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OF ACTS AND AXES

An ethnography of socio-cultural change
in an Aboriginal community, Cape York Peninsula

Thesis submitted by
John Charles TAYLOR (B.A.[Hons] University of Queensland)
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VOLUME I

ABSTRACT

This thesis is concerned with the processes of socio-cultural change set in motion when the Aboriginal people of the Edward River reserve gave up their hunter-gatherer life-style and joined with Anglican missionaries to form the Edward River settlement in 1938. In opting for a sedentary life, the Aborigines of the reserve were consciously adopting the role of culture recipients who were dependent on change agents (missionaries, and later government officials) from the mainstream Australian society to provide the sources for socio-cultural change as well as the direction in which it should proceed.

The cultural patterns characterising reserve life prior to the establishment of the settlement are reconstructed from informants' memories and the observations of anthropologists who conducted studies among the reserve's peoples between 1925 and 1935. The pre-settlement patterns are then compared with those which characterised settlement life in the period 1968-75 when the author undertook his fieldwork. Two independently formulated hypotheses concerning the degree, direction and sources of socio-cultural change are tested against the actual course of events. The first hypothesis was developed by an anthropologist, Lauriston Sharp, who on the basis of his investigations into the totemic ideology of the Yir Yoront, came to the conclusion that sustained contact between the people of the reserve and European Australians would lead to the collapse of the indigenous cultural system. The second hypothesis was implicit in Queensland State Government policy and legislation. It stated that the Aboriginal people of the Edward River settlement could be transformed over time from a welfare-dependent, managed community to one that was just like a normal country town in Queensland by providing physical amenities similar to those of country towns, and by imposing routines and social structures similar to those found in the economic systems and formal processes of social control in the dominant society.

Neither hypothesis has accurately anticipated the real outcome. Aboriginal belief systems have not collapsed

nor have the people of Edward River achieved that level of cultural competence that would permit them to manage their community without help. It is argued in this thesis that the first hypothesis failed because of an anthropological interpretation that over-emphasized the comprehensiveness of the indigenous totemic ideology and thus understated the resilience of Edward River belief systems. It is argued that the second hypothesis concerning the appropriate techniques for inducing change is also failing despite the commitment of the Edward River people to the development of their community. Edward River people have adapted to their institutional environment in such a way as to preserve some fundamental Aboriginal values, and to create a permanent niche for outside managers. There seems little prospect for change in this situation unless certain prerequisites to fruitful socio-cultural change are incorporated in basic planning strategies.

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CONVENTIONS

In rendering Aboriginal words I have employed the practical orthography developed by Dr A.H. Hall for the Edward River bilingual programme. Kinship notation follows the standard practice for representing kintypes. Classificatory relationships are represented by enclosing kintypes within quotes. The symbols ♀ and ♂ preceding a kintype mean "from the viewpoint of a female..." and "from the viewpoint of a male..." respectively.

In those places where I have had to rely heavily on the case material of other anthropologists, I have taken care to distinguish the material that I recorded from the material recorded by others by noting the appropriate source. In case examples where there is no source attributed the reader may assume that they represent my original data.

In the analysis and discussion of disputing behaviour I have followed the convention of numbering cases in order to make it easier to refer to them in the text.