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Centre for Resource  
and Environmental Studies



**Aborigines, values  
and the environment**

Kingsley Palmer

Australian Institute of Aboriginal  
and Torres Strait Islander Studies

Fundamental Questions Paper No.7

FUNDAMENTAL  
QUESTIONS PAPER

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The Fundamental Questions Program seeks to engender and inform public discussion of the implications for Australian society of the need for long-term ecological sustainability.

# Aborigines, values and the environment

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In this paper I examine the relationship between traditional Aboriginal people and the environment. In doing so I will attempt to define clearly this relationship which may have been erroneously viewed as involving intrinsic values of conservation. While I describe some of the values relevant to traditional Aboriginal people, I will demonstrate that values are a result of a complex economic and cultural system. The Aboriginal relationship to the environment was informed by this economic and cultural system and constrained by the available technology. Comparisons made between two very different cultures may be deceptively attractive but will prove to be of little value.

## Introduction

It is confidently asserted by many scientists that Aborigines have been on the continent of Australia for at least 40,000 years. Indeed they may have lived here for much longer than that, but whatever the period, one of their main achievements (and one that is often overlooked) was to adjust successfully to living here. This was no mean feat. The land the first settlers discovered differed in some respects from the tropical islands from which they probably came. The interior of the continent was harsh and dry, it contained plants and animals with which they may not have been familiar. The further they ventured from the northern coastlines, where they probably first arrived, the stranger and more challenging would have been the environment. Moreover, during the millennia that passed between that first

landfall and 1788, there were climatic changes, the sea level fluctuated, eventually reducing the land available for habitation (Mulvaney 1966: 128-37; Jennings 1971; Galloway 1971). The Aborigines experienced drought, shortage, ignorance of water sources when settling new lands. They placed heavy demands on a relatively simple technology that had to adapt to a variety of circumstances, ecological diversity and previously unencountered raw materials.

The changes in the environment, whether the result of movement into new areas or caused by climatic or other factors, were probably seldom sudden. The apparent success that Aborigines demonstrated in adaptation is no doubt partly attributable to the fact that there was time to accommodate these changes and to respond accordingly. Examples of failure to adapt are not well documented, though they did occur, but to what extent we cannot know for certain. However, we do know that an Aboriginal culture on Kangaroo Island (South Australia) was extinct by the time Europeans became familiar with the area (Lampert 1979), and it has been suggested that Tasmanians were less than successful in coming to terms with their isolation from mainland Australia (Jones 1977: 22). This conclusion is not without its critics (eg Horton 1979; Bowdler and Lourandos 1982; White and O'Connell 1982: 157-70)<sup>1</sup>.

No Westerners were present on the continent prior to 1788 to record scientifically the domestic economy of the Aborigines. With the exception of a few comments by early explorers like Dampier in the 17th century, we must rely for our information on the comments of early eth-

nographers working with those Aborigines who at the time followed a traditional life-style. However, after European settlement of this continent, nothing was ever quite the same again. The Aboriginal relationship with the land altered fundamentally. The economic system changed with the introduction of foreign foods; land was alienated, social groups broke down; whole populations were decimated. Moreover, the integrity of things previously taken for granted was called into question. Principal amongst these was land. Before the white invasion, land was a taken-for-granted asset, held, utilised and cared for by a complex set of traditions and rules of jural-like quality. The Europeans disregarded this land-owning system, because they could not, or would not, understand it. Since the economic, religious and social structures of the Aborigines were to a considerable extent underpinned by the relationship to land, its alienation by the new settlers altered much. What follows here as a description of the hunting and gathering economy and way of life and associated values, is then, of necessity, a reconstruction of the way things were.

Aborigines belonged to those people who have been identified in Western thought as 'hunters and gatherers'. Their economic system has a number of features and has been described in detail elsewhere (eg Beals and Hoijer 1971; Lee 1979; Silberbauer 1981: 258-304). In brief, in Australia, small groups of people traversed bounded territory in search of food, which they obtained by both hunting and foraging. Typically, groups (usually known as 'bands' in the literature) were composed of families, supplemented by affines and off-spring, usually spanning three generations (Peterson 1986: 74-141). Bands met up for special occasions (for example, to perform rituals, marriages or exchanges) when economic circumstances permitted. The range of the band varied considerably, and there is some evidence from south eastern Australia, that some groups may have become more sedentary, living in relatively large groups for periods of time while they exploited local resources (Williams 1984). However, for Australia this seems to have been the exception rather than the rule. Most bands traversed relatively large areas of land (Peterson 1986: 26-51), taking food for immediate consumption as either animal or vegetable matter. Generally there was a sexual division of labour; men being responsible for catching large game (kangaroo,

turtle, dugong) and women foraging for grass seeds, yams and other fruits and berries. This economic system has a number of characteristics that are particularly relevant to a consideration of how Aborigines related to their environment. First, Aborigines were semi-nomadic; that is to say they moved about the countryside, but within a defined range. As far as we are able to reconstruct, movement was determined by personal inclination, but also by the availability of resources. People exploited areas where they could optimise the return of their labour (O'Connell and Hawkes 1982). As resources became scarce, they would move on to other areas where game or vegetable resources were more abundant. In desert regions it was the availability of water that was the great determinant of where people could secure a livelihood. As one rockhole dried up due to evaporation, consumption and lack of replenishing rains, a group would move to the next. In seasons when there was abundant surface water, people could move out into usually waterless areas and exploit natural resources which might not be accessible for several seasons at a time since rainfall in desert regions was so unreliable (Strehlow 1965: 124-5). This pattern of exploitation resulted in a kind of indigenous (but involuntary) conservation. Aborigines were unlikely to over-exploit resources because they were only available to them while water held out, and this was necessarily for brief and infrequent periods (Hunn 1982). Strehlow also notes that for the Aranda of central Australia restrictions on access to country imposed for religious reasons could also act as a means of conserving flora and fauna in those areas (Strehlow 1965: 142-4).

Second, hunting and gathering people did not employ agriculture or the domestication of animals. There has been some discussion in the literature that there was incipient farming in Australia (eg Mulvaney 1969: 238-48), and some have put forward the view that burning the bush (a major preoccupation of Aborigines in Australia traditionally) was a sort of 'fire-stick farming' (Hallam 1979; Lewis 1982). Despite these views, by and large Aborigines took what was available to them as they moved across the landscape and did not cultivate or husband their resources in a western sense. It meant that there was little the Aborigines could do to directly influence the productivity of the landscape, although by their actions they enhanced the

possibility of certain species thriving. Third, it is evident that while the life of a hunter and gatherer in most areas of Australia involved hard work, in many areas it is likely that the subsistence economy provided a reliable and steady source of food (Sahlins 1972: 1-39). There were no doubt periods of hardship, particularly in the harsher inland areas of the continent (Strehlow 1965: 125). However, even in the most marginal of country (to non-Aboriginal eyes), groups were able to sustain life and a rich cultural tradition, apparently for thousands of years.

Fourth, Australian Aborigines did not generally generate a surplus of food for storage, although there are a few documented cases where food was put away to be consumed at a later date (Berndt and Berndt 1988, 114). However, the Aboriginal material culture was not well equipped for this purpose. It lacked complex storage vessels, there was no pottery, generally no construction in wood beyond shaping and hollowing. Moreover because Aborigines were on the move when not exploiting the abundance of one locale, transporting surplus food supplies was impractical. However, Aborigines did have other non-edible objects, often of a ritual nature, which were traded between groups. These included stone for axes or cutting tools (Sharp 1952), pitjuri (*Duboisia hopwoodii* chewed rather like tobacco, Watson 1983), pearl shells and ritual artefacts, to name but a few (Akerman 1979). A hunting and gathering economy can only be perpetuated if there exists a balance between exploitation and consequent consumption and the naturally available resources. For the economy to be sustainable, the environment must not be over exploited. For a hunting and gathering society over-exploitation means likely death. In Australia it is evident that over the centuries there developed a balance between the degree of use of the land, including the numbers of people in each economic unit, and the environment. This is not to say that Aborigines were conscious conservationists, but it is clear that the economy they drove was sustainable in the context of the environment within which they lived. Following from this it is evident that Aborigines lived in close association with the land and the environment and were aware of its potentialities, weaknesses and dangers. Unlike those who inhabit an urban environment, the landscape constituted a major component in the Aborigines' world view. This close association with the natural world in-

formed their way of thinking, their concepts, their religious beliefs and their social relations. In short, their cultural baggage was shot through and through with preoccupations about the land from which they derived their livelihood.

Finally, Aborigines were consumers and, for example, prized good meat above poor, fine stone for their axes above that which flaked poorly. However, as hunters and gatherers, who consumed what they caught or collected, they had little use for surplus and little opportunity to develop such. Prized items were exchanged for consumption but there was no exchange of consumer items for the accumulation of wealth. The items of trade goods that were manufactured or modified for exchange had more symbolic and ritual value than practical worth and were not exchanged with a view to create wealth. In fact, Aborigines did not, as far as we know, accumulate a surplus of exchange items. Once received, items were given away again (Altman 1987: 202). Aboriginal values did not accommodate the notion of accumulation or surplus, nor did the way of life make such accumulations practical. Rather, the main business in which they were engaged was in the exchange or accumulation of religious knowledge and it was from thence that their major values were derived. Even in the limited domain of economic consumer exchanges, things of practical value were characterised as being of value because they were believed to have spiritual potentialities. Knowledge of a religious sort was prized by Aboriginal people and much of the intense ritual life that characterised traditional Aboriginal societies had to do with its allocation, particularly to younger men and women. Since it was limited in its distribution and desired, as a mark of status in society, it was valued as a commodity was valued. These spiritual values were often associated with beliefs about the land.

## Value

Anthropologists are interested, *inter alia*, in relationships in which something is considered to have value. In this it is not a consideration of any intrinsic worth which is important, for value is a relational matter: a value is held by a person, and it determines action in a society when it is shared between the members of that society. Strictly, anthropologists are interested in why (or how)

people ascribe value, or 'value', since this helps to explain why people in a particular culture prize some things above others (Beattie 1966: 73). At a fundamental level this may be a simple matter of scarcity of desired items. *Pitjuri* was traded vast distances. Pearl shell was prized for its scarcity in desert regions and traded from the tropical north over great distances. Good stone for axes was traded from north Queensland to New South Wales because it made good stone tools and these were used to cut trees to obtain honey or to make wooden artefacts and so on. However, value is also ascribed within cultural exchanges as people fashion an identity and create their cultural universe. Through this process people ascribe artificial value to things, ideas or knowledge thereby creating the fabric of their society. What people value they preserve; what people desire they strive for. Having things of value gives status to the possessor. Studying the things of value in any society provides an understanding of how some achieve status and others strive to do so while revealing something of the preoccupations of that society with respect to the things they think are important.

The continent of Australia provided variation in climate and environment and there were considerable regional differences between people. Generalisations that may be considered to apply to the whole of the Aboriginal people are sometimes misleading. I now look in detail at one particular Aboriginal group to examine how value was articulated traditionally. By looking at linguistic categories and concepts embedded in traditional practices it is possible to arrive at some understanding of one particular Aboriginal value system. In many respects the values held by the people I describe here are those shared by many Aboriginal people in desert areas of Australia.

## Nyangamarta values

The Nyangamarta and Nyamil speakers of Granite Plains<sup>2</sup> formerly lived in the desert regions to the east of their present place of residence which is in the Pilbara region of Western Australia. Some were born on cattle stations after these were set up by white settlers in the the early decades of this century. Others, however, were born out in the desert and moved in to the settled country as recently as the 1940's, where they became incorporated into the local

station economy; but language and traditional practices have remained strong.

The values I describe were generated from the preoccupations of people in pursuing a particular way of life. However, the perpetuation of those values does not depend upon the sustaining of that way of life. Were this to be so, 'traditional' Aboriginal values would have vanished once the hunting and gathering way of life was discontinued. Values, once incorporated into a cultural system, survive and are in evidence at places like Granite Plains. This is why economic and biological determinism fail to account for the perdurance of values and practices in changed circumstances, or when such values are put to new purpose (Rose 1987, 191ff). The values are an important signifier of the cultural identity and their perpetuation an important means of maintaining that identity. However, the values a people hold dear are initially derived from their economic activities, although they may be sustained for cultural reasons subsequently. Moreover, they will be abandoned or modified if they become untenable for practical reasons. Aboriginal religious values have never remained static.

Fundamental to the Nyangamarta world view is the concept of the Dreaming. The term used for Dreaming by the dominant speech community at Granite Plains is *munguny*. The term *pukarikara* is also used frequently but belongs to the northern Nyungamarta, many of whom live in another community several hundred kilometres to the north. *Munguny* (or its equivalents) is both an historical creative period, and a contemporary reality. During the historical and creative period, mythological characters are believed to have roamed across the countryside having adventures which resulted in modifications of the landscape. Such modifications are now visible as rocks, trees, rivers, clay-pans and other physical features. The mythological beings also created water sources, named particular places and demarcated areas of land that groups of people would occupy. The beings had the form of animals, birds or reptiles, but they also appeared as human beings. Often they were able to change from one form into another. When they died, or were killed, they either turned into animals or those other beings with which they shared a common spirituality, or into features evident in the landscape. It is believed that the mythological beings are spiritually manifest in the

landscape and animals to this day.

For the Nyangamarta this set of beliefs has several practical and important implications. The land and all that is in it is believed to be imbued with an essential spirituality. A particular bird has the characteristics that make it remarkable because of a stated set of events that occurred in the Dreaming. A place is believed to have certain characteristics or spiritual attributes because of those events. While the whole of the landscape was believed to have been imprinted with the Dreaming, certain places (where significant acts took place) are considered to have more importance, to be more significant in a spiritual sense, than areas of country where Dreaming activity was not so remarkable. These specific sites (often referred to as 'sacred sites') occur typically as isolated rocks, pools, large trees, hills or any topographical feature that stands out from the landscape as a whole.

The Nyangamarta also believe that the Dreaming is a contemporary spiritual presence. Not only is the Dreaming evident at specific places in the countryside but it may be manifest in certain ritual objects and practices. Moreover, it may be contacted through the dreams of natural sleep. Above all else it provides the rationale for daily practice, custom or tradition. The mores of the people are believed to have been set down in the Dreaming. Thus, institutions of expected kinship behaviour, the way certain rituals should be performed, the manner in which animals should be prepared for cooking - the whole range of cultural acts that characterise traditional life for the Granite Plains people - is believed to have been ordained in the Dreaming. Like the land, the sites and the myths surrounding them, social action is governed by rules that are considered inviolable.

The Dreaming is an ontological concept that is framed in metaphysical terms and is symbolic of the motive forces that characterise human action. By an appeal to an historically creative period, during which precedents for social and cultural action were inaugurated, Aborigines place their continuing practices of traditional action within a metaphysical context. Similarly, by appeal to a contemporary spiritual motive force they also place daily exchanges and interactions in the context of a metaphysical realm of discourse whereby values are expressed and legitimated. The Dreaming is then the concept, symbolic of the mythical source of all life, that

both justifies and sustains the contemporary reality for Aborigines. This governing principal, founded in the Dreaming, is known in Aboriginal English as 'the Law'. 'Law' is a very general term used by Aborigines at Granite Plains, and very widely throughout Australia where traditional practices are important. It is often taken to mean a body of jural rules, imperatives and ways of doing things ordained during the Dreaming. However, it may have a variety of referents, depending on context. Sometimes it is used to refer to the tenets of the Dreaming. It may also be used to refer to a ritual performance; a song cycle and activities associated with its performance. It can also be used to mean a sacred object or even a place. So, for example, a man might say of a sacred site, 'That's the Law, that place' meaning perhaps that the place was not only made or modified in the Dreaming, but that it was in essence representative of the Dreaming and the imperatives that are believed to have flowed from it.

The Law, with all its referents, however represented, is also considered to be inviolable. The Nyangamarta of Granite Plains developed a complex series of symbols to express the values of their religious beliefs. Some of these were artefacts, other were stories, song or even words. Many are charged with a secrecy that makes them highly esoteric. Because the Dreaming is believed to be spiritually potent, it is also considered to be dangerous in a physical sense. The more esoteric an object or item of knowledge is, the more spiritually potent it is believed to be. This spiritual danger applies to places as well as objects or knowledge and is identified by use of the term *ngurlu*. In Aboriginal English the Nyangamarta use the equivalent term 'dear' (ie expensive); so a secret song cycle might be described a 'a very dear one', meaning that it was highly spiritually charged and was physically dangerous because of its potency, particularly to the ritually unqualified.

A man or a woman recognises a spiritual tie to specific tracts of land. This country, which could be termed his or her 'home' or 'own' country (*warany* in Nyangamarta) is believed to contain the very spirituality which was shared by his or her own father or father's father. People then speak of 'my father's country', meaning that area of land which was spiritually a part of their father and with which, by tradition, they too have a spiritual bond. This same terminology is used for the area of country

owned by a person's mother or indeed other relatives. Thus the terminology of kinship (mother, father, grannie (ie mother's mother)) is used to refer to land. Indeed, the concept of kin relationships is very much bound up with the concept of owning land, since the use of a particular kin term may also imply the rights and duties associated with the values that are a concomitant of ownership: responsibility to land and all that is in it; rights to have access to the myths and rituals associated with the sites in it and so on. For the Nyangamarta at Granite Plains, a youth is more likely, perhaps, to learn the rituals and myths of his father's country, from his father, in the first instance. However, other influential men, like his mother's brother, who is also knowledgeable about secret matters as they relate to another area of land, may teach a youth about those areas of land that belong to the boy's mother and her family. Knowledge of land and its spirituality is an important sign of maturity.

In times past knowledge of the spiritual dimension did not, in itself, equip people to secure a livelihood from the land; these were skills that were learnt in the course of informal education and socialization. However, ritual knowledge did confer upon a person the right to use the land and its resources and provided the confidence to do so successfully. As groups pursued their economic activities they visited sites of importance. Some were merely passed by, being noted as ever present reminders of the myths of the Dreamings. Others required maintenance; rocks piled up to form mounds, leaves and branches set in place; certain songs sung, unwanted vegetation burnt off. These visits, the details of which vary considerably from area to area, were regarded as a part of the landowners' responsibility. By maintaining the sites it was believed that the natural species that might be represented at a site would be safe-guarded. It was believed that at some sites natural species could be increased or enhanced by simple ritual acts. At Granite Plains these sites are known as *talū*. Similarly, the enactment of the major rituals, with their songs and ritual sequences, were believed to ensure the perpetuation of the spirituality of the Dreaming, while allowing the songs and the myths to be handed on to novices who progressively over many ritual enactments themselves became the senior experts in ritual and myth.

Hunters and gatherers moved, of necessity, across relatively large tracts of land occupying

different areas as seasons and resources required. When people do not occupy land permanently, rights to that land must be demonstrated in other ways than by physical presence. Aboriginal religion provided a legitimating framework whereby rights to country were established and perpetuated *in absentia*. This facility has provided the residents of Granite Plains, who now live permanently on land that is not their own, with a means whereby they can retain their links with their home territory which they cannot visit and which some of them have never seen.

There are, then, a number of general propositions that can be derived from these data. Aboriginal religion does not seek to negotiate or propitiate the natural world; only to accept it and nurture it to some degree. Men and women had a role to play in maintaining the state of the natural world. Certainly, if people failed to perform rituals or to maintain certain sites, it was believed that the natural order might go into decline. But beyond this spiritual intervention, little was required of people than that they pursue their activities as hunters and gatherers of the food and resources that the environment provided. Aboriginal technology could not provide the means to alter the environment or significantly modify the landscape, at least in the short term. Resource exploitation was labour intensive and had a low impact on those resources. Land then, and the sites within it, ritual enactments and myth are more concerned with an acceptance of the way things are, than with changing or influencing them. The keynote to Aboriginal religious practice is maintenance of the physical and spiritual world, rather than changing or developing it. Men and women co-exist with the environment and the natural world that surrounds them and the natural world is a taken-for-granted one. Aboriginal values, expressed in religious terms, very much reflect this view of the world. That which is valued is the Dreaming, the land and its sites, the rituals, the myths. Adherence to the tenets of the Dreaming and respect for its inviolability ensured that the *status quo* was maintained; ownership of territory was legitimated and people continued to gain a livelihood from an environment that was considered to be unchanging and unchangeable.

In the absence of a complex, consumer economy generated surplus of consumable items, the accumulation of physical wealth and real property to be negotiated, the currency of

exchange was typified by other, non-material attributes. That which was most highly prized in Aboriginal society was then a commodity which has been called 'arteficial knowledge' (Meillasoux 1973: 196). This religious knowledge which is composed of mythology and ritual practices is in fact a complex series of statements that concern metaphysical aspects of the physical world. They are considered to be true (*iitja*) by the population. Religious knowledge is not uniformly valued. Some is considered to have a higher value than others. Like other commodities, the wider distributed the knowledge, the less value it commands. It is then in people's interest to control the allocation of religious knowledge since by doing so they also control (at least to some extent) its value.

A cultural and economic system forms a package that works as a whole. I have shown that the values espoused by Aboriginal people are also part and parcel of that economy and the values were created and upheld because they were relevant to the economic system and helped to sustain it. The important conclusion is then that Aboriginal values are spiritual values, by and large, not because they were necessarily particularly spiritually enlightened people, but because the economic furrow they ploughed supplied no other avenue for activity that provided a value added factor.

## The vernacular fallacy

Ken Burridge identified the anthropological endeavour as being a 'reach into otherness' (Burridge 1973: 6). This was a process whereby, in part, through an appreciation of other cultures, we come to see things differently, and share that of which we were formerly ignorant (see, for example, Marcus and Fisher 1986: 1). There has been some attention drawn to the lives of hunting and gathering people and the way they lived with the environment and an assertion that we, as 20th century westerners, may have something to learn from them (eg Goldsmith 1988: 165). As a part of the machinery that is responsible for the destruction of their economy, and in many places their culture, there is a sort of irony about this belated interest. There is also a good deal of mystification and romanticism in the process that obscures the truth. I now look critically at traditional Aboriginal values, the life style they represented and consider what, if anything, they have to say

to us.

Traditional Aboriginal economic systems were those of a hunting and gathering people. The quality of life must have varied enormously depending on the availability of resources, and in places life was harsh. In good seasons the desert bloomed but if it did not, then it would be necessary to move elsewhere. Failure of one species meant that another had to be found elsewhere. In times of drought and scarcity people must have gone hungry. Some early ethnographers have indicated large demographic movements which were a result of drought in desert regions (Tindale 1974: 33,42,66 etc). Warfare was not unknown (Warner 1969: 144-79; Meggitt 1962: 42; Blainey 1975: 105-115; Peterson 1986: 36; Myers 1976: 60) and there is nothing to suggest that people did not die of disease, accidents, infections and so on (Tindale 1974: 80, 102 etc.; Webb 1989; Pardoe in press). Some groups perished in adverse circumstances, others were ultimately unsuccessful and died out, like those who lived on Kangaroo Island.

Aborigines had a strong spiritual link with the land and the natural world, but what this meant in terms of dealing with the land is unclear. It certainly did not prevent them from killing animals<sup>3</sup> or eating plants, cutting down trees and bushes when required or digging up flints or ochre. Living was a matter of obtaining a livelihood; for a hunter or gatherer, that was a very practical matter and the impact on the environment may not always have been positive. When men and women first arrived on the Australian continent some 40,000 years or more ago they did alter the land they first found. They may have changed the vegetation by burning it, probably beyond recognition (Mulvaney 1966: 93; Tindale 1959; Merrilees 1968; Horton 1982). They may have been responsible for (or contributed to) the extinction of megafauna (see Martin and Wright 1967; Martin and Klein 1984; White and O'Connell 1982: 88-95). Whatever the case, it is certain that whatever the extent of the impact, Aborigines did change the environment of the Australian continent. The economic system was possible because the available resources supported, in most cases, a very small highly mobile population. Aborigines had few material possessions and a simple technology but had a highly developed culture and a non-materialist value system. The low level of technology and relatively simple way of life meant that there was no major exploitation of non-

renewable resources, such exploitation as there was being at such a low level as to be insignificant. There was no poverty, since spiritual values were available to all, and there was no other major economic system that operated to express a lack or surplus of physical items. It was a singular culture and economy, very different from our own and probably not without its disadvantages.

What I have attempted to demonstrate in this paper is that the singular values of a former hunting and gathering society are a concomitant of their social and economic activities. The perpetuation of values in vastly changed circumstances is a means whereby people assert their cultural integrity, their ownership of land and their essential selves. But I have also attempted to demonstrate that there is nothing intrinsically 'good' about this Aboriginal value system. The economic system it supported did have some serious drawbacks, some of them fatal. A preoccupation with and reification of so called 'vernacular' societies in contradistinction to our own seems to me more a matter of a romanticizing the past than an affair that deals with the facts of the matter. It is also a curious reversal. While Western thought from the 17th century has instructed that there is such a thing as progress in civilisation, evidence from our wilting planet (to name just one source) indicates that perhaps this is not the case. It has occurred to some observers that other, less complex societies, may provide the answer. This, I think, tells us more about the commentator's inability to deal with the world of which they are (unwillingly perhaps) a part, than it does about the reality of life for hunters and gatherers. There is nothing new about the notion of a Golden Age, nor with a preoccupation with the myths such a concept engenders (Pearson 1983: 207).

The relative success of the Aboriginal occupants of this continent, up until 1788 at least, was a result of a *status quo* that developed between men and women and the environment. But the maintenance of that *status quo* was made possible because people lacked the technology to exploit the environment beyond their immediate needs. Lacking innovation and competition for resources, successive and more complex technologies did not appear in Australia as they did elsewhere. The sort of technologies a people possess test the values it holds dear, and changes in technology will ultimately

affect values. People who have no heavy earth-moving equipment and have no value for gold are not faced with the dilemma of whether to dig up a place regarded as sacred to recover minerals.

The assumption that Aborigines were natural conservationists fails to recognise a difference between the systemic nature of the development of Aboriginal values in relation to an economic system and associated simple technology and the non-systemic values developed by western peoples using advanced and complex technologies with a high environmental impact (cf Anderson 1989). The values that Aborigines held developed from the economic system they followed and were shaped by the technologies that were available to them. These were, with the possible exception of fire, non-environmentally threatening. For the most part, our 'Western' attitudes to the environment are not developed from an immediate economic relationship with the environment. Moreover, they are shaped by our mastery of a technology that can radically and rapidly alter the environment. Those who do have an immediate economic relationship with the environment may espouse very different values. This is one of the reasons why there is such a polarity of opinion between those who gain a livelihood from the forests of south-eastern Australia or Tasmania and those who live in cities and who do not depend for their income on forest products. Former hunting and gathering societies are today faced with some of these dilemmas, and employ new values to decide on what to do (Anderson 1989). There is nothing sacred about values, and some Aborigines today have voted for mining at the expense of the integrity of their land (Northern Territory Land Councils 1988: 7).

In these circumstances the business of comparing values across economic and social boundaries becomes a risky undertaking indeed. The values a society (or one part of it) develops are tied up with the economy, the technology and the mode of obtaining a livelihood from the environment. It is misleading to argue that Aborigines were environmentally conscious and lived in a balance and harmony with nature which was of their own devising because this may not necessarily be true. There is a conspicuous lack of evidence and speculations about what may have been the case lack convincing data (cf. Callicott 1983). Even if it were

true, beyond all doubt, that Aborigines were natural conservationists, this presumed fact does not help us in the twentieth century with our commerce, technologies and economies. The complex integrated economy and value system and related simple technology that was relevant for the hunting and gathering economy is not applicable to our own. Nor is it possible to borrow a portion of it, for the system operated as a whole, within a specific context.

We can reach across to the 'otherness' and hopefully appreciate it for what it was, and still is in some cases. But the mere fact that we examine another world should counsel us that, at best, all we can do is understand it without romanticizing it and turning it into something it never was, simply for our own disgruntled purposes. European man has exploited indigenous cultures for his own economic and intellectual purposes since the birth of colonialism. It would be a pity to continue this process in order to provide spurious legitimation for a cause; however worthwhile that cause might be.

## Notes

1. Prehistorians are not in agreement over this issue and there is an extensive debate in the literature which could be pursued from the general references I have provided. It is also the case that much debate surrounds the impact that Aborigines had on the continent by the practice of burning and how their occupation and exploitation of the habitat may have contributed to faunal extinctions. It is not possible to document these debates in detail here, but in noting them I also conclude that Aborigines did affect the environment; the real debate is the degree to which this occurred.
2. A detailed ethnography of these people is provided elsewhere (Palmer 1981). I have changed the name of the community to Granite Plains in this paper.
3. Strehlow (1965: 144) states that the Aranda did not eat an animal or species with which he or she was believed to have a spiritual tie, except to avoid starvation. They also felt 'compassion' for other animals that were spiritually associated with their close acquaintances or kin. Meg-

gitt (1962: 208-9) states that among the Walpiri no such food taboos applied and suggests that the Aranda may have been an exception in this regard. While food taboos may have been practised for other reasons, desert people were great meat eaters, and generally in Australia Aborigines took large quantities of game to supplement vegetable resources.

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