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Traditional knowledge and invasive missionary culture: Australia and the South Pacific

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1. The incorporation of new knowledge¹

Over the millennia that Australia and the South Pacific were settled by the original peoples of the region different but often related indigenous cultures developed in comparative isolation. The belief systems that developed owed a great deal to the prevalence of shamanism. In the years since Mircea Eliade's ground breaking work on north Asian shamanism was published (Eliade 1964) much attention and recognition has been given to the regional shamanism that was to be found on all continents either as a current religion or as an underlay to that religion. Aboriginal shamanism and Oceanic shamanism had much in common despite having developed independently and it is useful to consider them together.

The shamanistic revival that took place in the Americas, Africa and other parts of Asia from the late 1970s to the 1990s² was largely ignored by anthropologists in Australasia. Despite the advanced work that had been done in Australia on animism, the role of the trickster, swallowing and regurgitation and other aspects of initiation, they stuck narrowly to Eliade's localised definition.

¹ I first corresponded with Luise in 1968 when seeking advice on Gippsland orthography. Later she was involved in discussions re the founding of *Aboriginal History*. Although on fieldwork when the journal was founded Luise has always been regarded as a foundation member bringing to it her own unique contribution to the discipline.

² For a sample of this work see References under Gunson, Halifax, Hoppál, Kalweit, Lewis, Rogers, Rutherford, Siikala, N. Thomas, Vitebsky, and Walsh.

In these indigenous cultures knowledge was carefully preserved in songs, stories, dances and pictographs. While general knowledge was available to those admitted to rituals and ceremonies through performance, specialised knowledge was largely restricted to individual experts (men and women). In some societies it was the women who kept the genealogies; in others it was highly trained men who could recite all the clan genealogies. Some traditions were inherited by primogeniture, others by ultimogeniture. The skills of boatbuilders and other craftsmen acted as passports to other communities where their skills were honoured but rarely passed on.

While healing and other shamanic skills were often highly developed, some other knowledge was based on false premises. It was widely held, particularly in eastern Polynesia, for instance, that girls should lose their virginity between the ages of 5 and 12 as their breasts would not develop and they would be unmarriageable. The eating of human flesh was justified because the deceased person's attributes would pass to the eater.

The oldest records of indigenous knowledge and the oldest traditions remained unchanged from generation to generation and many of those whose duty it was to pass on the traditions did not know the meanings of some words. Traditional knowledge was shared on important occasions such as the birth, marriage and death of a chief or 'bigman', the 'enthronement' of a high chief or at initiation ceremonies. Often the occasion would be seasonal-related, for instance, to the position of the Pleiades.

Ever since the arrival of Europeans in the Indo-Pacific world in the 16th century there has been a tendency among Western scholars to assume that any belief or story that resembled Christianity was a direct borrowing, or indication of a new syncretic cult. It is certainly true that most indigenous people in the Pacific region were exposed early to the religious ideas and superior technology of the invaders, particularly Christian missionaries sent expressly to impart their knowledge to people, regarded, for the most part, as being little better than 'ignorant savages'. The new knowledge was 'whiteman's knowledge' or 'whitefella's myths' having no relevance to indigenous truth.

There is little evidence to suggest that Indigenous people took much notice of the beliefs of the invading culture before instances of conversion or change of conviction. However, the indigenous song cycles and traditions mostly allowed for the inclusion and recognition of new knowledge. Thus the performance of some Polynesian song cycles followed the inherited ritual with new songs that seemed relevant for the moment, and if successful, could be incorporated in future performances. A Marquesan song cycle in the 1850s incorporated stanzas relating to the coming of the French, Queen Victoria's imagined descent from the ancestor Piki, and a humorous piece on a plague of fleas.

Very probably, new knowledge was incorporated in the traditional repertoire of the elders in charge of the bora ceremonies. Richard Sadleir (1883: 18) records a stanza relating to the first sight of a railway train.

You see the smoke in Kapunda, The steam puffs regularly,
 Showing quickly it looks like frost, It runs like running water,
 It blows like a spouting whale.

New knowledge could often be confronting and would therefore be rejected. A well-known myth in the eastern highlands of New Guinea., from which the ‘cargo cult’ evolved, is as follows:

In the beginning there were three brothers. One became the father of the grasslands people, one became the father of the bush people and the third brother went away and never came back. When the white people came to New Guinea the old ones said: ‘These are the children of the third brother. He went away and obtained all kinds of possessions and learned all kinds of magic, and now he has returned. His children have access to clothing and tools, vehicles and tinned food from the outside world. The whiteman does not make anything he has so it must be made by the spirits. The spirits are our spirits too. The whiteman should share these goods with us. Some of us have seen goods arriving by sea in ships. Then goods are brought from a great hole in the bottom of the sea. Men take their ships out there and spirits go down on ladders to bring the cargo up from the depths.’³

The same myth was known to the people of the Binumarien valley of Papua New Guinea. When first exposed to the Christian beliefs of missionaries they rejected them as whiteman’s myths, especially the notion of equality between men and women. Much to the surprise of the missionaries the people of the valley became convinced of the truth of the Bible after a missionary translated the genealogy of Christ in the Gospel of Matthew. Accepting the biblical story of creation, combined with their own belief in the inferiority of women, resulted in the following myth (Cotterell 1999: 232):

In the beginning God made heaven and earth, and he made a garden in which he put man. God took a knife and scratched Adam’s arm and found that the blood wasn’t flowing in his veins. So God killed a chicken and gave it to Adam. When Adam ate the chicken, the blood began to run in his arm. God made Adam and Eve both men and, when Eve ate the fruit, as punishment God turned her into a woman.

This is a rather surprising syncretic outcome which apparently disappeared following the translation of Genesis in 1970 which is believed to have ‘liberated’ Binumarien women from ‘generations of repugnance for the sexual act, the birth of children and women’s part in both’. These views were countered by the notion that men and women were created equal, were ‘both naked and knew no shame’ (Walker 2010).

³ Quoted from the missionaries Des and Jenny Oatridge in Cotterell (1999: 232).

Some non-doctrinal Christian ‘survivals’ were really ‘borrowings’ such as colourful festivals which resonated with indigenous beliefs and practices. Thus White Sunday (the English Whitsun or Pentecost), which an English missionary introduced in Samoa, became extremely popular throughout Samoa and spread to Tonga and apparently the Torres Strait Islands with Samoan missionaries. The festival featured children and dancing; elaborate confirmation services were held and everyone dressed in white. Whether or not White Sunday spread to the Australian mainland does not appear to be documented but it could have been the model for the anti-Christian but quasi-religious movement known as Big Sunday which also featured children, dancing and initiation. Big Sunday took various forms in northern Australia ranging from giving licence to exaggerated sexual aspects of initiation to the ‘Chunday Corroboree’ of the Anglican mission at Oenpelli. Although the Berndts (1951:117) thought Big Sunday referred to a ‘big sandy’ area cleared for the performance of ceremonial rituals, Christian origins are likely.

2. The shamanic origins of old knowledge

While missionaries and other observers have recorded changes in belief, there are many instances where one suspects the absorption of Christian views, and even missionaries suspected as much. In many of these cases it is more likely that the explanation lies in the shamanic origins of traditional religion. The missionary Clamor Wilhelm Schürmann (Edwin Schurmann 1853/1987: 46) thought that the beliefs he heard of the hereafter were probably borrowed:

When a good man dies, his soul flies, as they express it, upwards or to heaven, where there are plenty of kangaroos and other food. Bad men, one person told me, go down into a great fire, but I am not sure if he had not heard that from an European.

Eyre (1845/2010: 223) gives a similar account:

One old native informed me, that all blacks, when dead, go up to the clouds, where they have plenty to eat and drink; fish, birds, and game of all kinds, with weapons and implements to take them. He then told me, that occasionally individuals had been up in the clouds, and had come back, but that such instances were very rare; his own mother, he said, had been one of the favoured few. Someone from above had let down a rope, and hauled her up by it; she remained one night, and on her return, gave a description of what she had seen in a chaunt, or song, which he sang for me, but of the meaning of which I could make out nothing.

Despite the shamanic features of this narrative I was still inclined to think it had been influenced by Christian views of heaven and hell until I put it in the context of another more authentic tradition, gathered no doubt in a bora ceremony, in another location, by the independent scholar R.H. Mathews.

Mathews' account⁴ is a classic example of the shamanic flight or voyage of the spirit of the deceased to the 'happy hunting grounds'. The fire may be a testing fire but it is certainly not hell.

There were many parallels between Christianity and shamanic features of Aboriginal religion – the world tree, the avian nature of the soul, genesis from the earth, the power of crystals and the ritual use of water. Swain & Rose (1988: 1) claim that the myth of the forbidden fruit in the mythology of the Otati of eastern Cape York Peninsula is of Judeo-Christian origin but it is more likely to be a variant of the shamanic myth of the forbidden berry known from as far afield as ancient Finland and the Marquesas as well as Mesopotamia.

Perhaps the area where European influence was most suspected was in regard to notions of deity. In the Pacific Islands this tended to be a late development, often based on the words chosen to represent the concept of a god in translating the scriptures. Use of the term *atua* puts the ocean-sky god Tangaloa on a par with, and sharing attributes with, the introduced Jehovah and Jesus. The name Tangaloa has been substituted for God in some Samoan Christian scriptures. Of course most Polynesian gods did have the supernatural attributes of Jehovah.

In eastern Polynesia there was a god who was much more controversial. This was Kiho in the Tuamotus and 'Io elsewhere in eastern Polynesia. Kiho or 'Io was the abstract depersonalised god of philosophers, a first cause free of human engagement. The intriguing thing about this god was that the being's existence was apparently kept secret for many years after first European contact and some anthropologists and missionaries believed it to be an invention. Anthropologists took opposing sides. The Catholic bishop in the Tuamotus claimed that he would have heard of these stories if they were genuine traditions; he found the Maui myth cycle collected by the linguist Frank Stimson to be obscene and the Kiho myths to be a fabrication.⁵ He was positive, he argued, because there was complete trust between him and his people, so he would have been told.

It is possible, of course, that his most trusted confidants did not know either. I have been given cultural information, by Islanders close to their cultural origins, that has been denied by others who have been exposed to mission influence for three generations. Indigenous people who have kept secret oral lore for generations have a remarkable record for protecting knowledge. One hundred years after the arrival of the first missionaries in the Society Islands the missionaries learnt for the first time that firewalking had existed in their midst. Similarly sexual initiation rites from Tahiti continued to be practised secretly in Pitcairn and Norfolk Island until modern times.

The existence of 'Io elsewhere in eastern Polynesia strengthens the argument for a common Polynesian origin. Indeed, the myths suggest that certain schools of learning and hereditary priests were the custodians of that lore. There seems to have been a similar pattern in Australia. The controversies ranged around whether

⁴ The Hereafter, reprinted in Thomas (2007: 149-151).

⁵ This account is based on the papers of anthropologist Kenneth Emory and others in the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu.

the sky gods thought to be supreme beings had ethical dimensions, whether they were in fact ‘high gods’, and did they owe their existence to the presence of Christianity. The extensive literature that was created is still absorbing reading.⁶

One of the complications was the large number of Aboriginal languages. Missionaries had to decide what word should be used for ‘God’ in Bible translation. Schürmann (1853/1987: 91) tells how he learnt of ‘*Mumaintyerlo*, who of old lived on earth, but who sits now above, has made the sun, moon and stars, the earth and the visible world in general’:

As soon as I got this name, I substituted it for the hitherto used Jehova, which they could scarcely pronounce --- If further discoveries do not show that they combine too pagan and absurd ideas with the name *Mumaintyerlo*, I mean to retain it for the name of God.

He learnt afterwards that the name simply referred to a ‘very ancient being’. William Ridley, missionary to the Kamilaroi, unwisely used Baiame to denote the Christian God in 1854. Failing to find a suitable Awabakal word, Lancelot Threlkeld tried unsuccessfully to introduce the biblically derived Jehova-kabirûê, Eloï and Immanuelli. Baiame, not known in Threlkeld’s territory, like Tangalooa, was an unsuitable choice, though Ridley and James Gunther of the Church Missionary Society at Wellington Valley possibly believed he was a dim memory of a creator figure.

In these controversies, anthropologists and amateurs in the field seemed to have an advantage over the more academic theoreticians who may have pronounced from a great height but had no practical experience. When the great Edward Tylor (1892) suggested in relation to Australia that ‘savage gods’ were ‘borrowed from missionaries’ the real issues seemed left behind, for it was easy for his critics to prove that the stories about these beings long preceded the missionaries, that their names were known in distant locations and the textual context undoubtedly spanned many generations.

Was Baiame, the principal ‘high god’ in many south eastern regions, an All Father or ‘Supreme Being’? Quite clearly he might appear so for one region. Eyre (1853/1987: 91), who had no illusions about the divinity of Baiame spoke of him as follows:

Among other superstitions of the natives, they believe in the existence of an individual called in the Murrumbidgee Biam, or the Murray Biam-baitch-y, who has the form and figure of a black, but is deformed in the lower extremities, and is always either sitting cross-legged on the ground, or ferrying about in a canoe. From him the natives say they derive many of the songs sung at their dances; he also causes diseases sometimes, and especially one which indents the face like the effects of smallpox.

⁶ See the works of Lang (1892-1906), Tylor (1892), Howitt (1904), E. Sidney Hartland in *Folklore* and, more recently, Corduan (2013) which, though theological, contains a scholarly analysis of the debates.

The description by Howitt (1904: 500) of Daramulun would fit most of these mythical beings: Daramulun was said to be able ‘to go anywhere and do anything’:

When he makes himself visible, it is in the form of an old man of the Australian race. He is evidently everlasting, for he existed from the beginning of all things, and he still lives.

Threlkeld’s account of the ‘Unknown Being’ of the Awabakal (Gunson 1974: vol.1:62-3) named Koun (Kōn) is similar:

he was a male being, who was always as he is now; in appearance like a Black, that he resides in the thick bushes or jungles, occasionally appearing by day, but mostly by night.

In general he precedes the coming of the natives from distant parts, when they assemble to celebrate certain mysteries, as knocking out the tooth in the mystic ring, or when performing some dance. He appears painted with pipe clay, and carries a fire-stick in his hand; but, generally it is the Doctors, a kind of Magicians [shamans], who alone perceive him, and to whom he says, - ‘fear not, come and talk.’

At other times he comes when the blacks are asleep, takes them up, as an eagle does his prey, and carries them away!

The shout of the surrounding party often causes him to drop his burthen; otherwise, he conveys them to his fireplace in the bush, where close to the fire he deposits carefully his load. The person carried tries to cry out, but cannot, feeling almost choaked: at daylight, Koun disappears, and the black finds himself conveyed safely to his own fireside.

Although Threlkeld used dream psychology to explain the story it is clearly an account of shamanic activity. Similarly the story of the Eagle-Hawks (Gunson 1974: vol. 1: 66) carrying in their beaks the large stones of a stone circle was another way of saying that shamans had built the circle.

Koun, Munaintyerlo, Baiame, Daramulun, Pundjil and all the other ‘sky gods’ of southern Australia were historic and living master shamans credited with supernatural powers of transportation and the ability to create heavenly bodies as well as local landmarks. They were ‘men of high degree’ who passed on sacred songs and created new ones. Such men and women, with identical roles, were found throughout the South Pacific. Little wonder they were mistaken for images or borrowings of the Supreme Being of the invading missionary culture.

At different times in prehistory and later there were cultural intrusions from New Guinea, the Torres Strait Islands and Indonesia (Makassar) which contributed fertility cults of tropical origin and Duk Duk type rituals to the diverse religious patterns developing in Northern Australia that contrasted with the more shamanic culture of the south, but that is another story.

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