Afterword: Peterson's Impartye—A short appreciation

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By a curious stroke of fate, Nic Peterson's 'Totemism yesterday' (1972) had a particular resonance for me. My cohort at Chicago had been alerted to the glories of Lévi-Strauss by Nur Yalman, a youthful Terence Turner and David Schneider. No-one knew better than us what cognitive classification was about. Less usual for the times, my class also read Meyer Fortes' Tallensi corpus. This was our introduction to ethnography. The books were out of print and, for Raymond Smith, part of our project was to go downtown and copy a swathe of work. The tension that we saw between Schneider and Raymond Smith was similar to that between Lévi-Strauss and Fortes—between a cognitive and social structural approach. These structuralisms met in turn over the topic of totemism; was this response to species abstract, rational and systematic, or a matter of contingent events, identities and sentiment? Twenty years later, when I began to read my way into central Australia with the classics first—Spencer and Gillen, Róheim, and the Strehlows, father and son—and match them with Lévi-Strauss, one of my early illuminations came from Hiatt's response to structuralism, as developed by Peterson. Hiatt (1969) noted Lévi-Strauss's failure to contextualise the difference between the moiety symbolism he described and the more common Australian clan totemism. Hiatt's focus was the rationalism Lévi-Strauss assumed and his denial, on theoretical grounds, of the significance of sentiment. Peterson elaborated this critique in two ways. He introduced the issue of place in substantial terms. He showed that totemic designs from both northern and central Australia were symbolic representations of mythologically interpreted terrain. He also discussed the manner in which both conception and clan totemism were tools for the identification via place of individuals and groups. In this, his observation that one person's conception site could be another's clan identity captured the manner in which place and space were deployed by central Australians to produce a highly adaptive use of speciated geography. Just as important, by tracing the sociality that articulated these phenomena, Peterson showed how sentiment was embedded in totemism: as attachment to a conception place, itself the social interpretation of parturition in time and space; and as attachment to father's place, which ageing men liked to return to and, if possible, die on. That the relation was never simply one between symbol and group, as Durkheim would have it, but rather between forms of identity

and particular locations, interpreted by ancestral species-being, cut cognitive structuralism down to size and reasserted ethnography. Peterson's article also developed a social view of the issues in ontology that Róheim, Strehlow jr and Nancy Munn wrote about.

In this engagement, I see Peterson's footprint and, as I will demonstrate, that imprint with its particular components has been left in a range of other connected locations. I have chosen four of these and my contribution is to draw the connecting theme between them that bears on my own work. First, I note some components of the imprint, one of which Nic shares with Hiatt: a firm and enduring sense of problem anchored in ethnography. In Peterson's case, however, this sense of problem shifted over time and in the past decade or so came to rest in a world of Indigenous continuity and change. From totemism, through the residential group, to demand sharing and 'double citizenship', Peterson has tested ethnographic analyses and, aside from Lévi-Strauss, cast Radcliffe-Brown, Stanner, Hiatt and Beckett as his interlocutors.

A second characteristic of Nic Peterson's work is an interest in ecology and the forms of thinking about social groups—beyond the jural and into the economic—which that focus brings. Lee and de Vore (1968) were crucial here although an interest in ecology also reached well beyond hunter-gatherer research. Third, ecology brought an interest in the material and in changing socialities. A simple way of putting this is to say that Peterson's work is not only social and ecological but also significantly historical. If I were to state these components succinctly, I would say that the imprint involves *a sense that the environment and its changing constitution, mediated by social relations, are integral to the specification of practice*. This perspective has been brought to a range of ethnographic problems. Australian totemism, the residential group, demand sharing, and the dilemmas of double citizenship raise these issues in Peterson's work. Having mentioned totemism, I deal with the others in turn.

The Residential Group

It is sad but true that echoes of the debate over Radcliffe-Brown's notion of the patrilineal horde—as he conceived it, both a landowning and a residential group—still sound in the course of native title claims today. Peterson's 'Totemism yesterday' discussed not only clan totemism as such, but also the issue of 'local organisation and the totemic patriclan'. The patri-clan, or, as it would become known, the ritual descent group, became, in Peterson's hands, the source of patrilineal ideology and by virtue of the effect it involved, an effective spacing mechanism for band society. The dispersing tug of particular places via the sentiments of leaders in descent groups acted as a counterweight to band

society. On this point, Peterson's discussion anticipates some aspects of Ingold's (1986) contentious but interesting distinction between 'territory' and 'tenure' in hunting and gathering societies. Regarding residential groups, Peterson drew on literature and fieldwork in order to offer a far more discriminating view than Birdsell's (1970) of the manner in which environment and social relations bear on the composition of local groups. 'Access to the labour of young active females', not least in order to care for the aged, probably affected the composition of both small groups and bands over time (Peterson 1978: 23). In passing, it is interesting to note that this issue of residential groups acted as a catalyst for both Nic and Annette Hamilton to pursue aspects of gender relations. Each contributed to a collection edited by Fay Gale entitled *Woman's Role in Aboriginal Society* (1978). Of particular interest in Peterson's essay is his use of a form of analysis that also links with Meyer Fortes: in order to demonstrate why a small residential group might not be simply patrilineal with female affines, Peterson offers an account of a developmental cycle for an Australian domestic group. This early tentative shift from structuralism into transactional analysis has many applications in Australia as the contexts of residence and travel have changed. Through Sansom's (1982) 'concertina household' and Smith's (2005) 'linked households' to Musharbash's (2008) radical transactional account of *jilimi*, ecology as Peterson addressed it segues into changing historical context.

Peterson makes this move himself in his discussion of demand sharing. Initially, he framed his interest in terms of a critique of the nature/nurture distinction as it might be employed in socio-biology. Peterson martialled ethnographic evidence to show that a socially taught 'ethic of generosity' about which Hiatt wrote was in fact sharing that is commonly demanded. If demanding is selfishness 'rooted in human nature' (Peterson 1997: 172) and giving is a form of socialisation, how in fact do they fit together as demand sharing? Peterson's account shifts through various models in order to arrive at a discussion of demand sharing as the 'representation of social relations', drawing on insights from Woodburn, Sansom and Myers. Peterson concludes that depending on context, demand sharing can be a testing of relatedness in a social system where relationships 'have to be constantly maintained and produced through social action'. 'It may be assertive behaviour, coercing a person to make a response', or 'substantiating behaviour to make people recognise the demander's rights' (Peterson 1997: 190). Finally, he notes that, paradoxically, demanding can also be a gift when, in an egalitarian world, it creates 'asymmetry' between individuals (Peterson 1997: 172). Along with Sansom, Myers, Merlan and Macdonald, Peterson explores the implications of these practices in a commodity world. For a time at least, they constituted a central part of a sociality of services that located Aboriginal people in but not of a market society and its capitalist economy. I encountered this first hand when I arrived in central Australia. I felt like a web site taking 100 hits a day. Demands came from all directions, possibly because I was no-one's relative

and therefore could be tested by anyone. Ordering this situation by becoming a relative of sorts was my route into fieldwork. It also allowed me to see that in the dense population of settlement life, grandmothers in particular dealt daily with situations more taxing than mine. These observations led me to conclude that the practice of relatedness among Western Arrernte had become involute in significant degree—elaborated and turned in on itself in a dysfunctional way for those who were less effective demanders. In short, the relative power of two different regimes of value in fact did not allow Western Arrernte to re-render commoditisation in a hunter-gatherer way (see Austin-Broos 2003, 2009).

This issue connects directly with the final imprint I will note: Nic's critique of welfare colonialism as a summation of remote Indigenous circumstance. To this end, he states that the concept of 'welfare colonialism' obscures 'economic and cultural issues with a political analysis of dependency [that] offers no... explanation for the state seeking to...perpetuate such a dependency or for indigenous people...participating in it' (Peterson 1998: 113). Peterson argues cogently elsewhere that, at least in part, land rights were possible because they were conceived in non-economic ways and in some respects as a form of welfare—a holding operation for an intractable problem he describes in terms of the 'difficulties and dilemmas created in the articulation of two divergent cultural systems' (1985, 1998: 110). In particular, he traces the intersection of a cash and commodity world with an economy of limited goods that produces maverick consumers who become an anomaly in market society. Peterson (1998: 110) notes that policy has been reluctant to acknowledge that 'material circumstances...substantially improved' cannot leave 'cultural heritage unchallenged'. This opacity on the part of the state is matched by Indigenous commitment to circulation and significant limits on accumulation—reinforced at the macro-level by state transfers and at the micro-level by demand sharing. Peterson (2005: 14) remarks: 'Only when people's consumer dependency is a great deal higher than it is today...can people be expected to become motivated and involved in the treadmill of wage labour, and the emphasis on circulation reduced.' Nic dramatises this circumstance by calling it a *double citizenship* in which extremely difficult decisions need to be made by Aboriginal people regarding conflicting forms of value that bear simultaneously on their world. Moreover, he remarks that 'the radical change in the nature of life in remote communities that took place between 1968 and 1977 has not been adequately registered or examined' (Peterson 1998: 109). For the Western Arrernte and in central Australia, however, this recent transition, and the *cultural* nature of economy, has been central to my own ethno-historical research.

This survey of four footprints or *impartye* is designed to make two points. First, the imprints are connected; totemism for Nic was, among other things, a form of representation through spacing propelled by affect; local groups were shaped by

demographic and locational imperatives over time; demand sharing became the site not simply of relatedness practised but also of economies that clashed; and finally, the suffering of remote Indigenous Australians today is not simply state oppression but also indicative of a historical conjuncture that has brought deep conflicts between two different regimes of value. As he moved from ecological environment to historical context, Peterson continued to consider the culture in economy, and vice versa. Second, these problems demonstrate the real continuity between ethnography present and past. In Australia, perhaps the time is ripe for ethnography and ethno-history to take precedence over consultancy again. We need to learn more about the directions of remote Indigenous experience today. Notwithstanding his commitment to applied research, Nic's work exemplifies this task.

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