Does 'culture' have 'history'? Thinking about continuity and change in central New South Wales

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Introduction

I was on Erambie mission in Cowra in the early 1980s, sitting on a chair on the lawn while one of the guys cut my hair. An older Wiradjuri man saw us and came up to tell me to make sure I picked up every bit of hair when we had finished. No explanation, just, 'You don't want to leave that lying around now'. He moved on, and as he did, a young woman sitting with others on the grass turned to me with a nod, 'Yeh, you could get sung, you know!' She smiled but it was clear she was serious and sharing his concern. While I personally do not know of Wiradjuri people who train these days in the arts of sorcery, it is nevertheless an ever-present fact of life. People remain susceptible to it, one never knows who might be around who does practise it, or where people have visited where they have been in contact with it. But I was surprised by this man's comment. Not by his obvious reference to the existence of spiritual powers or forces which can be mobilised by people, but because this same man had, earlier that very day, been at pains to convince me my studies of 'culture' in Wiradjuri country were misconceived — there was no culture left. In retrospect, with more understanding of aspects of Wiradjuri experience and of that particular person, it seems that he was doing what many non-Aboriginal Australians do: working on a stereotypical notion of what 'Aboriginal culture' should look like and, in the process, devaluing the culture that he and others around him were actually living.

Not that I should have been surprised. Wiradjuri country is in central New South Wales, a State in which the growth and success of Anglo-Australian society and industry has for more than a century been sustained by a belief that not only was the destruction of Aboriginal society in the face of colonising forces inevitable, it was also complete. Even the most supportive advocate of civil rights for New South Wales Aboriginal people could point to the dispersals, massacres, dispossession, miscegenation and loss of culture and language. Themes such as resistance, while they made active agents and fighters of the previously passive depictions of Aboriginal people, nevertheless helped to fuel the image of irrevocable loss. Thus, claims in this State under the *Native Title Act* (1994) have been met with surprise or cynicism in some quarters. The idea that there are continuities in Aboriginal traditions not only confronts this myth of dispossession but also stereotypical notions of 'Aboriginal culture'. The resultant distortions for an understanding of Aboriginal cultural dynamics in New South Wales

have taken on a new political significance with the passing of the *Native Title Act* because it requires that one determine the extent to which classical structures affect and inform the life-world of contemporary Aboriginal people's cultural systems and the extent to which these structures have or have not been altered in their accommodation of modern cultural forms such as the nuclear family, the global capitalist economy and the modern nation state.

This paper briefly explores the history of studies in New South Wales which have contributed to the popular belief in cultural loss. My focus is on the work of social anthropologists, in part because it is the discipline within which I work, but also because few other disciplines took any interest in Aboriginal experiences in New South Wales until the 1980s. This overview demonstrates, not surprisingly, that the analyses of anthropologists were influenced by the politics as well as the theoretical perspectives of their day. However, in seeking to encourage a more critical approach to the anthropological analysis of change, I would not want to undermine the contributions these earlier writings continue to make. These writers took an interest in southeastern Australia despite it being academically unfashionable to do so and their observations and insights reveal much about Aboriginal practice at different points through the mid-twentieth century. But what is needed today from anthropologists and historians is the development of a fine-grained, localised but contextualised and ethnographically-informed approach which will enable the historicising of Aboriginal peoples in south-east Australia. This will open up an appreciation of the ways in which they have changed and why they have done so, as well as enable identification of the ways in which they have transformed their own practices in response to changing environments so as to maintain valued practices, albeit in much modified ways. Such studies will not only counter the perception that 'culture' can be 'lost' (although, of course, specific practices can be rendered illegal, irrelevant or impossible to maintain) but will also challenge the ways in which some peoples' experiences of change are valued but not others.

Studies of Aboriginal culture in New South Wales

The view of 'cultural loss' that prevailed throughout most of the twentieth century, until the 1980s, has largely been the result of two factors. The first is inadequate field-based research. Second, where field data clearly show otherwise, attesting to continuities in Aboriginal practice in New South Wales, the assumptions of loss, along with an anthropological tendency to value only the exotic as worthy of study, encouraged the analysis of this data within uncritical models of social change which assumed the inevitability of the demise of Aboriginal traditions and the consequent adoption of European cultural ways. This is evident in the work of Marie Reay. On the basis of her work in rural New South Wales in the 1940s, Reay (1949: 112) argued that:

When the culture of a group fails to adjust to radically changed external conditions, the group is apt to be characterized by the pathological condition of disequilibrium ... A cursory glance at the place of the mixed-blood communities in the larger, predominantly European society, indicates that it is a pathological part of that society ... Clearly, incompatible goals can be pursued, conflicting values held, without the group approaching disequilibrium, if the group is adequately structured. But a strong institutional structure is lacking here.

However, despite the attitude she expresses above, Reay provides rich data on various Aboriginal practices and beliefs. She does not interpret these as a contemporary portrait of Aboriginal peoples' actual lifestyles – as the outcome of strategic choices as they mediated changes over which they often had little control. Rather, she dismisses signs of cultural distinctiveness as vestiges of a past not yet successfully discarded.

Reay is only one example of the common approach of the mid-twentieth century which was ethnocentric, organicist and synchronic. It attempted to account for the oddities of Aboriginal lifestyle as consequences of an Aboriginal failure to adjust to European domination. Bell (1962, 1964) put it as strongly in the 1960s:

Generally speaking, the part-aborigines of New South Wales have no culture of their own to preserve. There is the odd exception of a settlement where a few attenuated features of traditional life hang on, but these have little relevance to the people's way of life (Bell 1964: 64).

Bell dismissed any notion that Aborigines had a different culture, maintaining that their distinctive 'tightly knit groups' were solely a product of social, economic and cultural depression: 'in other words, these groups are just like groups of poor whites' (1964: 68).

Calley (1957) did give some weight to the efficacy and influence of Aboriginal ways. In particular, he argued that Aborigines of the north coast had been able to reconcile some of their beliefs with those of Christianity, as did Hausfeld (1959). Both writers attribute the retention of practices which stem from classical times ('traditional practices'), however successfully incorporated, to the need to ameliorate their low status in Australian society by sustaining an alternative world from which Europeans could be excluded (see also Rowley 1972). In that respect they recognised that 'traditions' could be evidence of strategic choices that Aboriginal people themselves were making, even if only reactively, foreshadowing later studies that saw distinctive domains as a product of colonial relations (see Beckett, below) and which picked up on the resistance theme which was to gain support from historians through the 1980s (see below) and more recently in forms of political anthropology (Morris 1989, Cowlshaw 1999; see more generally Gledhill 2000).

Such evaluations reflected Berndt's (1963: 386) assumption that there was a continuum which could be drawn from 'traditionally oriented' Aborigines to those who were 'to all intents and purposes European'. For those in the centre of this continuum the analyst was required to decide 'when the life of the people is no longer meaningful in traditional Aboriginal terms, but is meaningful only or predominantly in European terms' (Berndt 1963: 387). Aboriginal studies required that one or other of two determining cultures be selected as the reference point. In settled Australia, the European world was assumed to be all powerful and Aborigines were evaluated in predominantly European terms. The term 'settled Australia' was introduced as a model by Rowley (1972: v) to denote the southeast and southwest regions of Australia 'in which those enumerated as half-caste are approximately equal in number with those enumerated as Aboriginal in the 1961 census'. Rowley described Aboriginal people in the mid-west of New South Wales as having 'approached a higher degree of acceptance and integration' — to the extent that 'one is forever looking for people where this has happened, since they may not be thought of as Aboriginal at all' (1972: vii). This last comment is curious. Aboriginal people would appear to have been uncomfortably visi-

ble to Europeans who in the 1960s were concerned about Aboriginal people moving into the towns. Bell, in contrast, maintained that differences were obvious — in lifestyle as well as appearance. He asserted, in apparent contradiction of his argument on cultural loss, that the value system of New South Wales Aboriginal people was 'diametrically opposed to that of the European population' and that this was 'one of the chief factors distinguishing them from Europeans' (1965: 406; 1962). However, these differences were not interpreted as characteristics of *Aboriginal* societies but rather as examples of why Aboriginal people were failing to enter into the relations expected of them.

When the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was established under an Act of Parliament in 1964 to 'promote aboriginal studies' it focussed its brief on studies of traditional Aboriginal life, further entrenching the dichotomy of cultured and cultureless. There were constraints operating on the Institute. The parliamentary debate stressed that the new Institute was to be academic: 'It is not intended that the new institute should rival existing institutions' (Commonwealth of Australia 1964: 1944). It was to be restricted to collection, processing and preservation of material about traditional Aboriginal society before it, too, 'disappeared'. Set up as a response to the call for urgent action to be taken to conduct Aboriginal studies before 'the source material of many aspects of study in this field' disappeared (Mr Freeth, Minister for Shipping and Transport, in Commonwealth of Australia 1964: 1943), it assisted in the recognition of the strength of traditions of Aboriginal practice in remote Australia and thus in a process of their valorisation, something much need in settled Australia where Aboriginal people were being taught to be ashamed of what they were (see, for instance, Jimmy Barker's story in Mathews 1977). This opportunity was explicitly denied to Indigenous people of 'settled Australia'. This was not simply on the grounds that they were believed to have no traditions but because the pressure to eliminate continuing practice in order to better assimilate them was so much greater in areas where their presence conflicted with European goals.

Beazley, Member for Fremantle, was well aware at the time of the tensions which were reflected in the way in which the Institute was established:

There can easily develop, among welfare officers and many authorities who are administering aboriginal affairs in the Commonwealth and in the States, a possessive attitude towards aborigines, a resentment if somebody else comes into the field and a particular resentment if somebody else's study reveals things which are inconvenient ... I believe that there is a clear contradiction between a general policy of assimilation, which means the disappearance of the aboriginal culture, and this battle to preserve, at least in record form, the aboriginal culture. A contradiction can easily develop between two sets of persons — the people who believe they are administering a policy of assimilation and the people who, for the sake of their studies, are encouraging the performances of ceremonies, recording the languages and so on (Commonwealth of Australia 1964: 2160).

Thus, the Institute's existence was predicated on two lines of thought: first, Aboriginal traditional life ways were destined soon to disappear and, second, the operation of the policy of assimilation (and the protection of the industry set up to ensure it) was to remain paramount. It was hardly surprising that anthropological studies in 'settled Australia' — which also had particularly entrenched welfare agencies — would not have been valued. In fact, amongst a people considered well on the way to assimilation,

if not very successfully, such studies may have seemed to constitute a threat to this policy direction. Later, Berndt was amongst those who would have liked to have seen this brief broadened. He maintained that:

To widen the Institute's focus at that time was quite a struggle. For a matter of several years, the Institute officially resisted studies of non-traditional themes, especially when these concerned the southern regions or political issues — these were considered to fit more appropriately within the frame of Aboriginal administration (Berndt 1982:57).

Nevertheless, there was a new wave of anthropological studies emerging, prompted in part by WEH Stanner. Most notably this included Jeremy Beckett (1958, 1964, 1965, 1978, 1993, 1996) who worked in western New South Wales among the Wongaibon, Barkinji and Maljangapa people and Diane Barwick (1963, 1964, 1978, 1998) who conducted extensive research in Victoria. Their contributions proved much less evaluative and have thus been more enduring. Beckett was the first to argue for the New South Wales context that Aboriginal people had distinctive modes of interaction, as in kinship relations, drinking styles, and in mobility patterns — the Aboriginal 'beat', which marked them off from Europeans. It was not the world of poor black whites. He also focused on Aboriginal men in the pastoral industry who were variously negotiating the immense changes they were living through (1978, 1993, 1996). In many ways Beckett's work was before its time and was largely unheralded for two decades (but see, for example, Sansom 1980, 1982). Barwick was particularly, and perhaps uniquely at the time in anthropology, concerned to record Victorian Aboriginal people's histories, a task interrupted by her untimely death. Through an historical approach, she sought to identify those social structures and activities which illustrated a coherence in Aboriginal social life over time. In another notable study conducted in northern New South Wales, Kitaoji (1976: VII-52) drew attention to the distinction that should be made between the destruction of tribal social organisation and social deprivation: 'The former is an historical fact; the latter is an inference'. Her analysis of kinship demonstrates how kin relatedness remained an integral component of Aboriginal understandings of sociality, personhood and gender, despite the changes wrought in its actual expressions by political and economic pressures.

Studies elsewhere in settled Australia still focused on the success or otherwise of assimilation (see, for instance, Gale 1964, 1972; Inglis 1961, 1964; and Pierson 1972 in South Australia; and Eckermann 1973 and Smith and Biddle 1975 in southeastern Queensland). The maintenance of kinship was attributed to poverty, and female-headed households to 'broken down' nuclear families. But in almost all this work, until the 1970s, anthropological models of Aboriginal life in southeast Australia implicitly reinforced the notion of discontinuity: classical Aboriginal culture was a thing of the past, and discernable 'vestiges' were supposed not to be able to last.

Another factor emerges in the 1960s to further reinforce the notion of discontinuity. At the time that the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies was promoting the study of 'traditional Aborigines' there was simultaneously an increasing emphasis on religious beliefs as central, indeed definitional, in the understanding of Aboriginal societies. This view underpinned the land rights movement in northern Australia and eventually the framing of the Northern Territory *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* 1976. The distinguishing characteristics of Aboriginal practice were associated with ritual or with

'spirituality', de-emphasising, indeed even excluding, political, economic and social practice (see also Povinelli 1993). Perhaps the hardest hit of all facets of Aboriginal experience in colonial New South Wales, this focus on religion further removed them from interest: if religion was so central, without it how could they have culture? The political and academic response in 'settled Australia' was to de-emphasise 'culture' — indeed, even to deny it — emphasising a history of injustices, of Aboriginal resistance, of rights denied by the force of arms, of subjects constituted by colonialism, of people whose enforced change (interpreted as loss) should be compensated. Historians, including Indigenous historians, became more visible than anthropologists in the production of models through which Aboriginal peoples could articulate their demands (for instance, Prentis 1975, Broome 1982, Miller 1985, Wilmot 1987) and it became fashionable to depict anthropologists as perpetrators of the 'great deception' (Langton 1984) of cultural loss.

Although not challenging this general model of discontinuity in his earlier work, Beckett was nevertheless one of the few prepared to cut across the notions of a 'cultural vacuum' and establish new directions of study. He took Aboriginal people out of the 'disappearing race category', challenging those who argued that their pre-contact culture was the only model by which they should be judged. He also rejected the depiction of Aboriginal people in essentialist terms (1988: 3), later explaining his approach:

But this is not a matter of challenging the authenticity of a people's cultural tradition, or of their historical experience as it is passed on to succeeding generations, so much as an insistence that these things cannot be understood apart from their relationship with the state.

Beckett argues that a group which is seen to be only reproducing its own social and cultural forms cannot control the definitions of who they are and Aboriginal engagement with the wider society needs to become the important focus. But Beckett's corrective for what he sees as an essentialising tendency nevertheless insufficiently allows for those aspects of Aboriginal cultural tradition which cannot simply be understood as inversions or transformations of introduced forms but are transformations of practices and meanings with a history distinct from, albeit significantly reshaped by, the presence and pressures of European colonisers.

The constructionist approach which emphasised Aboriginal lifeways as constructed and historically constituted tended to reinforce the idea that Aboriginal peoples of 'settled Australia' were, by and large, but creations of colonialism. The depressing status of victim was re-valourised by reading it as 'resistance' but 'change' still meant loss, although one that was now understood as imposed by colonial violence and repression rather than due to an indigenous lack or any natural inevitability.

Cowlishaw (1988, 1997) and Morris (1983, 1989, 1997) have been prominent authors of the impacts of colonialism on the lifeways of New South Wales Aboriginal peoples, people encapsulated and constructed through relations of race, surveillance or terror. Expanding on Beckett's studies of relations between Aborigines and the state, both have particularly emphasised the role that racism has played in the construction of Aboriginal identities. But they have steered away from studies of the internal dynamics of Aboriginal lifeways within communities which are still, largely as a result of state incursions as they point out, physically and socially segregated from non-Aboriginal Australians (although Morris' 1989 work on 'creative bricolage' starts to develop

important insights into cultural processes of change). While this may not have been an intention, the focus on racism nevertheless also reinforces the idea that Aboriginal people in southeastern Australia are creations of an ongoing colonial encounter and that their own *cultural* history plays little part in their modes of engagement with either each other or the wider society.

Culture, structure and change

The term 'culture' has been used in so many ways in both anthropology and popular use as to become very confused but I use it to refer to those social, intellectual and materially-oriented practices through which people express what it means to them to be in the world. Culture is thus the product of peoples' interactions with each other and their environments. But these practices cannot be understood as static or unchanging: they change, adapt, shift as a people move from one place to another, as a group of cohorts ages, as new practices are introduced, or as the material environment changes — from one season to another, after devastation such as war, or through changes in technological practices. 'Culture' is therefore dynamic, a reference to the constant creativity of human beings in their social contexts as they move through different times, places and events. Thus culture is, implicitly, a reference to the range of creative capacities for change and adaptation which one might expect to find among a particular people. What enables these creative, adaptive processes is better understood if we think of culture as those systems of meaning and practice produced by the ways in which people interact with each other and their environments, including dealing with the constraints as well as the possibilities that those environments yield.

Through the influence of Radcliffe-Brown from the 1920s, anthropologists in Australia understood people's lives as taking place within structures of, for instance, kinship or politics. The models of structure at the time were static and there has been a tendency in recent years to reject them altogether. But we need to maintain the idea of structure — all social life is not fluid and amenable to choice — and we can now do so understanding that structures of thought and practice are always in a process of change (through the work of Bourdieu 1977 and Giddens 1984 in particular). From the 1950s, Lévi-Strauss sought to unravel the deep structures of cultural life of which we are not conscious, which underpin the meanings of everyday belief and practice. One legacy of both of these approaches to understanding the structures which constrain action is the reminder that day to day practice takes place within systems of meaning. Meaningful practice, shared and modified over time, reveals structured patterns. The choices people make day to day, the constraints within which they make them, and the contingencies of life suggest constant change and flux. Nevertheless, it is also the case that much of this seeming flux is taking place within higher order structures of morality, value orientation and social relatedness that are enduring and which both modify and are modified by changes presented to us.

Structural configurations can be powerfully embedded, operating as frameworks which allow multiple levels of meanings to be negotiated and lived out, rather than as formations which constitute or fix the culture in time or space. These structures are our cultural histories, linking present and changing practices with meanings and values of their past. This shifts the earlier anthropological focus from structure as a system of formal rules and regulations operating in a climate of cultural stasis, to a more dynamic

understanding of structure as defined in relation to ideational frameworks, moral codes and practices which provide pathways for distinct ways of being in the world. These structuring elements of practice are not necessarily visible or understood by those who participate in them, and apparently similar practices may take on different meanings in different cultural contexts. For instance, an activity such as a fight between two young Wiradjuri men might be 'read' or interpreted quite differently by people of cultural different backgrounds (Macdonald 1988). The meanings one brings to the interpretation of an observable event are informed by embedded values and moralities in ways that even participants in that society are not always aware of because they take them so much for granted. It is a central tenet of social anthropology that most people grow up 'ethnocentric' — believing their own taken-for-granted ways of being in the world are shared (or, perhaps, should be shared) by others around them — indeed, they need to operate effectively as a socialised being. It is 'natural' to interpret the actions of others from our own standpoint.

Wiradjuri people tend to be more keenly aware of differences between their own ways of being in the world and those of 'white people' than is the reverse. Differences of meaning and values are constantly brought to light in complex interactions in which they are usually unequal partners. These differences both maintain and reinforce a distinctiveness which is not always in ways of their own choosing, consistently reinforcing the consciousness of separate domains: Aboriginal domains as those spaces and times in which their values predominate are contrasted with the relative constriction of European domains. 'White people' with little or no experience of Aboriginal domains tend only to look at Aboriginal social life in New South Wales at a superficial level, in which they see many changes in activities as compared with the visual representations of the 'traditional Aborigine'. The voluntary or enforced adoption of new activities of European origin within an Aboriginal cultural repertoire, leads to an ethnocentric assumption that the meanings and significance of these activities is also carried over into the receiving culture. At times, this is indeed the case. More often, however, tenacious structures of meaning and practice operate to mould or adapt introduced ideas and activities so as to maintain, where feasible, embedded understandings of personhood, sociality and being in the world. This leads to a process of transformation in which one can recognise a complex interaction of continuities in change.

Two decades ago Liberman (1978: 174) noted in the Western Desert that cultural regalia such as 'make-up, fancy clothes, rock-and-roll cassettes, comic books, and so on' can have some effect in inculcating prevailing Euraustralian aspirations', but 'they can be tolerated in large quantities without affecting significantly the everyday social relationships of Aborigines'. It goes without saying that anyone conversant with the history of New South Wales will recognise the significant impact of European culture, including its ontological framework, on Aboriginal people. Nevertheless, my research over two decades indicates that Aboriginal frameworks have not simply been replaced by ones derived from Europeans (see Beckett 1958 and 1964 for earlier examples; also Austin-Broos 1996). Indeed, many of the conflicts and difficulties of intra-community life and of Aboriginal-European relations arise because of this little recognised fact.

According to Kapferer (1979), the transformation of contexts may be taking place even when the surface elements, the ingredients of social action, might appear incoherent. It is such an 'incoherence' which, to Europeans in the mid-twentieth century,

seemed to constitute the Aboriginal experience in southeast Australia. It looked neither classically Aboriginal nor European. However, transformation, as a means of reconciling the known with change, is not necessarily an obvious process. Changes may occur in the content of social relations such that the new content is altered but retains a significance similar to that pre-existing. The present is but one point in a series of spatial-temporal phases in which there is simultaneous permanence and change (Hunt 1977). Social life is never static: changes are inevitable, with or without the relations set up by colonisation. Europeans have generally assumed that the effects of European colonisation and capitalism are all-pervasive, that a hunter-gather society would not have means of incorporating the new system within the logic of the old. This does not imply that accommodation to European ways does not take place: in fact, this was necessitated as Europeans redefined the Wiradjuri social and economic environment. However, neither does it imply that change has to take place in terms of a European way of being. Indeed, it is not possible to make adjustments or transformations in terms of someone else's way of being.

Early anthropological definitions of structure have been radically reinterpreted in recent decades. The weakness of earlier structuralist and functionalist theoretical paradigms, which privileged the analysis of fixed or static structural forms and therefore their perceived dominance in shaping the lives of their given subjects, was, of course, that they presented a picture of classical societies as being unchanging, constantly reproducing themselves according to their own particular structural imperatives. Originally developed to meet the needs of the scientific method in the late nineteenth century, 'structure' was privileged over 'process' because it was more amenable to analysis in the mechanistic terms of scientific positivism — important to new disciplines struggling to gain legitimacy as social *sciences*. The 'arrangement of parts' (forms and mechanisms) thus took precedence over study of what those 'parts' did in everyday life or the systems of shared meanings underlying and constituting those parts (structures), and in the intricacies of the lives of inhabitants.

This is evident in nineteenth century studies of New South Wales societies in which early anthropologists (such as Cameron 1885; Mathews 1894, 1897, 1900; Radcliffe-Brown 1918; Elkin 1933; Berndt 1947) became preoccupied with studying the structures of kinship and ritual organisation but told us little of the ways in which these translated into or emerged from the daily practice of, for instance, 'being kin'. It had been theoretically and practically more 'manageable' to analyse a cultural structure such as kinship, language, religion or law, than it was to investigate the impact of these structures on the personal desires and motives of individuals within the communities under study, requiring as the latter does a particularly demanding form of field work. As a result, classical anthropology told us more about the form of a particular society than it did about the day to day lives of its people. People however make social structures work *for them*. They are not imprisoned by them.

The earlier mechanistic methods were unable to account for change, encouraging the static views of 'culture' in which change came to be interpreted as 'destruction'. The inability to theorise change and deal with structure dynamically meant that 'break-down' was the outcome of any analysis because all change was assumed to be in the direction of either European-American style modernisation or extinction. This has had profound implications for the understanding of Aboriginal societies in their various

responses to colonisation, and in particular in the southeast of Australia where the intensity of colonial impacts necessitated and often forced radical change. In New South Wales the focus in the earlier literature on Aboriginal lifeways led to distorting preoccupations with manifest structure at the expense of meaning and process, giving rise, as outlined above, to a century of writing about Aboriginal peoples in terms of 'loss', 'breakdown' and 'remnants', denying their creative capacities in the face of violent upheavals and the continuity of valued practices. Certainly there has been a loss of certain practices and beliefs which could not be continued in the very changed economic and social circumstances which their colonisation imposed on them. The assumption of 'cultural loss' among Aboriginal people of southeastern Australia is distorting.

The formal structures of classical Wiradjuri served, as far as can be ascertained from this literature, to enable succession to specific knowledges and ownership, and to regulate relationships between people for the purposes of marriage, ceremony and dispute management. The more formal something is, the more fixed the structure which it has to translate. The formal structures of classical Wiradjuri life have become attenuated in order to increase their capacity for adjustment necessitated by successions of major and minor disruptions imposed by the colonial order. The more formal something is, the more fixed the structure which it has to translate. Wiradjuri people have relaxed their structures in order to increase their capacity for the fluidity necessitated by successions of both major and minor disruptions imposed by the colonial order. The specificity of Wiradjuri classical lifeways has given way to more diffuse approach to connectedness, of people to people, people to place, and people to the spiritual world. It is wrong to see this as 'loss' or 'weakness' in a cultural form: rather, it is a demonstration of the strength and tenacity of this cultural system. Far from 'not being able to withstand the pressures of colonisation', as popular belief in New South Wales has had it for over a century, the Wiradjuri have had such a commitment to their worldview, and the social, spatial and spiritual relations to which it gives rise, that they have made whatever adjustments have been required of them to ensure that their cultural system survived. In the light of their history, this is remarkable.

Contemporary anthropology has had to recognise the fact that societies are a great deal more dynamic than early models allowed for. The nineteenth century belief in 'progress' as a unilineal change in the direction of northern European culture was not borne out, nor was the later assumption that 'modernisation' inevitably destroys 'tradition'. Anthropology responded not by ignoring structure but by realising that it is not static and that there is a dialectic relationship between structure and meaning, and structure and process in social life. Everyday meanings are continuously negotiated within social structures, and this in turn alters, modifies or transforms these structures in a continuous and dynamic way, what Giddens (1984) called a process of structuration. Geertz (1973) also had a major influence by highlighting the significance of systems of meaning for understanding change, reorienting the study of structures to take into account social processes as ways in which people negotiate meanings, and influence and modify structures. A model of culture that assumes a people's lifeways are characterised only by immediately observable activities is one that cannot take into account the meanings, the values, and the inter-relationships between activities and

meanings by which practices and processes take on the rich depth of experience which constitutes human social life in all its variants.

Formal structures are based on a concept of how people are allowed to be. They provide pathways which maximise the Wiradjuri process of individuation, the coming into being in the world as a unique individual person who is at the same time part of a social entity and identifies with a specific social entity, in this case, Wiradjuri. They adjust as the conditions of being change. It should have been the case that peoples such as the Wiradjuri would long ago have become a *focus* for social anthropology because of their resilience and ability to adapt and transform as cultural beings, people with the capacity to making practice meaningful even within situations over which they had little control. Instead, for five generations they were regarded as of little interest to academics who were preoccupied with defining such societies in their classical form as precursors to 'civilisation', and in their contemporary forms as 'failures'.

Traditionality

Tradition has become a central mode of authentication in the framing of Aboriginal rights within the *Native Title Act* (Cth) (1993/1997). For a quarter of a century, Aboriginal-related social anthropology was dominated by issues emerging from responses to the Northern Territory *Aboriginal Land Rights Act* (1976). Its focus on sites of significance required only limited elaborations of principles of sociality and traditions of continuity. It did not promote a lively discourse of social change in the studies of Aboriginal societies in Australia, despite the increasing significance of such debates elsewhere in the decolonising world. The *Native Title Act* has changed that. By requiring that claimants produce evidence of cultural histories to support their contention that they have a continuity of cultural tradition, it does not allow anthropologists to use worn-out and static models of culture. It challenges us to integrate more adequately into the understanding of Aboriginal societies anthropological insights which have been developed, largely outside Australia, over the past four decades to specifically address the fact of continuities of belief, value and practice *and* dynamic social change as a normal characteristic of *all* societies.

However, it is 'tradition' rather than static notions of culture and formal structure which is now the biggest burden that New South Wales Aboriginal people have to bear. It carries with it the sub-text of authenticity because, in response to the changes in their lives, they have constantly been represented in Australia as 'not real Aborigines'. Wolfe (1994: 110) has coined the notion of 'repressive authenticity', which describes the problem of having to prove Aboriginal authenticity in terms of a limited definition of 'traditionality'. The use of the concept of tradition in the context of static models of culture can act as a mode of exclusion through its creation of a history-less people who are locked in a 'traditional' past, in contrast to being modern. 'Tradition' is rarely a label which people give to their own practices. It is an inherently comparative term, an assessment of the value and recognition of certain practices as against others, as interpreted within a particular relationship (cf. Volkmann 1984: 166). The choice of emphasis is political and arbitrary. We call some practices traditions informed by the past but not others. How are such decisions made and, more significantly, by whom?

Debates about tradition, influenced in particular by Hobsbawm and Ranger's 1983 volume on the *Invention of Tradition*, have tended to focus on the ways it is con-

structed or invented in the present so as to depict the past in a certain way. Tonkinson (1993: 599) has referred to tradition as something that clearly belongs to the present, 'effectively conceptualised as a *resource*, employed (or not employed) strategically by certain (but not all) of a community's members'. One evokes:

the past to gain strategic advantage in the present ... When people contest definitions of the past and the nature and content of customary practices, the 'truth value' of such claims is largely irrelevant to the observer; what matters is whose views prevail, and why, and to what effect.

Ulin (1995: 526) agrees, pointing out that the invention of tradition is not only positional but selective:

Not all discourses of an imagined and relativized past have an equal chance of being advanced and recognized as authoritative. The historical and sociocultural differentials of power thus occupy a central place in establishing which of a multiplicity of positioned actors will be able to advance their versions of the past as authoritative. The effort to gain recognition for an interpretation of the past involves a political struggle for self-identity and mutual recognition that should not be trivialized by a postmodern equivalence of discourses or, as Jonathon Friedman (1991) has argued, a museum concept of culture.

Aboriginality is a bundle of social constructs, many of which compete with each other but on unequal terms. Aboriginality is as constructed in remote Australia as elsewhere but only in remote Australia is it imbued with authenticity. The two principal criteria for a privileged position of authenticity are to be natural and untainted. In wilderness areas the Aborigines are untouched by the Anglo-capitalist. A combination of possessive individualism and modernisation ensure that the demise of those who cannot fulfil these criteria is seen as an equally natural process of decline — and not the outcome of a particular form of anthropological and political privileging, coincidental with expansionist programs in settled Australia. It is 'to be expected' that denser colonial settlement would extinguish Aboriginal traditions, because the colonisers are the powerful. This not only renders the Aboriginal people of settled Australia less authentic, because traditions are defined in such a way as to ensure that this will be the case, it entrenches the legitimacy of colonisation itself. Anthropologists collude in the reproduction of limited constructs of Aboriginality and thus to the denial of alternatives to this system they have constructed. It is now so much taken for granted that the distinctions between remote and settled Australia signify cultural loss, that to question it is to render oneself unacceptably radical or naive.

Handler (1986: 2) maintains that:

Our search for authentic cultural experience — for the unspoiled, pristine, genuine, untouched and traditional — says more about us than about others. Explaining anthropological notions of authenticity will give us yet another example of the startling degree to which anthropological discourse about others proves to be a working out of our own myths.

There is a real paradox in Trilling's (cited in Handler 1986: 3) assertion 'That the word [authenticity] has become part of the moral slang of our day points to the peculiar nature of our fallen condition, our anxiety over the credibility of existence and of individual existences'. But in the exoticising of those who are deemed more authentic in terms of European imagining is the denial of lived lives.

Change happens everywhere as a normal part of cultural process. Traditions are not the vestiges, the conscious or unconscious leftovers from another world of practice. Rather, they refer to meanings and practices moving through time, dynamic. Traditions are those practices and beliefs of a people which are regarded as having been informed by practices and beliefs of the past. They do not normally require to be of long standing in a culture to attract such a label: they need only to have been transmitted through one or two generations, and a particular social group may refer to traditions which have developed as annual rituals over just a short period of time. 'Traditions' are thus contemporary practices that have histories and these histories are complex, full of tension, change and contradiction. They are strategies designed to make the unfamiliar familiar, to maintain power in the hands of some rather than others, to recall fears and prohibitions as well as fond memories handed down from one generation to another. The *bunyip* or *waawee*¹ is still in the river — maybe not as incarnation of the clever man but as feared killer nonetheless, with many a story told of an adult made unwary by the grog pulled down into its icy-cold holes. The card table turns someone's wages into someone else's winnings, which then have to be shared with kin with a traditional right to make demands.

The *Native Title Act* requires that what constitutes a living tradition among Aboriginal peoples must be seen to have its intellectual or behavioural foundations in classical lifeways. For example, when describing their traditions of hunting, rabbits feature frequently and rabbit curry has been a long standing tradition among Wiradjuri people. Some Kooris refer to it as 'traditional Koori food'. However, the rabbit and the curry were introduced from Europe subsequent to the colonisation of Wiradjuri country. The hunting and cooking of goanna or echidna in traditional ways, on the other hand, have been directly informed by classical lifeways and constitute traditions in the context of the Act. If rabbit are hunted in the classical way that possum, for instance, was once hunted, with well-flung stones, this would constitute an adaptation, a transformed tradition. If rabbits are shot with guns, and goannas are no longer hunted at all, one might argue for a cessation of a tradition of hunting in such a case. The realities, I would argue, are much more complex. In many areas, Wiradjuri people continue to hunt goanna, sometimes to cook on open fires and sometimes in the oven. But its meanings have, of course, changed considerably from the days when it was part of a staple diet rather than a symbolic seasonal 'treat'. Thus reference to 'traditions' of, for instance, familial culture, law or other customs, will be to a vibrant and meaningful tradition of intellectual and social activity in contemporary practices and/or beliefs which can be seen to have been informed by this classical period but which are not necessarily expected, consistent with the Mabo High Court decision of 1993, to have been transmitted in identical form or structure.

Continuities are more able to be grasped if one accepts that the dominance of Wiradjuri social life was not total. Even during the mission era, when managers dogged everyday life, people saw themselves as exercising a degree of autonomy. Indeed, the levels of autonomy are probably more reduced today in northern Wiradjuri, and proba-

¹ The *waawee* is like a great snake, which causes death by dragging people down into its deep waterholes (Gribble 1886:118, Mathews 1904:162). Although older Wiradjuri may use the local term *waawee*, it is also now called by its popularised name, the *bunyip*.

bly elsewhere, as a result of contemporary political and economic structures than at any other time in their history, pre- or post-colonisation. Mission managers identified in Wiradjuri memory as good are clearly those who appreciated their need of the Wiradjuri polity, and the kinship networks upon which it was based for the effective management of the community. The Aboriginal Protection and Welfare Boards relied both on hunting and gathering skills and opportunities, and on the economics of sharing to ensure supply throughout the community and thus cut their own costs. Hunting in particular underpinned several of the Wiradjuri mission economies until after World War II. Individual communities have differing histories of the ebbs and flows of controls and repressions of their valued modes of being in relationship to each other and to place and their practices.

And there have been obvious political shifts over time. At certain times, it has been incumbent on Wiradjuri to de-emphasise tradition, at other times to highlight it. This responsiveness to the exigencies of the dominant society is to be expected in a situation of relative powerlessness. The Aboriginal Protection Board encouraged men to hunt to save the Board money. At the same time, hunting signified the continuance of a state of primitivism, and a man who was known to hunt found it more difficult to get a job. Such hypocrisies inevitably produced ambiguities and conflicts in Wiradjuri representations of themselves vis-a-vis the white domain. Hunting, shearing and fruit picking have each been valued highly in different economic eras, and Wiradjuri people have excelled in all of them over generations although, in the indigenous cultural history stakes, a higher symbolic value is placed by contemporary Australia on the skills of hunting. In contradiction, status and pride were more available through paid employment in the European domains which ultimately mattered in the power stakes. This again reflects the subtle processes of exclusion through the apparent valuing of 'tradition'.

It is often the case that, while deep structures which inform social meanings and everyday practices may remain, resulting in a transformation rather than a loss of traditions, it is the surface or manifest culture which is observed — and in many cases misunderstood — as evidence for 'loss' of culture. As has been the case since colonisation, what is not seen to be material or visible (land tenure at the time of initial colonisation is an example) is not accorded status as an authentic cultural mode. The most common examples evidenced for 'loss' of traditions in settled parts of Australia are loss of traditional languages and formal ceremonies. Kinship, authority relations, ways of being, identification within a collective framework of kin relations, and relationships to land are phenomena which are not easily visible to the eye. Friedman (1993: 753, 760) makes a pertinent observation in this regard:

[W]hile it is indeed the case that tradition is constantly undergoing transformation as long as it participates in a dynamic social process, there is also significant continuity in the transformation itself. And where absolute discontinuity exists, it can be overcome by the act of creating a social identity based not so much on history books but on the transformed cultural strands that link generations ... and I maintain that with an artefact based notion of what culture is all about, the question of continuity cannot even be properly addressed as a social phenomenon. This is because continuity, and therefore transformation of cultural form, is not comprehensible in terms of the forms themselves, but must be rooted in the motivations and strategies, the intentionalities of social subjects in time and space.

The point is that kinship rules, language or rituals (as forms of cultural exotica) are amenable to treatment as a set of material artefacts which can be offered as evidence of traditionality. This stems from the early emphasis on their higher order structures — form, rather than practice. They are then reified because of their value to western cultures at this point of modernity, including, for example, their commodification for the tourism industry, or the need for ‘spiritual authenticity’ to placate the crisis of meaning in materialist cultures. The turning of these notions into objects or things divorces them from their social origins and therefore from their meanings. Conceptualisations of traditionality and authenticity, when reified, become mutually interlocked in a dangerous circle of interdependence and therefore offer little in the way of explaining how transformative processes actually operate within Aboriginal socialities. Whilst the processes of transformation depend on the continuities offered by perdurable structural forms, it is a mistake to think that notions of continuity can only be linked to inelastic frameworks of traditionality. Notions of traditionality must incorporate models of history to be at all meaningful when analysing how cultures transform and reinvigorate themselves. Lindstrom and White argue that it is only through an historical approach that the stereotypical notions of ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ can be eroded (1993: 470). This of course entails that, in studies of cultural continuities and transformations in Aboriginal Australia, our models of their histories must be grounded in the realities of Aboriginal-European relations and the obvious inevitability of change as a result of state-sanctioned incursions into their lifeways while at the same time acknowledging the capacity of much of Aboriginal tradition to have continued to share those interactions.

The point I wish to draw out here is that notions such as formal kinship rules, language or rituals (as forms of cultural exotica) are often treated as a set of material artefacts to be offered as the only evidence of traditionality. They are reified because of their value to western cultures at this point of modernity: including their commodification for the tourism industry, or the need for ‘spiritual authenticity’ to placate the crisis of meaning in materialist cultures. The turning of these notions into ‘objects’ or things divorces them from their social origins and therefore meanings. Conceptualisations of traditionality and authenticity, when reified, become mutually interlocked in a dangerous circle of interdependence and therefore offer little in the way of explaining how transformative processes actually operate within Aboriginal socialities. Whilst the processes of transformation depend on the continuities offered by perdurable structural forms, it is a mistake to think that notions of continuity can only be linked to inelastic frameworks of traditionality. Notions of traditionality must therefore incorporate models of history to be at all meaningful when analysing how cultures transform and reinvigorate themselves. As must always be the case for studies of cultural continuities and transformations in Aboriginal Australia, models of Wiradjuri history need to be grounded in the realities of Wiradjuri-European relations.

The capacity to change

The history of European–Wiradjuri relations in the vast Wiradjuri area is long and convoluted and it is not my intention here to elaborate on the moral complexities inherent in comparisons between government policies of different eras. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we recognise the extraordinary capacity of much of Wiradjuri tradition to have continued, as well as the obvious inevitability of change in Wiradjuri societies as a result of state-sanctioned incursions into their lifeways. This does not mean that these

changes should necessarily be interpreted as so great that they constitute a situation of 'cultural loss', as popular belief would have it. On the contrary, I would argue that it is because of the creative ability of Wiradjuri and other Aboriginal socialities to reconstitute themselves as discreet social entities under the impositions of colonial policy that Australia has been forced to address the moral/political issues of land rights and social justice over recent decades, in New South Wales as elsewhere. The failure of assimilation policies attests to this fact, as does the now legal definition of what constitutes an Aboriginal person. Since 1972, Australian governments have recognised the existence of distinct Aboriginal polities through the expression 'Aboriginal community', and have allowed people who identify with and are identified by such communities to define themselves as Aboriginal. It has included the recognition by the Wran Government in 1983 of the Wiradjuri desire to jointly incorporate their land councils as the Wiradjuri Regional Aboriginal Land Council, despite initial plans to divide this cultural region (Macdonald 1986).

Liberman (1978: 161) has noted how cultural innovations in Aboriginal society pass as already 'principled versions' of how things have always been done, and that this is as true for ritual as it is for political formulations. What is evident in Wiradjuri lifeways over the past two centuries is that their traditions of lived experience with their vast repertoire of expressions have been able to continually nourish themselves from their own source. When activities are introduced, they have been modified in form or meaning in such a way that they continue to express the source of Wiradjuri social being. In the past Wiradjuri people would have illustrated these expressions of sociality in the form of myths, ceremonies, songs, rituals and various other activities of classical Wiradjuri lifeways. Nowadays they have different expressions, as would be expected in a situation of continuing colonial encounter: there is a focus on political activities and articulations, on ritualised stories of past contrasted with present, of the old people, of Wiradjuri-European encounters, of sporting prowess, and different ceremonies of selfhood. In other words, things that make contemporary life meaningful but in terms of their traditions of moral order (such as 'demand sharing', see Macdonald 2000).

Within the physical sciences, theories such as chaos theory have been developed to accommodate more adequately the complex nature of dynamic systems. None could be more complex and dynamic than human social systems but Australian anthropology has been slow to incorporate theoretical frameworks which acknowledge this (but see, for instance, Morris 1989, Merlan 1998, Austin-Broos in press). Pre-existing systems — social, intellectual and material — are a key resource in a people's cultural capacity to adapt, modify and transform themselves as individuals and as social groups in response to both enforced and desired changes wrought by their own lifecycle, by colonialism and other intercultural contacts, war, natural disasters, and so on. It is in this responsiveness that people demonstrate the vibrancy of their culture.

The recent work of Marshall Sahlins' (1985, 1995, 2000) has been committed to examining the ways in which indigenous peoples change, and he argues that the collective structures of tribal or cultural life are able to reproduce themselves over time because they clearly demonstrate a capacity to risk themselves in the new conditions with which they are presented. Sahlins' approach emphasises that it is *in the way that a people change* that they maintain their wholeness, their distinctiveness — these are not just the product of continuity or survival. The unique Wiradjuri response to the chal-

allenges of colonialism stems from their appeal to practices and meanings with histories in their classical past as well as the ways in which they continually negotiate introduced ones. Both are resources, strategies for dealing with changed circumstances (see also Tonkinson 1993 on tradition as a resource). But Aboriginal beliefs and practices in Australia have been regarded as authentic only if seen to be unchanging since 'time immemorial'. There has been no recognition, until the Mabo decision, of the fact that it is not only perfectly logical but also legitimate that, under conditions of colonisation, social systems would undergo processes of transformation. As Wolfe (1994) points out, colonisation is not an historical event but a structure within which indigenous peoples have had to operate.

Colonisation is a process with alternating periods of upheaval and stability as adjustments are made on all sides to the presence of the 'other' (see also Wolfe 1994). It is evident that some introduced practices were found attractive by Wiradjuri people precisely because they did allow for both strengthening and continuity of valued Indigenous practices. Wiradjuri adapted introduced technologies for their own purposes, as when Reckitt's Blue laundry whitener was adopted to paint bark upon which there were carved representations of fish in water (Mathews 1897: 43, at Bulgeraga Creek on a *burbung* initiation ground). This kind of incorporation of non-Indigenous artefacts and activities is not evidence of a loss of an artistic tradition but of creative adaptation and incorporation of European products into Wiradjuri traditions and lifeways, albeit within a very changed framework of reference (see also Morris 1989). At other times, new practices were found attractive and change was desired or was part of the strategies of adjustment. Flour was an attractive alternative to the collecting and grinding of *nerruh* grass seeds for damper bread, and the native grasses disappeared quite quickly under the pressures of grazing and land-clearing. Card-playing introduced a new mode of redistributing resources and was thus able to redefine money coming into the community in terms of Wiradjuri systems of economic and social value. It is little wonder that cards became so popular, here as elsewhere in Australia (see, for instance, Berndt and Berndt 1947; Goodale 1987), particularly as hunting and gathering became more difficult and wage labour imposed potentially new forms of economy and value.

The recent recognition by the Australian state of Aboriginal rights on the basis of traditionality, as in native title, implicitly recognises that it is previous state policies which have forced certain forms of transformation and change. It thus invites acknowledgement that this should be accommodated in the understanding of Aboriginal cultural histories. New South Wales people are faced with the unenviable task of educating non-Aboriginal people in the ways of their own particular forms of cultural expression, in an environment which has been made hostile over a long period to their recognition at any level. The problem is how to deal with an historical outcome which is mostly a creation of state policy: including, for instance, eradication, segregation and assimilation; or the requirement that in order to receive much-needed housing and development funding Aboriginal people must introduce culturally-alien structures as a condition of their receipt.

But as Sahlin encourages us to think, the point is not what has been 'lost', nor what has been 'retained'. Rather, it is how ways of being in the Aboriginal context have been efficacious in providing resources upon which people could draw in responding creatively to changes over time. What is not useful is discarded, whether it has been

rendered 'not useful' by prohibitions or force, or whether it is voluntarily discarded in favour of new resources available in the environment. Change is particularly evident as well as frequent at the level of technology: most people would rather buy their flour than make it (see, for instance, Sharp 1964). The least change is evident in the structuring of social interactions, meanings and values, and it is these which form the basis of, as well as being influenced by, the Wiradjuri systems of kinship, land connectedness, authority and economies. If Wiradjuri people draw on practices and beliefs of European origin and transform them in their struggles, is this not improvisation rather than assimilation? As Asad (1993: 11–13) comments:

The idea that cultural borrowing must lead to total homogeneity and to loss of authenticity is clearly absurd ... one does not simply get a reproduction of identity. The acquisition of new forms of language from the modern West — whether by forcible imposition, insidious insertion, or voluntary borrowing — is part of what makes for new possibilities of action in non-Western societies.

Aboriginal socialities have survived and in most cases thrived, despite state-sanctioned attempts to dissolve them through violence, then dispersal and assimilation policies. One could say that the failure of each of these stages of state activity provides irrefutable evidence as to the power of Aboriginal socialities to renew and maintain themselves as discrete polities in the face of ongoing attempts by the state to dismantle them. Aboriginal people in New South Wales have had to endure prolonged, hostile and intense occupation of their lands. They should not have to suffer the concomitant indignity of a further lack of recognition towards their own particular modes of survival and adaptation simply because they have had to endure the full wrath of the colonising process. The fact of their survival as distinct Aboriginal societies indicates the strength of their cultural history. The assumptions of 'assimilation' that follow strategic choices which involve the adoption of European-derived practices are a product of ideological positions on the inevitability of modernity rather than an ethnographic and historical portrait of Aboriginal responsiveness. The Wiradjuri past is influenced by ideological projections of anthropologists, historians and colonisers alike, rather than in a genuine interest in how their cultural forms are and have been constituted. Yet it is the fact of the creative ability of Wiradjuri and other Aboriginal societies to reconstitute themselves as discrete social entities under the impositions of colonial policy that challenges Australia to address the moral and political issues of recognition, rights to land and social justice, in New South Wales as elsewhere.

Legitimizing colonisation

So I am arguing that, until recently, understandings of the Wiradjuri past and present have been influenced by ideological projections of anthropologists and colonisers alike, rather than in a genuine interest in how their cultural forms are and have been constituted. They have had to confront not only the model of cultural stasis but also the privileging of certain traditions over others. Tradition has become associated with exoticised practices, in particular those associated with rituals and artefacts, those which emphasise the manifest and the material at the expense of systems of meaning. The privileging of certain activities has rendered some traditions valuable and others not.

In the labelling of Aboriginal peoples as either traditional or cultureless, anthropologists have colluded in the invention of a hierarchical and hegemonic model of

Aboriginalities and thus also of traditionalities which have served to conceal the historical events by which dispossession itself has been 'naturalised' in the settled areas of Australia. The development of agriculture in central New South Wales, contributing as it does to the political economy of the State and the nation as a whole, is based upon the violent dispossession of the Wiradjuri. We can trace the process by which that dispossession has been invented and reinvented over time as a natural and inevitable process of cultural loss and disintegration in the face of modernisation and progress. The invention of the inevitability of the Wiradjuri demise has, of course, legitimated their continued colonisation and the denial of their rights.

While I have characterised the view of New South Wales Aboriginal people as having 'lost' their culture as being due, in part, to inadequate fieldwork and the continued uncritical application of outmoded anthropological theories of social change, these practices were themselves produced within a political arena in which it became necessary to emphasise loss of Aboriginal culture in particular ways in order to legitimise European-Australian gain. Increasingly, a denial of cultural tradition has served to deny rights to those who no longer have 'tradition'. The social construction of the authenticity of only certain forms of Aboriginality as 'traditional' naturalises the colonial process of land alienation and use which has differentiated Aborigines of remote and settled Australia for much of the twentieth century. Socially-produced differentiations are constructed (invented) as 'natural'. It is 'natural' that denser settlement would extinguish Aboriginal traditions, or make any transformational processes less authentic, because the traditions are defined in such a way as to ensure that this will be the case. 'Tradition' is an assessment of the value of certain practices as against others, as interpreted within a particular political relationship (Hawkins 1996). The choices in emphasis are political and arbitrary: some people are allowed to change and not others. Indigenous rights, when defined as traditions, are calculated in terms of their distance from non-indigenous practices: the more 'different', the more 'rights'. Rights are then, in a self-perpetuating spiral, only defined in terms of the retention of those differences, irrespective of other facets of cultural life.

While I cannot explore debates about the invention of tradition here (see, for instance, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Linnekin 1983, 1992; Linnekin and Handler 1984; Tonkinson 1993), suffice it to say that if it can be argued that 'tradition' is invented in response to political exigencies, then it must also follow that 'culturelessness' and 'loss' can be invented as well. It is necessary to examine the theoretical and political significances of culturelessness and loss as the dominant representation of Aboriginal peoples in southeastern Australia, and the extent to which anthropologists have colluded in these representations by their silence and in their contribution to a hierarchical and hegemonic understanding of 'Aboriginality' as defined by a classical past, and not as the cultural history of landowners grappling with the pain and attractions, the conjunctures and disjunctures which characterise their history of colonisation. Does it matter, in the end, what *kind* of 'culture' Aboriginal peoples have in their quest for justice and recognition in the face of colonial practices and ideologies?

It is instructive in this respect to consider the argument that Ulin (1995) has developed in exploring the politics of the 'invention of the tradition' of Bordeaux wines. His insights on the ways in which tradition becomes defined and legitimised can be equally applied to the 'invention of the culturelessness' of New South Wales Aboriginal people.

This can be illustrated by my paraphrasing of part of Ulin's (1995: 519) discussion, using it to argue that the current position of New South Wales as Australia's premier and most highly developed State:

Follows conjointly from its political and economic history and from a more general process of 'invention' that disguises what is social and cultural in 'natural' attire. [The history of New South Wales] thus illustrates the dialectical connection between [the development of agriculture in New South Wales] and [dispossession of Aboriginal people]. It is thus imperative to address the theoretical and political implications of the invention theme, for I maintain that power differentials between [Europeans and Aborigines] significantly silenced all but [powerful European colonial interests] in the invention of a hierarchical and hegemonic ... tradition [which rested on the invention of the 'inevitability' of the disappearance of Aboriginal culture, and hence on Aboriginal cultural loss and disintegration].

The theme pervasive for almost a century of the inevitability of modernisation or progress, and thus of cultural loss, has served to buttress the aspirations of capitalist development through colonisation and has been an important component of ideologies of possession and legitimation. Returning land to Aboriginal control has been regarded as morally and politically advantageous only when 'culture' (defined by other than Aboriginal participants) has been deemed to have survived — mostly notably in the Northern Territory — coinciding, at least until relatively recently, with land which was considered of less value to developers. The politics of return are very different in developed States, where the ideology of culturelessness continues to deny Aboriginal people similar rights, or even sometimes their right to call themselves Aborigines. To argue for the Aboriginality of New South Wales Aboriginal people not only places at risk of pollution the exotic representations of Aboriginalities upon which national identities and cultural industries depend, but it also threatens the security of non-Aboriginal landholders who have been led to believe the prior owners were long gone, at least as encultured beings.

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