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The Aboriginal people of Erarnbie

- descendants of the Wiradjuri

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
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programme at Macquarie University 1981,
by C. Chaffe.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY.

ABBREVIATIONS.

- 'The Select Committee', refers to:
The Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly on
Aborigines, Parliament of NSW, 1981.

- 'First Report of the Select Committee', refers to:
First Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative
Assembly upon Aborigines of NSW Aboriginal Land Rights and
Sacred and Significant Sites, Government Printer, 1980.

- 'Minutes of Select Committee', refers to:
Report from the Select Committee of the Legislative
Assembly upon Aborigines, Minutes of Evidence, Parliament
of NSW, Government Printer, 1980.

- 'Second Report of the Select Committee', refers to:
The Second Report from the Select Committee of the
Legislative Assembly upon Aborigines, Parliament of NSW,
Government Printer, 1981.

- 'A.W.B.' refers to:
the Aborigines Welfare Board.

- 'A.O. N.S.W.' refers to:
the Archives Office of N.S.W.

- 'A.I.A.S.' refers to:
Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.

PRECIS

This thesis is a study of the culture of a small community of Aboriginal people at Erambie, near Cowra, N.S.W. These people are consciously and deliberately recreating, renewing their culture. They are the descendants of the Wiradjuri of the Lachlan Valley and are now looking to their past to understand their present and create their future.

This work examines why this is necessary for them. In order to do this, it, like them, look to the culture of their ancestors and traces the forces that have acted upon them and their descendants through their effects to today.

It thus demonstrates the continuum from the culture of their forebears to the culture of the Aboriginal people of Erambie today. Part of this continuum is the importance of land then and now. The significance of land now is as a vital element necessary for the preservation of their culture.

All of the foregoing provides documentation of grounds for a land claim made by them and attached to this work. The claim was put together by me, according to their instructions.

"Land is everything to Aboriginal people
the centre of Aboriginal culture. For Aboriginal
people everything is centred around the land . . .
The original taking away of the land from the
Aboriginal people was the main cause of the
disintegration of Aboriginal culture . . . We are
now trying to put back all the bits and pieces and
that is a difficult task."

(A. Coe. Minutes Select Committee, p. 338).

INTRODUCTION

Background and Aims.

The idea for this thesis came out of some field work that was undertaken in the 18 months period, from the second half of 1979 to the end of 1980. This field work was undertaken as part of the course work requirements for the B.A. programme in Sociology at NSW University. However, this work was also undertaken on behalf of the Aboriginal Legal Service at Redfern, Sydney. They wanted some assistance gathering statistical and historical information to help them put together their submission to the NSW Select Committee upon Aborigines in NSW. Some students undertook archival work. Some went into the field to various Aboriginal communities throughout NSW. I was in a group that went to Erambie reserve, near Cowra.

The field work served at least two purposes. Students learned field work and research techniques as required by the University and the Legal Service gained some information they needed but would otherwise have had some difficulty gathering. As far as I am concerned, this work served at least two more purposes. It gave me the idea that my future university studies might very well be useful to others as well as myself. It also gave me an introduction to a community of people who could use the services of a researcher.

From an original intention to write the history of the Wiradjuri people, my ideas developed to include work of a broader nature. The main reason for this change was consideration of the ideas of Mr Les Coe. He and his wife Agnes were my host and hostess during my field work trips. Mr Coe died last year. During the time I knew him he impressed upon me his belief that land rights were the hope for a decent future for his people.

This work is intended as a study of the culture of Erambie people now and in the past and as the documentary basis for a land claim made by them.

Dave Morrissey was the person whose ideas had most influence on me in judging the feasibility of this aim. His own thesis, completed last year, at this university, was a history of government policy towards Aboriginal people in this state; and he attached two land claims to this work; claims he had researched. He said "The presentation of work done for Aborigines as part of an academic work is . . . intended as a gesture towards such incorporations becoming more normal." (1980: p. (ii)).

I see my work as a continuation of this bid towards "acceptance by University authorities that work done under their regimes can be of an activist character." I want this work to be a piece of research of value to the university and to the Aboriginal people who are its subject. I don't want this dual purpose to be compromising of the value of either aim. I wish to demonstrate with this thesis that these two aims need not be incompatible.

Another aim of this thesis is to restore to Erambie people some of their history that they have lost. For reasons that will be discussed later, they do not know much of the details of the pre-contact history of the Wiradjuri society or of the history of their resistance to white takeover. They know enough of what happened to realise that such knowledge is important for them in understanding their own position today.

In attempting to consolidate their cultural heritage they want to gather together this sort of historical information. They don't want to go back to bush life. They want to put together all the bits and pieces of knowledge that have survived. Aborigines, like other oppressed groups, see their hope for the future beginning with a positive affirmation of themselves and their culture. They want to take into their own hands control of their own heritage and their own present.

This brings me to the question of why I should be dealing with a land claim for the people of Cowra. These people are literate and versed in the ways of bureaucracies and the politics of non-Aboriginal Australian society, to a far greater degree than, for example, the Aborigines of Northern Australia. Shouldn't an Aboriginal person be doing this, rather than a non-Aboriginal? Is such a project, undertaken by a white anthropology student, simply another example of colonization of the knowledge of Aborigines for the purposes of non-Aboriginal intellectual endeavours? Is this a colonization of their desire to look to their own history instead of to the white non-history of Aborigines?

I believe the answer to the first question is yes. An Aboriginal person should be writing this work but the Aborigines of Cowra are in a position where their resources are stretched by the business of living daily life. They are in that category of Australians who were found by the 1981 NSW Select Committee upon Aborigines, to be the most disadvantaged group in the country:

- the infant mortality rate for Aborigines, in 1978 was three times that for non-Aborigines.
- 50% of NSW Aborigines live in housing detrimental to physical and social health.
- only 2% go beyond Grade 9 at school, compared with 24% of white children. (pp. 34-43, Report of the Australian Council of Churches).
- NSW Aborigines are seventeen times more likely to be in prison than non-Aborigines.
- in 1978 there were close to 60% of NSW Aborigines unemployed.
- Aboriginal life expectancy at birth is 50 years; whereas for non-Aboriginal Australians the figure is 71 years.
- infant mortality per 1000 live births is 120 for Aborigines, 16 for non-Aboriginal Australians (pp. 15-395 2nd Report of the Select Committee).

Because of their present life situation, the Aborigines of Erambie just don't have the time to get together a submission such as this, though they are in favour of it being done.

They are keen for me to do it, as someone who has access to the archival and library deposits of this city, as well as the time. I am in a much better position than they are to do it. For these reasons I am able to act as a consultant to them.

The question of whether such an attempt is only another way of colonising the knowledge of Aborigines for non-Aboriginal purposes, is a little more complex.

It has become increasingly clear that work done by anthropologists is not done in a vacuum. Governments, mining companies and other bodies can use anthropological reports for their own ends and against the best interests of those about whom they are written. When this is considered in conjunction with the fact that most of those who are subjects of study are in a subordinate, disadvantaged position, then it becomes clear that the possible uses to which the work may be put and the range of interpretation of its meaning, are important considerations for each anthropologist. I would agree with this comment by Mintz:

"Anthropologists today are once again thinking about whether there are sides and if so which side they should be on. The era of detached observation - if there ever was one - is gone forever. Most of us, I suspect - and I for certain - would rather side with the victims of "progress" than become a divining rod with which "progress" identifies its newest victims." (Mintz 1977:60).

For the most part, the relationship of anthropology to the cultures studied has been one of exploitation, in that the anthropologist gains something of value, whilst the other party only loses something, ranging from a bit of privacy to secret information.

Aborigines have too often been the 'objects' of anthropologists' scrutiny. Aborigines are heartily and understandably fed up with this treatment. They are beginning to let us know.

The following question was put to the Select Committee:-

"Is it another committee to make a survey and is it just going to be wiped aside? We have had so many surveys and different things like this and nothing has been done about what the people want. Has the evidence you collect any real significance to the Wran Government, or whoever it goes back to, or is it going to be put in a basket and waste everybody's time?" (A. Coe. Minutes of Select Committee).

If the attitude were taken, that studies should be done for Aboriginal communities, then the normal human relations of exchange would prevail, whereby both partners gained from the experience. Anthropologists would probably even find such an attitude in their own interests as they would be more likely to obtain co-operation by such means.

By doing work for the Aboriginal community, there is an inbuilt guard against exploitation. The University is still using the Aborigines for its own ends, but the Aborigines are also using the University for their purposes.

RESEARCH METHODS.

In attempting to reconstruct the history of the Wiradjuri and describe the culture at Erambie today, data was used from both archival sources and from field trips. Wherever possible the data from the field work were used comparatively with the archival sources. Where the two sorts of data conflicted, these differences were presented and reasons for these differences analysed. The early accounts were also considered in the light of present day ideas on for example, the position of women in society. In this way, a synthesis was made of all available data.

Altogether five field work trips were made. In 1979 a trip of one week was made. At this time the Legal Service wanted information on conflicts between the Wiradjuri and the English invaders in the first days of contact. They also wanted information on knowledge of material remnants of Aboriginal culture, such as carved trees, bora grounds and cave paintings.

In 1980 two field trips were made, one of a week and one of four days. This time the Legal Service wanted information about the situation of Aboriginal people in terms of certain social variables. They wanted to know about housing conditions, health, employment and particularly about education.

In 1981 two more field trips were made. The first was for a weekend at the beginning of the year when ideas for this work were discussed informally. Some people said that whilst it was important for them to know their own history, land claims were even more important. A field trip of one week, later in the year, was used to determine just how prevalent this attitude was. A survey was conducted where each person was asked their views on land rights; whether they were in favour of me helping to research a claim and what land, if any, they wanted claimed. People were also asked about their kin relationships to other people at Erambie, whether they were born there and if not where and why they came there.

The information from all these field trips was used in this work.

BASES OF LAND CLAIMS.

Land claims in NSW do not follow the same format as in the Northern Territory. Many claims have been put to the government of NSW, though none have yet been granted. The book Land Claims in NSW, is a collection of these claims, put together by the NSW Land Council. Since the first of these claims was drafted, there has been a government Select Committee upon Aborigines, which put out a Report on Aboriginal Land

Rights. The claims already made, and the recommendationw of this Select Committee, are the only guidelines available for future claims. Hence these sources have been used here as an important part of the formula for this work.

The NSW Select Committee upon Aborigines recommended that claims for land be founded on any or all of the following bases:-

- (a) needs
- (b) compensation
- (c) long association
- (d) traditional rights (1st Report of Select C'tee, P. 8).

These bases were interpreted according to the guidelines set out in the book Land Claims in NSW.

According to these guidelines;

- " 1) Aboriginal people should be able to claim land simply because they Need it. This could be for spiritual, social or economic reasons.
- 2) Land could be claimed as part of the Compensation which the European community owes to Aborigines for taking their land and destroying a lot of the people and their culture.
- 3) Where Aboriginal people had lived for a long time in a place; they could claim land on the basis of long Association.
- 4) Where people can show that they are descended from the original people of a particular area, they could claim land as a Traditional Right." (Land Claims Book, 5th Page, unpaginated).

The fourth Chapter of this work 'Culture Today', shows that the Erambie people need the land for economic and social reasons. It also demonstrates the importance to them of preserving their cultural cohesion and shows that land rights are needed for this.

Chapter one, 'Before the White Invasion', demonstrates what Wiradjuri society was like in the early days. Later chapters show what was lost after the takeover:- land, the lives of many of their

people, the well-being of many more people and important elements of their culture such as language and religious ritual. In this way the thesis demonstrates just grounds for a claim on the basis of compensation for what was lost.

Chapters two and three demonstrates the basis for a claim on the grounds of long association.

The whole of the history, from pre-contact times to today, demonstrates that Erambie people can show that they are descended from the Aboriginal people of the area and thus forms the basis of a claim on the grounds of traditional rights.

The situation could be envisaged where a claim made on the basis of tribal rights, could be challenged. It might be argued that rights should not be distributed to people on the basis of who their ancestors were. This might be seen as an aristocratic idea. The point is that such an argument is based on the ideas of a culture introduced to Australia. Aboriginal culture was here prior to white culture and traditionally land rights were based on ancestral ties. The Aboriginal people of this state have special and different ties to land than non-Aboriginal Australians. This land was violently taken from them by war waged on them and they have never been compensated for this loss. Usually the loss and the manner of taking the land have not even been recognised by the dominant society.

A claim based on need might also be resisted by someone who also asserted need. In any disputed proceedings there is a 'need' to justify one's case. The statistics presented earlier in this introduction, show that where economic need is involved, it would be unlikely that any other party would be more in need than Aborigines. Also Aborigines wish to negotiate solutions with non-Aborigines.

"An equitable solution could be worked out between the Aboriginal and the European people. If we knew that land rights were to be granted our demands would be reasonable,

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knowing that we have to live with our fellow white
Australians. We would not want to contribute to
racial discord." (P. Coe, Minutes of Select Committee p. 246).

