NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The sixth General Meeting of the Society for 1982 will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at

8.00PM MONDAY, 23 AUGUST, 1982

AGENDA

1. Apologies.

2. Minutes of Previous General Meeting.
   Minutes of the previous General Meeting, held Monday, 26 July, 1982 to be confirmed. A copy of these minutes is attached.

3. New Members.
   No new members have been elected to the Society.

4. Papers and Journals.
   Papers and Journals from other Societies and Organizations will be tabled at the meeting.

5. Business.

6. Speaker.
   Mr. AURIMAS DUMCIUS, will give an address to the Society entitled:

   THE SEDAN AREA

7. Supper.

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A REVIEW OF SOME RECENT ANTHROPOLOGICAL WORKS ON AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

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It is frequently claimed that the traditional interests of Anthropologists are being rendered irrelevant by the drift of tribal people out of their rural homelands into towns or settlements and integration with a Western style economy (be it only as recipients of some form of welfare support). This trend is growing and in some areas, such as Australia, is completed. The dependency of these people on the wider world for material goods such as food, clothing and more exotic items like alcohol, tobacco, motor cars, radios, etc., does indeed overwhelm the traditional subsistence economy. Settled residence on limited areas in fact renders it impossible without access to four wheel drive transport, as the area surrounding camps is soon foraged out and cleared for firewood, creating in many cases a mini dust bowl. Despite this, the old order retains its relevance for many people whose lives find a framework of meaning and order in it and not in the values of the 'modern' world which surrounds them. Several works published in recent years illustrate how Aboriginal culture has managed to remain viable despite economic dependency on white Australia.

Basil Sansom worked with Aboriginal people who are usually considered to be the least tribally oriented of all - 'fringe' dwellers. Fringe dwelling Aborigines of North, Central and Western Australia have often been portrayed (especially in the Press) as the end product of a process which has become known as 'detribalization'. This followed white settlement and has broken down the traditional forces of social control and authority. Coupled with economic dependency and the inability to confront the European settlers through traditional organization or communication, the Aboriginal order fell. The people abandoned the rural areas to live on the fringe of white society - on missions, cattle stations, and what was considered by whites as the least desirable of all, around or in the growing towns. Here, unable or unwilling to adopt an urban lifestyle, they became prey to poor nutrition and health, alcoholism and delinquency. That, in brief, is the popular account. The not infrequent media stories on Alice Springs race relations are a case which illustrates this. There is a real lack of ethnographic research with fringe dwelling Aborigines. Few Anthropologists have bothered to ask basic questions such as how and why people live this way. It is becoming apparent that adequate accounts of such a life style cannot be put together from surveys or Government records alone, but needs the long term approach of an ethnographer. Jeff Colleman's account of Alice Springs reveals a totally different picture of the situation to that of the media. His work (1979) represents the first serious anthropological account of fringe dwelling. Sansom's book is a much needed contribution to such studies. In it he describes, in considerable detail, one of the five "fringe dwelling mobs" of Darwin (1975-76). A group he calls the "Wallaby Cross Mob".

The inhabitants of Wallaby Cross are considered by Sansom to be divisible into two groups. These are the regular members and their families and the "fringe clients". The regulars are those who call Wallaby Cross home and whose claim is generally accepted. This membership can be lost, leaving people with the choice of returning to the station, mission, reserve, etc., from where they
originally came, or trying to gain acceptance at another camp. Clients are people, normally resident outside Darwin, who attach themselves to the camp for varying periods (or more specifically to individuals who are camp members). The five Darwin Camp mobs compete with each other for these out-of-town visitors, offering as bait their expertise (born of experience) in city living, i.e., dealing with such organizations as the Police and Welfare agencies. Each camp is described by its members as being a safe place to stay, compared with the dangers of camping individually in Darwin. At a camp personal property is respected, there are no "crazy" people, and among the regulars are enough sober men to protect the visitor from drunks or outsiders. The visitor, they stress, can enjoy a visit to Darwin in safety and relative comfort. The tendency of people to visit through camps or to seek one out after attempting to go it alone, Sansom views as demonstrating the validity of these claims. In return the visitor is expected to be free with his finances, much of which is spent on mob activities, partying, food and drink. It is this continual flow of visitors in and out of Wallaby Cross which keeps the camp financial. Many of the visitors are rural workers, who accumulate sums of money during periods of employment. These people view their stay in Darwin as a holiday. When a visitor's money is spent, the goodwill which his generosity has built up, allows him to stay on and share in other peoples spending. Choices have to be made as to how many unpaying visitors can be supported and some may be asked to leave in times of financial difficulty. The only regular source of income are the pensions to which elderly camp members are now entitled.

What are the advantages which attract people to live permanently at Wallaby Cross? According to Sansom:

...a fringe dweller need call no white man 'boss' on the grounds that the man in question is his employer. This means that the fringe dweller has retreated from a relationship of authority that is characteristic of inter-racial dealings. Further, freedom from employer to employee boss-ship is an advantage that fringe dwellers value. To express the matter in their own terms, Masterful Men of the fringe dwelling mobs devote themselves wholly to 'blackfella business'. They can thus assert their independence of both wage labour and unemployment benefits: 'that station job and that unemployment, we fella doan need it'.

Apart from the drinking and partying, what business does the mob spend its time on? In particular, what is the nature of the 'blackfella business' that the mob is proud to be able to devote a good deal of time to? Ceremonies are important events for the people at Wallaby Cross. In them the bounds of the group are overcome to involve other mobs and people in the rural areas. These ceremonies are of the full series known to Aborigines, Dreamtime ritual, initiations, mourning and so on. Several are mentioned by Sansom, who frequently dwells upon their significance for Wallaby Cross. Missing a ceremony where one is an important actor is treated as a grave transgression of etiquette, not readily forgiven. The camp is proud of its ability to mount frequent and elaborate ceremonies, and they are a major part of the camp's attraction to visitors. By their form of 'hotel' enterprise, which makes sense by European standards, the people of Wallaby Cross are free to experience things which are valued by their own standards. Many Aborigines remember the restrictions placed on them in the recent past by whites and value the independence and freedom which camp life provides.

(1) No attempt is being made to describe camp life as desirable. It is an indication of Australia's long inhuman treatment of Aborigines that fringe dwelling can acquire status as a chosen lifestyle.
Colleman's work on Alice Springs camps emphasizes the activity of the Commonwealth Government's Welfare Branch, during the 1950's, which in seeking to extend its control over Aborigines, led to some people living in fringe camps to escape the tight control of the stations, missions and housing projects. The Alice Springs camps retain greater links between rural workers and the camp regulars. The camp tends to act as an Aboriginal Social Welfare scheme where unemployed people can live while awaiting work or social welfare payments.

Sansom's work is not without flaws. His accounts of camp life and economics are the better parts of the book. He marrs this by attempting to make the data fit a particular theoretical perspective. This does not detract from the book's value as a fringe camp ethnography.

The Camp at Wallaby Cross follows the entire range of camp activities, economics, leadership, ritual, etc. By comparison The Silent Revolution concentrates on religion and its recent developments. Kolig's book is based upon fieldwork in the Kimberley region of Western Australia, especially among desert people who have migrated here over the last 30 years or so. Many of the original groups from the region fared badly under colonial rule and are much reduced in population. Especially since World War II people have been leaving the vast Western Australian desert to live on missions and settlements around its fringe. These people have not suffered the frontier style violence and loss of land to agriculture which most Aborigines experienced. It is these desert people who now inhabit the settlements which fringe the desert in a great arc from the southern Kimberley, south-east to the South Australian border. (Hall's Creek, Fitzroy Crossing, Balgo, Jigalong, Wiluna, Warburton and others.) Kolig's conclusions from this study are extended to consider Aboriginal Religion across the northern half of Australia. "Aboriginal Religion", Kolig tells us, "is more active and alive than ever". The Law - the European term used by Aborigines to describe the totality of their belief system - did not die with their hunter/gatherer economy but survived. It has modified to account for the changes which have occurred and is continuing to evolve with changes in Aboriginal material welfare. A conscious attempt, Kolig insists, is being made by many groups to retain their religious identity, despite many years effort at assimilation. "The common denominator of these attempts is the Aborigines' mounting pride in what they see as their autochthonous cultural traditions and their desire to elevate them to a salient position in their lives". Among the indifferent Kimberley peoples, this often occurs as a 'millenerian' movement, frequently as a variant of the Northern Territory 'Big Sunday' or Kunapibbi ceremonial. This has spread south as far as Warburton. The local religious cults are apparently in decline after many years of intensive contact, missionizing and cult imports. The desert people whose adult population was raised in the desert have escaped long contact with these pressures and retain their religion to a much greater extent and are the generators of the religious 'Renaissance' in the region. From among the Aborigines who have settled at Jigalong, Tonkinson (1974) saw only one desertion from the Law, that of a woman who wished to avoid a 'promised' marriage and so married a Christian Aborigine from another area. The not inconsiderable attempts by the local missionaries to turn converts, had little effect save that of strengthening the resolve to keep the Law. The takeover of Jigalong Mission by the Government was celebrated at Jigalong as a victory for the Law and their resolve against Christianity.

(2) This 'model' applies to the camps studied but may not apply at all. Further study may identify several types of such camps, outwardly similar but existing for different reasons.
The Law has not survived without modification. Change has occurred in several important areas. Accepting the reality of modern employment is one. Station hand work, the major source of employment open to young Aboriginal men, usually has a heavy and a slack work period. Ceremonies had to be rescheduled to occur during the slack period in order to ensure adequate attendance. This change would not have occurred without a measure of resistance but was a necessary requisite for the religions survival. The focus of the religious activity from that of small inward looking cult lodges, jealously guarding their songs and ritual, to ceremonies involving larger groups than was previously possible, has also been very significant. In the desert, people were scattered in small groups across wide areas of country. The gatherings at which they assembled were limited by the desert, both as to their size and duration. Suspicion and distrust of distant groups, was the norm. Congregated on the settlements now are large numbers of people, frequently from several language groups, living together under a white law which demands a great measure of inter-group peace. Communication between these people can now occur through the medium of English or by a growth in multi-lingual ability. The various settlements are linked by white communications and the Aborigines can now see themselves, not as isolated communities, but as links in a chain of 'Law centres' which stretch across Australia. Tape recorders, two-way radios and motor cars, all play a part in maintaining this close contact. Assembly for work also brings together combinations of Aborigines not possible in the desert. The religious activities of Aborigines is fed by the combined aspirations of these people, whose numbers, mobility and ability to communicate, are acting to build a religion which spans, not divides, all the small groups. This is giving it new strength and significance as Aborigines face the values of a wider world. Monies and skills from employment can also be put (as they are at Wallaby Cross) to religious and ceremonial purposes.

This strengthening of religion is not a new phenomenon but has been hinted at since the early 1950's, but Kolig's book is the first work to examine its extent, development and origins. The significance of these developments are summarized by Kolig in the following manner.

Religion is now rapidly becoming a powerful force binding the Aboriginal people together and fostering mutual recognition and solidarity. Religious practices have now created a modern network of communication and interaction that serves as a paradigm to instill a sense of belonging together. A profound if silent revolution is taking place.

These two recent works illustrate the value of continued ethnographic research among Australian Aborigines, and tribal people in general. In all likelihood their culture was not static prior to colonization and is certainly not so today. Recent years have brought many significant changes to Aboriginal people. Drinking rights have been extended to them, equal wages paid, social security, land rights, and political activism have also emerged during the 1970's and have radically altered the lifestyle of many. The evidence available presently indicates that the pessimistic predictions about the ability of Aboriginal culture to survive will not eventuate.

References
