their way of life and to live culturally as Aboriginal Christians shows that they regard it as a viable religion for Aborigines to follow.

As local agents Ngukurr Christians are bringing the seven presuppositions above to the contextualisation process and these influence how they do contextualisation. It is from these presuppositions that they interact with the Aboriginal way of life, accepting many things, challenging some things and incorporating the gospel into their way of life. As local agents they are the ones who deal with social change, the wider church and their way of life when contextualising the Christian message. Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians are the catalysis that allows contextualisation to occur.

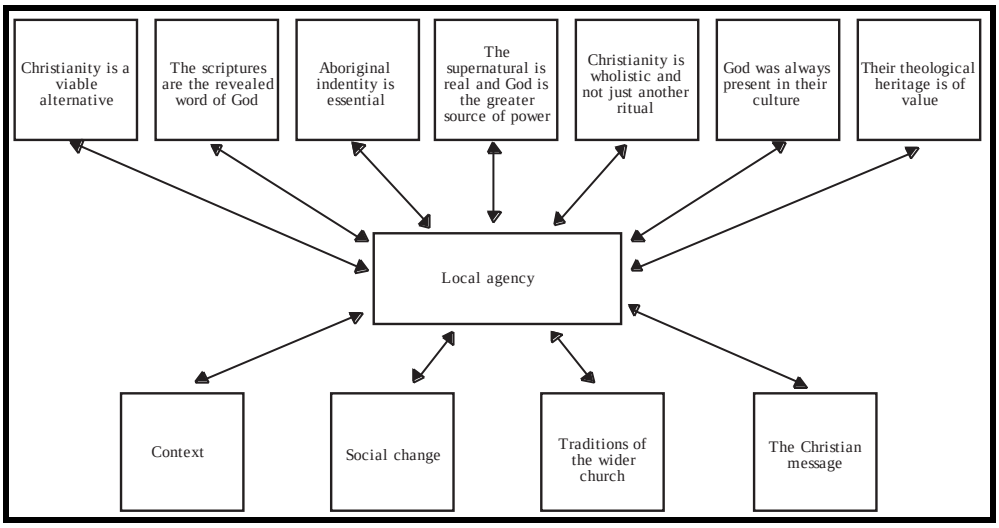


**Figure 11** Model of contextual theology as practised at Ngukurr.

When I try to characterize their approach to contextualisation using Bevans' models, praxis is the most appropriate way to describe what is taking place. Ngukurr Christians are reflecting, acting, reflecting again and acting again in an ongoing process. While some of their approach, such as their attitude to Scripture as the revealed word of God, could be described as a translation approach, it does not adequately account for everything that is taking place. Where we can see that context, social change, the Christian message and the wider church are all involved in what is happening, it is tempting to describe it by the synthetic model. However the Ngukurr church is not concerned with holding these four things in balance, as that model requires. While there is a real interest in identity and living culturally as a Christian, what is actually happening does not appear to fit the anthropological model. The praxis model comes closest out of all the models to accounting for what is happening.

But perhaps the problem is that we are trying to force an Aboriginal approach to contextualisation into models that are designed by Westerners and represent a culturally different way of understanding what is happening. This is why I have suggested a model that deals with what Aborigines bring to contextualisation. This will be more fully discussed in the concluding chapter.

# Part Five

Conclusion

# CONCLUSION

Having examined the data in Part Four it is now time to decide if the suggested model is the best model to understand the relationship between agency and the contextualisation of the gospel. I will first deal with the importance of the presuppositions that are brought to contextualisation of the gospel. Next I discuss the seven presuppositions that I have identified that Ngukurr people bring to contextualisation. The vital role of local agents in the contextualisation of the gospel is explored. The local theology that is the outcome of contextualisation at Ngukurr is examined to see if it is Christian. I follow this with why I regard my model as the most suitable one. The last part of this conclusion is concerned with ten things that come out of the study that would be useful for studying other Aboriginal churches.

## A MODEL OF CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE GOSPEL AT NGUKURR

### The Importance of Presuppositions

Stephen Bevans in his book *Models of Contextual Theology* identifies the presuppositions that shape each of the five models that he presents. These presuppositions influence how each model views the task of contextualisation. I regard it as just as important to be aware of the presuppositions that the local agents bring to the task.

When local agents are involved in contextualisation of the gospel, they do not approach the task in a purely objective fashion. Instead they bring all of their previous experience and knowledge with them and this influences what they do. As well as being influenced by an Aboriginal way of life and viewing the world around them, they also bring to contextualisation all that they know and affirm about the Christian faith. At Ngukurr I have identified seven presuppositions about the Christian faith that are evident and that affect how Christians at Ngukurr contextualise the Christian message and the local theology that results from it. These presuppositions also shape the way that they contextualise the gospel and need to be recognised in order to gain a complete picture of what is happening.

Bevans identifies the following presuppositions that account for the different focus of each of the models. The key presupposition that people bring to the translation model is that the gospel is supracultural. People who are consciously using this model speak about a core gospel. They argue that the gospel can be separated from the way it is expressed in one culture and then with the help of theology, anthropology and real religious sympathy, it is translated or wrapped in the receptor culture.[622]

For the anthropological model the key presupposition is that God's revelation is found in human culture, not as a separate supracultural message but within the complexity of a culture, '*in the warp*

[622] Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 33.

*and woof of human relationships which are constitutive of cultural existence'*.[623] The model understands the Bible to be the result of the '*socially and culturally conditioned religious experiences*'[624] of Israel and the early Christian community. The anthropological model recognises that culture will shape the way that Christianity is articulated[625] in a particular context.

With the praxis model the key presupposition is '*the insight that the highest level of knowing is intelligent and responsible doing.'* Practitioners of the praxis model believe that, by following a process of acting, and then reflecting in faith on that action and repeating the process a theology can be developed that is truly relevant to the people in a particular situation. Theology is thought of more in terms of actions, a process and a way of living rather than an academic exercise. The expectation of social change is vital for the praxis model.

The key presupposition for the synthetic model is '*the composite nature of human culture or the situation in which men and women live.'*[626] People who practise this model argue that every culture has elements that are unique to it and elements that are held in common with other cultures. For this model it is important to emphasise both the uniqueness and complementarity of a particular situation, as one's identity emerges in a dialogue with both. The model is ambivalent about culture. Features of a culture can be good or bad depending how they are used or developed. This model requires the practitioner to hold culture, social change, gospel and traditions of the wider church in creative tension.

A fundamental presupposition for the transcendental model of theologising is that the starting point is one's own religious experiences as well as one's own experience of self. But there needs to be recognition that one is also shaped by context. A person starting from the transcendental conceives of theology as bringing into speech who that person is as a person of faith, in every possible respect, as a product of a historical, geographical and cultural environment.

The above presuppositions are important to understand how the five models work and shape local contextual theology. A local theology that is worked on from the perspective of any one of the models will be shaped by the presuppositions behind the model. If one of the models is used to describe an existing local theology, it will be described and identified in terms of that particular model and its presuppositions. I did find the models excellent for gaining insights from different view points into what was happening at Ngukurr. It is as a result of working with these models that I have arrived at my suggested model for understanding contextualisation of the gospel and its resulting local theology there.

I would argue that the Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians are bringing their own set of presuppositions to the contextualisation process. This shapes their contextualisation and needs a new model to account for it. The following seven presuppositions have emerged from the material discussed in chapters one to three, and six to nine. The seven presuppositions shape the way people perceive and interact with the gospel, the wider church, local culture and social change. They also influence the product of the contextualisation process.

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[623] ibid., p. 49.
[624] ibid., p. 49.
[625] ibid., p. 50.
[626] ibid., p. 83.

*1. Christianity is a Viable Alternative*

For the members of St Matthew's Church, Christianity is a viable alternative to traditional Aboriginal religion. It has become clear in the discussion of material presented that they perceive a choice to be made between Christianity and traditional religion. This is clear from their attitude to ceremonies, death and the after life, and healing. Listening to the church members discuss how to live as Christians, it is clear that the expectation is that, like traditional religion, it will involve the whole of their lives. For them it is a holistic religion. It allows them to deal with unexplained illness, the supernatural, fear, death, social justice and everyday life. They do not approach Christianity primarily in an abstract manner or seek to rationalise their faith. In seeking to be Aboriginal Christians they start from what it means to be a Christian in any particular situation?

Christianity is a universal religion that is inclusive of all peoples. Unlike the traditional ceremonies it is not owned by a group of people in one area. It copes with people coming together in one community from a number of different Aboriginal groups and with the growing knowledge of the different nationalities and cultures in the world. The acceptance of Christianity by many different Aboriginal groups also supports the notion that it is a viable alternative to Aboriginal religion.

This presupposition accounts for the way Ngukurr Christians talk about Christianity and traditional Aboriginal religion as two different ways, and describe people who try to follow both as 'two way'. This is the perception of both the church and those who are strongly committed to the ceremonies. Schreiter reminds us that religion is more than a view of life; it is a way of life.[627] Ngukurr people say that culture is more than religion. They argue that culture includes many things. It includes the local ways, values, needs, traditions, language, preparation of food, what they teach their children, what is important to them, importance of relationships, sharing, symbols, ideals, hopes, dreams and the importance of looking after their land.

People believe they can be Christians and still be part of their own culture. They say that when Christianity is incorporated into their culture it enhances their culture. They resist any idea that they can only be Aboriginal if they participate in ceremonies. What they appear to be doing is placing their Christian faith at the centre of their lives and replacing the traditional religion. Ngukurr Christians talk about following Jesus or following the ceremonies. This in essence means that they are talking about conversion from one religion to another and this results in what Hiebert calls a world view shift.[628] The way people view the world around them is constantly changing. New ideas can result in small or large changes and cultures are constantly changing as a result of ideas being incorporated into them. As they have worked hard at identifying as Aborigines and have retained many Aboriginal values and ways of doing things, this is the best way to describe what is happening. It also fits with their evangelical theology.

The fact that people in the context of death are content to do things in a manner that allows Christian rites and traditional rites to take place without merging them supports the idea that they see

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[627] Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, p. 149.

[628] Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan ,1985, pp. 49; Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context*, Herald Press, Scottdale, pp. 55ff; Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, pp. 64-105; Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p. 97; and Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, pp. 29, 122, 145, 149.

Christianity as an alternative religion; as does the way they are very careful to credit any healing they are involved in as God's work and not from another source of power.

Christianity as a viable alternative to traditional religion is also the view of other Aboriginal Anglicans in Arnhem Land. When the Reverend Aringari Wurramara, the brother of Gumboil, was ordained at Angurugu on Groote Eylandt in 1985 he walked to the church with great dignity wearing a white cassock. His clan escorted him to the church with singing and dancing.

> *Around his neck hung a string dilly bag containing items of significance to his clan. It was the gift of the Wurramara clan to provide for him a truly Aboriginal way of carrying out of his community that which would have tied him to their traditional rituals, that he might walk back into his community bringing a different blessing as minister and pastor of his people*[629].

His brother the Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara reported that the dilly bag was removed when Aringari and his escort reached the church boundary. The significance of this was that the clan was releasing him from the obligations of the ceremonial law so that he could do God's work.[630]

Further support for Christianity as a viable alternative to Aboriginal religion can be seen in the way people have taken what was very much a White way of worshipping and changed it into something that is done very much in an Aboriginal way, and in the way they have been contextualising their faith, while at the same time being very careful to maintain their identity as both Aborigines and Christians. They see themselves as following a different religion, but one that allows them to retain their identity. The new religion gradually permeates all of life just as traditional religion did. This view shapes the way they approach contextualisation and how they deal with Aboriginal traditional religion.

*2. The Scriptures Are The Revealed Word of God*

It has become clear from the material presented that Ngukurr Christians have a high regard for the Scriptures, and that they regard the Bible as the revealed word of God. While this attitude towards Scripture is one that was taught by the evangelical missionaries, it appears to have strengthened under Aboriginal leadership, as a result of having a large amount of the Bible in Kriol. This, they argue has given them access to the inside knowledge (the real meaning).[631] Inside knowledge is a term used in traditional religion to refer to religious knowledge that is only available to those who are initiated into it. Before they had the Kriol *Holi Baibul*[632] Ngukurr people say they only had the outside knowledge, it was in English and was like stories. It is similar to the way most Whites do not fully understand the teaching of the Dreaming because they only have the outside story and not the

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[629] John Harris, *One Blood*, Albatross books, Sunderland NSW, 1990, p. 861. See also Keith Cole, *From Mission to Church*, Keith Cole Publications, Bendigo, p. 205 where he reports that one of the Aboriginal Christians explained to Mrs Margret Butler that the significance of the dilly bag and the singing and dancing was that Aringari was leaving behind his part in Aboriginal ceremonies for another calling.

[630] Personal communication from the Reverend Gumbuli Wurramara.

[631] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tape no. 9, Side 1, Ishmael Andrews.

[632] The *Kriol Baibul* contains all of the New Testament and a third of the Old Testament. The whole Bible will be in the next edition. Aborigines insist on it being referred to as Bible for two reasons. They wanted people to realise that it was in fact Scripture and not Bible stories. Secondly, many Aboriginal languages refer to a part of something and the whole of it by the same word, and so they were comfortable with calling the volume Bible even though they knew it was not the whole Bible.

knowledge that belongs to the initiated men. Once Ngukurr Christians had access to the Scriptures in their own language, the inside meaning was accessible to everyone who wanted to learn.

The inside meaning is the teaching about God and his power over spirits and the supernatural. It is about God's power to heal. Because the missionaries used the King James Bible which is difficult to understand and taught in English, some Ngukurr Christians say they did not realise that there was an inner meaning behind the stories and that there was a lot more religious teaching in the Bible than stories. As the missionaries did not talk much about God's power and his ability to heal and overcome sorcery, some Ngukurr people wondered if the missionaries understood the inside meaning of the Bible, or maybe they thought that Aborigines could not understand it.

Ngukurr Christians say that having the Scripture in their own language has caused them to realise that the Bible is far more than a collection of stories. The inner knowledge, they say, is available to anyone who is willing to study it and not just to a select group. This view of the Bible results in a high regard for the Bible.

The high value that people give to Bible study, meeting twice a week and working systematically through a book of the Bible, suggests a high acceptance of its authority. Many also read it at home. What they find to be of interest is often different to what White Christians find interesting. The teaching about the gospel and its relation to the Jewish law, a major concern in Hebrews and Paul's writings, are of great interest. Their understanding of these passages has probably been facilitated by also having the book of Exodus and its teaching about Jewish law in Kriol. Ngukurr Christians are interested in the writings of the Apostle Paul, his teaching about the meaning of the gospel and his writings about the gospel and the Jewish law. They see similarities between that struggle and their struggle, as they work out how the gospel relates to their traditional law.

The acceptance of Scripture as the revealed word of God is in many ways similar to how traditional religion accepts the Dreaming mythology of how things came into being. Revelation is accepted as a given. Neither is concerned with an abstract approach to religion. The concern in both cases is how to practise religion. The Bible is regarded as where God's revelation to humans is recorded. While this is different to how Aboriginal religion was revealed, both are perceived as revealed religions. Acceptance of the Scriptures as the revealed word of God means that Ngukurr Christians regard Christianity as a revealed religion. It also means that at this point in time it is regarded as an authoritative book representing a mainly literal approach to the Bible.

*3. Aboriginal Identity is Essential*

The importance of their identity as Aborigines is an influential presupposition in the way that Ngukurr Christians approach contextualising the gospel. They strongly believe that as Christians they have not abandoned their Aboriginality and that being a Christian helps them to come nearer to fulfilling the ideals of Aboriginal life of sharing and looking after one another, as well as taking care of the country they are responsible for.

It is clear from the data presented earlier that Ngukurr Christians have employed Aboriginal ways of doing things, such as notions of time, occasion, location and so on in the way they run their Fellowship meetings and church activities. At Ngukurr the Christians have retained and adapted an Aboriginal way of living in the midst of much social change. Their Aboriginal identity is strongly linked to speaking an Aboriginal language and using it in their worship, Bible studies and prayer. They have rejected the missionary expectation that they would be assimilated into White culture,

resisting the colonisation of the self and choosing instead an Aboriginal lifestyle. The Christians see themselves as Aborigines in every way except that they follow a different religion. They strongly reject the idea that to be an Aborigine you must follow the traditional religion. This is not as radical as it seems in today's situation, as many young people are choosing not to be involved in traditional Aboriginal religion, finding it too arduous.

The concern to retain their Aboriginal identity results in their contextualising the gospel into their way of life so that they live culturally as Aboriginal Christians.

*4. The Supernatural Is Real And God Is The Greater Source of Power*

The approach of Ngukurr Christians to the world of the supernatural, healing, the after life and sorcery reveals that they regard the supernatural as real and God as the greater source of power. It is clear from the data discussed in earlier chapters, that God is perceived as able to deal with local issues relating to the supernatural. God is also viewed as the Creator, the one responsible for the origin of things. The power of God is more important to them than abstract questions about the Trinity, God's eternal existence, atonement and so on. The perception of God as a god who exerts power contributes to their practice of Christian healing and their attitude to sorcery and spirits.

*5. Christianity is Holistic and Not Just Another Ritual*

A further presupposition of Ngukurr Aboriginal Christians, that has emerged from this study, is that Christianity relates to the whole of life. It is expected that it will be part of everything in their lives. The data presented in this thesis demonstrates that the Christian faith impinges on their view of unexplained illness, the spirit world, death and the after life, how you relate to people and other areas of life. Christianity is not regarded as just another ritual. Instead they see it as permeating the whole of life. This accounts for the practice of relating the gospel and Scripture to people's way of life wherever appropriate and across the board.

*6. God Was Always Present in Their Culture*

In the previous chapter I presented their claim that they knew God before the missionaries came. Joshua, a leading member who was baptised in 1921, thirteen years after the mission commenced was an advocate of this view,[633] and it seems likely that the view goes back to then as it was held by the early Ngukurr Christians. However it could have been formulated later as I have not established a date for when the view was first expressed.

This presupposition affects how and where they do the contextualising of theology. Their position that they knew God before the missionaries came, means that they regard God as present in their culture before the missionaries arrived. It is also consistent with Aboriginal ideas about 'The Dreaming' containing everything in the sense of things awaiting discovery. The missionaries brought more knowledge about God rather than a completely new message. This was most likely very different to what the missionaries thought was happening.

As the majority of Ngukurr Christians have located God as separate and above the Dreaming this affects the way they view ceremonies and the Dreaming. It also means that God is not regarded as something foreign. He was always there even if somewhat remote. This presupposition has most likely strengthened them in their intention to retain their Aboriginal identity as Christians. The

[633] Joy Sandefur, 1995 Field Tape no. 5, and refer to chapter eight for a more detailed discussion of this.

knowledge that they had always known something about God has contributed to their being secure in their identity as Aboriginal Christians.

*.7 Their Theological Heritage Is Of Value*

When Ngukurr Christians contextualise the gospel they bring to it the theology that they already have. As discussed in chapter nine they have a heritage of evangelical theology from the CMS missionaries and the teachings of the Anglican Church which they have chosen to continue. It also includes what the first Ngukurr Christians taught them about how to live as Aboriginal Christians. To this they have added their own ongoing efforts at contextualisation. All of this theological background is what they bring to the task and influences the decisions that they make. Ngukurr Christians do not appear to see it as necessary to choose between what theologians would call propositional theology or a contextual theology. Instead they are more concerned with taking what they understand about Christianity and contextualising it so that they can live culturally as Christians.

All of the above presuppositions are important as they reveal what Ngukurr Christians bring to the contextualisation process. They are not approaching it from a vacuum. All that has gone before shapes what happens today. If Ngukurr Christians had different presuppositions such as a strong heritage of sacramental theology, the outcome would be different. The presuppositions of the local agents do influence contextualisation of the gospel as the presuppositions are what the local agents bring to contextualisation.

**Local Agency**

The local agents are the ones who discuss a particular issue, ponder what Scripture is teaching, what that means for their situation and occasionally explore what their conclusion means for the wider Aboriginal church. In doing this they are interacting with the gospel, the wider church, the context and social change.

The agent of contextualisation is, as Luzbetak advocates, the Christian community.[634] At Ngukurr the local agents are the local church, its minister and members. Without them no contextualisation occurs. It is only as local agents respectfully explore the tensions between the gospel, culture, social change and the wider church that they integrate the gospel into their local context and so are able to truly say they are Aboriginal Christians.

This does not mean that today there is no role for an outside theologian. From time to time there is opportunity for a professional theologian to have input and raise issues with Ngukurr Christians. This happens when a lecturer from Nungalinya College visits the community and conducts a short course or when church members go to the college for a Bible course. The outsider can bring useful information as to how the same issue has been handled elsewhere by the church and can gently question whether a local theology has perhaps misunderstood what is a widely accepted teaching of the church. It needs to be remembered that every Aboriginal church and its context is unique and that what is appropriate in one place is not necessarily appropriate in other Aboriginal churches. The local Christians are best equipped to decide what is effective for their context.

[634] Louis J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Culture*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1988, p. 82.

**Context**

The local community is the context in which people are living culturally as Aboriginal Christians. It includes the local ways, values, needs, traditions, language, what they teach their children, what is important to them, importance of relationships, sharing, symbols, ideals, hopes and dreams. The Christian message can only be incarnated into a particular context by people who are members of that group. They are the ones who know best how to live in that situation and are the best equipped to work out what it means to live as a Christian in their context.

**Social Change**

The Christians at Ngukurr realise that change is happening rapidly in their lives and that it has to be coped with. The current generation has experienced rapid social change in the direction of White culture and growing secularisation of the younger generation. People are aware that their way of life is not static. Change is happening all the time. When Christians incorporate the gospel into their way of life, they realise that on occasions it could mean change in the way some things are done, but they view it as improving the way they live. As they reflect, act, reflect and act again, any change that they introduce has been carefully considered instead of overtaking them.

**Traditions of the Wider Church**

For the Ngukurr church this includes many of the traditions of the Anglican Church, such as communion, baptism, confirmation and other teachings. The church is influenced by its interaction with other Anglican Aboriginal Churches, and Uniting Church Aboriginal Churches. There is also interaction with parachurch organisations that include the Church Missionary Society, Nungalinya College, the Bible Society, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the Katherine Christian Convention. There is an awareness of the existence of other denominations and church related organisations but there is little interaction with them.

**The Christian message**

My understanding is that the Christian message that Ngukurr Christians are contextualising includes the teaching of Jesus in the four Gospels, the teaching of the epistles and what they refer to as the teaching of the Bible. It also includes the fundamental doctrines of the Anglican Church. While the phrase ‘the Christian message’ is ambiguous, it does allow all that Ngukurr people say they are contextualising to be included in it and is a more appropriate term for what is happening at Ngukurr. Peter Schineller has also used ‘the Christian message’ to refer to what Christians contextualise.[635]

**A Local Theology**

The product of what Ngukurr Christians are doing is what Schreiter calls a local, contextual theology. A local theology, is the reflection of Christians upon the gospel in regards to their own situation with attention given to how that particular situation shapes the response to the gospel.[636] The data presented in this thesis demonstrates that the response of Ngukurr Christians to the gospel has been shaped by the fact that they are Aborigines residing at Ngukurr. Their approach is clearly one that involves reflection on what they understand the gospel to be and acting to contextualise it, so that they can truly call themselves Aboriginal Christians.

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[635] Peter Schineller, *A Handbook on Inculturation*, Paulist Books, New York, 1990, p. 62.
[636] Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1985, p. 1.

While it is not a written theology at this point in time, it does involve reflection on the Scriptures, and the teachings of the Anglican church. It also includes what the previous generation of Ngukurr Christians taught them and the evangelical theology that the missionaries taught them.

While this local theology is not written as a statement of Ngukurr contextual theology, it is still theological reflection. Some of it is in written form. Many of the Christian beliefs find expression in the songs that people write without any outside help and so reflect their beliefs. The creed in Kriol states the basic Christian beliefs and this is found in the Kriol Order of Service for Holy Communion.

When the local Christians contextualise these beliefs, they are working out a local theology that gives expression to the gospel in their context.

The question needs to be asked whether the local theology at Ngukurr is genuinely reflective of the gospel and faithful to the Christian tradition? Schreiter has proposed the following five criteria for discovering the answer.[637] He argues that the answer should be yes to all five of the criteria if the local theology is genuinely reflective of the gospel and faithful to Christian tradition.

*1. The Cohesiveness of Christian Performance*

Cohesion is a difficult thing to ascertain. One way of approaching it is to ask if the theology is at odds with Christian doctrine. If it is, or large parts of it need changing, then it is unlikely to be a well-formed Christian performance. At Ngukurr there is no evidence of the theology being at odds with Christian doctrine as taught by the Anglican church. Focus on the power of God has not replaced the centrality of Jesus and the salvation offered through him. Nor is there any reason to think that equating God with *Bangkawa* has resulted in a cult or heresy.

*2. The Worshipping Context and Christian Performance*

This criterion involves asking whether the worship is recognisable as Christian? At Ngukurr this can be answered in the affirmative. Worship is addressed to God. The songs are usually either about what God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit have done and mean to them, or are addressed to God. Holy Communion is held regularly to remember Jesus and his redemptive work. The creed affirming basic Christian beliefs is said, and prayers are addressed to God. They are affirming and continuing the Christian tradition.

*3. The Praxis of the Community and Christian Performance*

Schreiter comments that 'What Christians do is central to who Christians are.'[638] 'By their fruits shall you know them' is one of the oldest and clearest ways of discerning Christian identity. It is when Christians move beyond doctrine and belief, to engage with their environment that their credibility or lack of it is discovered. At Ngukurr the Christians are known as people who care for others, seek to maintain peace in the community and as people whose lives have been changed. They often ask themselves: how can I best show love in this situation? They are recognised as Christians by the rest of the community by their behaviour.

[637] ibid., pp. 118-21.
[638] Schreiter, ibid., p. 119.

The concept of praxis reaches beyond action to reflection and the approach of Ngukurr Christians to contextualisation of the gospel and the emerging local theology involves both action and reflection as they endeavour to live culturally as Christians.

*4. The Judgement of Other Churches and Christian Performance*

Here the question to be answered is: does the Ngukurr church acknowledge the judgement of other churches in the matter of its Christian performance or does it close itself off, assured of its own truth? St Matthew's church freely interacts with the other Aboriginal Anglican churches in Arnhem Land and is part of the Anglican diocese of the Northern Territory. It also interacts with other churches. Its members attend courses at Nungalinya College where they participate in classes with other Aborigines from a number of different denominations. While they hold a different view of the Dreaming and how it relates to God than some Aborigines in other churches, they have not cut themselves off from those churches because of it. This is similar to the way they remain in good relationships with those in the community who are strongly committed to the ceremonies, even though they disagree with them.

*5. The Challenge to other Churches and Christian Performance*

Here the questions is: what contribution does the local theology make to the way in which the whole of the Christian Church understands itself? St Matthew's church has made a number of contributions in this area. It demonstrates that you can be Aboriginal and Christian. Secondly under the leadership of Reverend Wurramara the church has developed a way of conducting funerals that is acceptable to many Aborigines in Arnhem Land and adjoining areas. Thirdly the church affirms what is already known in the Christian tradition. Fourthly it has a history of its members evangelising other Aborigines.

As all five criteria mentioned above are answered in the affirmative, we can conclude that local theology at Ngukurr is faithful to the gospel.

**Why 'A Model of Contextualisation of the Gospel at Ngukurr'**
**is the Preferred Model**

The model I have suggested accounts best for what is happening at Ngukurr. It recognises that people approach contextualisation of the gospel with all that has shaped them so far in their journey as Christians and that because of that journey they bring certain expectations and presuppositions to how they approach the task. The model highlights the crucial role that local agents play in contextualisation. At the same time it acknowledges the four elements that Bevans has identified as important to contextualisation. It is the local agents and all that has shaped them in their Christian journey, who interact with the local context, the social change that is taking place, the wider church and the Christian message. The result is a local contextual theology.

This model is preferred for a number of reasons. It recognises the influence of what Ngukurr Christians bring to the contextualisation process, and specifically how their Christian journey shapes their approach to reflecting on the Christian message and the action they take. While it could be argued that the presuppositions are part of the local context, I regard them as important enough to be identified separately, as the presuppositions are as important as their cultural context. It could also be argued that, as the presuppositions are what the local agents bring to the task they could be included with the local agents on the diagram but I find it useful to understand what is influencing the local agents as they approach the task of contextualisation. It is my conclusion that the presuppositions that

they bring to the task are as influential as culture, social change, Christian message and the wider church. As such, the presuppositions should be identified separately, as recognition of them results in a better understanding of how they are contextualising the gospel.

My preferred model copes better with the complexity of what is happening in a situation where no model is being consciously followed. The church at Ngukurr is not following a particular model of contextualisation, nor do they discuss what they are doing in terms of models of contextual theology or other models of theology. They are concerned with incorporating the gospel into the concrete experience of life as they experience it as Aborigines. The model I have suggested allows the situation to be examined without having to align what is taking place with one of the five types of contextual models discussed in chapter five. It can also deal with data that comes from a period when a model of imposition best describes what was happening overall, and yet the Aborigines at Ngukurr were also drawing their own conclusions. An example of this is that for many years it was the intention of missionaries to civilize the Aborigines so that they could assimilate into Australian society. However a number of Aborigines at Ngukurr chose to accept the gospel but reject the idea of assimilating into Australian society. Here a model of imposition is needed to describe the missionaries approach and a contextual one to account for the actions of the Aborigines.

If I was to choose one model to account for what is happening at Ngukurr, I would end up having to force the data to fit under that model, which would be unsatisfactory. The alternative is to use all the models which becomes unwieldy. By using the selective and composite model I suggest, I have been able to gain a good understanding of how the local church is doing theology.

A further advantage of the suggested model is that it helps us to understand how Ngukurr Christians approach contextualisation and so avoid a Western abstract perspective. The Western approach is to try and account for what is happening by using an analytical abstract approach in order to work out a logical system of ideas, whereas the approach of the people at Ngukurr is one where they deal with a particular issue and work out the relationship between that and the gospel. For them the focus of doing theology is working it out in everyday life in a way that allows them to live as Aboriginal Christians.

My preferred model places local agency at the centre of the contextualisation process where it belongs, as the local agent understands the context and is best equipped to assimilate the gospel to their way of life.

Another advantage of the model is that it allows the outsider to understand what is important to the Ngukurr Christians, and to hear what they are saying about how they understand Christianity.

The above reasons make the suggested model the most useful for gaining an understanding of contextualisation of the gospel at Ngukurr as it deals best with the complexity of the situation

## APPLICATION TO OTHER ABORIGINAL CHURCHES

Early in this thesis I commented that a casual glance at St Matthew’s Church would suggest that it was not very Aboriginal, as things like traditional Aboriginal tunes are missing from the music; no traditional rituals have been included or adapted for inclusion in church services and activities; it meets in a building that is easily recognisable as a church, and the church is proud to be Anglican.

However the material presented in this study demonstrates that it is Aboriginal in many other ways and that its members are proudly Aboriginal Christians and do not see themselves as imitation White

Christians. From the start of their church, they have quietly made their own decisions about the gospel, and correctly claim that they played an important role in starting other CMS missions and evangelising other Aborigines. Ngukurr Christians have been involved in the contextualisation process since their early acceptance of the gospel, but this has accelerated under twenty seven years of Aboriginal church leadership and the availability of much of the Bible in Kriol. Also under Aboriginal leadership they have changed many of their activities, such as Fellowship and Bible Camp, so that they are now conducted in an Aboriginal way. While it was the intention of the missionaries to plant a church that was in every way a replica of the Anglican Church as they knew it, today it is very much an Aboriginal church and one that proudly identifies as such.

A number of concepts emerge from this study that would be useful for understanding other Aboriginal churches. All of them should be considered in order to understand if and how a church is contextualising the gospel.

1. It is important to understand the history of the church from the point of view of its Aboriginal members, as well as from the point of view of the mission or denomination that founded it. This will give insights into what has gone before and give an indication of what some of the presuppositions might be that influence the way the gospel is contextualised.

2. The importance of listening to Aborigines cannot be underestimated if a person wants to understand what they are doing and why. Knowing the language well will facilitate this, as will non-judgemental listening. Stories about early church members converting to Christianity will also contribute to one's understanding, as will collecting stories from people about why they are Christians today.

3. If the church members strongly identify themselves as Aboriginal Christians, then exploration of why this is so will reveal what they regard as necessary and important to identify themselves as Aboriginal Christians. Where they do not regard themselves as Aboriginal Christians it is just as important to find out why. It could be because they are ashamed of their Aboriginal identity.

4. A knowledge of the local culture/context is important in order to understand how the context influences the way they view the world around them and will identify whether things such as healing and kinship relationships are important. The local context shapes their local theology, as the theology needs to deal with issues that are important to the way they view the world.

5. Social change needs to be understood in relation to contextualisation as being of two types. There is the rapid change that they are experiencing because of the pressure of the dominant White society. This can be viewed as disruptive or good depending on the nature of the change. Contextualisation of the gospel will also result in some changes, but it should be the kind of change that has been carefully considered and is of benefit to those involved. Because of ongoing social change, contextualisation must be an ongoing process

6. If the local church is going to contextualise the gospel it needs to understand what the gospel is. Here an understanding of the local theology, which will include in many cases the theology that they were taught by the missionaries, will be helpful. Having the Scriptures available in their own language will bring a new depth to their knowledge of the gospel, the teachings of the Bible and their contextualisation of it.

7. The way that the church being studied relates to the wider church, will give an indication of whether other churches recognise what is happening in that particular church as Christian.

8. The presuppositions that people bring to contextualising the gospel shape the way they approach it and contribute to the outcome. The model that I have suggested should be of use in understanding what presuppositions they are using. The seven presuppositions that I have suggested in my model are by no means fixed. An Aboriginal church in a different area with a different mission history, and with a different Aboriginal mythology, could well approach contextualisation with different presuppositions. It is not at all necessary that they have the same presuppositions or even the same number of presuppositions. What is important is to recognise the presuppositions that they do bring to the task. As contextualisation is an ongoing process, it is also likely that over time the presuppositions will change due to a deeper understanding of the gospel or new concerns that arise.

9. The local agents are the most important people in the process of contextualising the gospel and the resulting local theology. They are the catalysts that gives expression to what is being contextualised and they make the decision about how it is incorporated into their lives so that they regard themselves as living culturally as Christians. The local agents are the people who produce the ongoing theology. An outsider can make a sensitive contribution but cannot actually contextualise the gospel, as only members of the group can successfully do that.

10. It is important to remember that Aborigines will not comfortably work from an academic approach that sets out a plan as to what the gospel is, what needs to be contextualised and the order in which matters should be tackled. Rather Aborigines work from concrete questions that arise from time to time, such as should Christians marry only people from the opposite moiety? Then they reflect on what the Scripture teaches about marriage. Or alternatively, from their study of Scripture they realise that the particular way they handle something, such as taboo relations, may need to be changed if they are to truly love their neighbour as Jesus commanded. This is an ad hoc approach, but nevertheless it does add to the local theology and it reflects an Aboriginal preference for dealing with the concrete. Much can be learnt about the beliefs of a local church by discussing with people in a non-threatening way how Christians should behave in particular situations rather than starting from an abstract discussion about theological beliefs.

When consideration is given to the above items, one will discover over a period of time if contextualisation of the gospel is occurring in a particular church situation or whether the acceptance of the Christian faith is merely a surface commitment. I would also expect that the same considerations would be useful for a study of a church in a different culture.

The model that I have proposed should be of value in studying contextualisation in any church. The culture/context, social change, the Christian message and the wider church will always need to be considered in any contextual study. The local agents will always be essential to the process and the presuppositions that they bring to contextualisation will need to be understood and recognised as part of the contextualisation process that is producing an ongoing local theology.

In conclusion, it has been demonstrated in this study that there is a vital relationship between local agency and contextualisation of the gospel at Ngukurr. The church at Ngukurr is correct to identify itself as an Aboriginal church. While they have contextualised much of the gospel and its teaching into their way of life, it is here as elsewhere, an ongoing process which keeps the church alive and vibrant. The local theology that is the product of their contexualization of the gospel is one that is true to the Christian tradition and is recognised by others to be so. They are right to identify themselves as Aboriginal Christians.

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