JOURNAL OF THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

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THE MAKING OF ‘MISSION MOB’:
KOONIBBA LUTHERAN MISSION AS A SITE OF MEMORY

_______________________________________________________________

Eve Vincent

1 Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia

Abstract

The Koonibba Lutheran Mission was established on the far west coast of South Australia in 1898. In 1963 the mission closed and the state government took over administration of the Koonibba community. In this article I argue that throughout most of the 20th century West Coast Nungas organised and expressed their collective identity around the shared experience of life on Koonibba. In the native title era, ‘tribal’ groups have (re)emerged as more significant identity categories across this region and one’s ‘tribal’ affiliations are stressed. Yet a connection with Koonibba is still prized, and it is sometimes seen to afford Aboriginal people access to firsthand experience of land-based practices such as food collecting, as well as understanding of the cultural import of particular places. In this article I consider how memories of the mission articulate with contemporary social realities. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in the outback town of Ceduna, I argue that Koonibba remains an important site of memory for West Coast Nungas, which is heavily drawn upon in the native title era. Contemporary Nungas narrate accounts of the mission experience that stress the ways in which conditions on Koonibba underwrote the perpetuation of the very way of being missionaries were intent on foreclosing.

1 ‘Nunga’ is commonly used as a term of self-identification by Aboriginal people in South Australia. ‘Anangu’ is used by Aboriginal people in northern South Australia and is preferred by those Pitjantjatjara-speaking people who live in Ceduna or visit the town from the remote communities of Yalata and/or Oak Valley.
Introduction

In 2009 I sat in Aunty Vera’s living room in Denial Bay, a small coastal settlement near Ceduna. Gleaming, dust-free, dark wood surfaces were crammed with framed photos of family members – school portraits, snapshots and other photographs marking life events. On the wall hung a large reproduction of an image of Aunty Vera’s maternal grandmother as a solemn adolescent girl in a high-collared white dress, a younger sister gripped to her hip. Aunty Vera’s great grandparents and their six children are pictured in front of the Koonibba Lutheran Mission’s stone church, the sharp diamond point of a window jutting out behind them. Koonibba, says Aunty Vera, was – is – home.

Aunty Vera was born at Koonibba in 1946 in a heatwave. She was delivered by her maternal grandmother, a renowned traditional midwife adept at turning breech babies. Aunty Vera’s afterbirth was buried at Koonibba. She told me, “I was born at Koonibba, I was baptised at Koonibba, I was confirmed at Koonibba. And I suppose I’ll be buried there.”

The Koonibba Lutheran Mission was established in 1898 on the far west coast of South Australia, on the edge of the Nullabor Plain. In 1963 the mission closed and the South Australian state government assumed administration of its residents – as Ceduna Nungas say, “the government came in.” Today the former mission site is home to 250 residents of the Koonibba Aboriginal Community, which is administered by the elected Koonibba Community Council. Many former mission residents reside in Ceduna as well as other small towns on the far west coast and across the Eyre Peninsula.

In this article I argue that throughout most of the 20th century West Coast Nungas organised and expressed their collective identity around the shared experience of life on the Koonibba Lutheran Mission (see also Read 1984). Many Nungas, like Aunty Vera, express that Koonibba remains “home”. Since the mid-1990s the native title era has generated new tensions and possibilities around local Aboriginal self-identifications in this region. ‘Tribal’ identities, some of which were certainly retained on the mission, have re-emerged as the primary referent for Aboriginal self-understandings as Aboriginal people seek to demonstrate the continuity of connection to country that native title requires. Indisputably, these ‘tribal’ identities –
Kokatha, Mirning, Wirangu and Pitjantjatjara – are ascendant in Ceduna (see Monaghan 2006, 2007, 2012), as they are across Australia. It is true then to say the Koonibba experience forms the basis of an identity-formation that has been largely but not fully eclipsed. Koonibba, however, remains an important site of memory, which is drawn on by contemporary Nungas in complex and ambivalent ways.

In this article I consider how memories of the mission articulate with contemporary social realities. I argue here that Koonibba is remembered today as somewhere where knowledge of “the old ways”, and of language, was kept alive. Childhoods at the mission are valorised in the native title era; these were childhoods spent hunting and gathering in the bush contiguous to the mission as bushfoods were collected to supplement a meagre ration supply. Thus, this article elaborates an apparent contradiction: the fact that Aboriginal people came to settle permanently at Koonibba signalled the end of a way of being for mobile hunter-gatherers. Yet today a connection with Koonibba is cherished as it is seen to afford Aboriginal people access to firsthand experience of land-based practices such as food collecting. In some cases a childhood spent on the mission is also associated with the transmission of the knowledge of the secret-sacred content of stories associated, especially, with certain sites that lie in the scrub just beyond the mission. In these ways the “mission mob” authenticate themselves in the present in the terms set down by the state. In the process they seem to indicate that the mission experience provided the conditions to maintain something of the very way of life that missionaries explicitly set out to destroy.

Interviews and Fireside Yarns: The Basis of this Article

This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Ceduna throughout 2008-9. Stories about Koonibba flowed around the campfire “out bush” and around the kitchen table “in town”. I collected a wealth of material from these “yarns”, as lengthy and humorous storytelling sessions rolled on. I also conducted a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews in the field in 2009. In this article I make particular use of two especially rich recordings done with Aunty Vera and her younger sister, Aunty...
Joan. In accordance with my University of Sydney ethics approval, I use pseudonyms throughout this article.

Further, I have been granted access to a selection of wonderful in-depth recordings done by the oral historian Sue Anderson and archaeologist Keryn Walshe as part of the National Estate Grants Program-funded ‘Oral History of the Koonibba Mission Project’. These interviews were conducted in 1996 and 1997, and have been lodged in the J.D. Somerville Oral History Collection, Mortlock Library of South Australia.\(^2\) I was granted permission by numerous interviewees to access these earlier recordings, which I also draw on extensively in this article to supplement my own recorded interviews. This article also relies heavily on the memoir of former Koonibba pastor, Clem Eckermann (2010), which was published posthumously, and historian Peggy Brock’s (1993:63-120) influential account of Koonibba.

**Australian Anthropology and Aboriginal Missions**

The publication of Deborah Rose and Tony Swain’s (1988) edited collection devoted to the subject of Aboriginal mission experiences sought to redress anthropologists’ neglect of Aboriginal responses to Christian missions in Australia. Rose and Swain (1988:4) argued that it was partly an “enchantment with the exotic” that had led anthropologists to regard Aboriginal culture’s contact with Christianity to produce corrupted cultural worlds and forms of little interest to the anthropologist. Anthropologists’ neglect of missions was all the more glaring because of the ubiquity of the missionary presence. Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1988) argued that in their 40 years of field experience they only rarely carried out anthropological research in an area unaffected by missionary activity. Missions, they noted, sought not to only transform the spiritual life of Aboriginal people, but every aspect of their lives.

\(^2\) The recordings are stored at OH 365. I can give no further details without compromising the anonymity of my research participants.
For the Berndts (1988:53), Christianity should be understood as “the handmaiden of Europeanization.” This point has since been taken up and systematically established by historians who have attended to the transformation of everyday lives and cultural practices (Attwood 1989; Blake 2001; Brock 1993; Choo 2001; Lydon 2009). Yet historians have also taken care to demonstrate that a “simple equation between mission and empire is not possible” (Etherington 2005:196). While missions and missionaries are deeply implicated in the colonial process, they might also pursue objectives counter-posed to those of settlers or come to act as severe moral critics of colonial powers (e.g., Reynolds 1998).

The process by which Aboriginal people come to be produced as ‘Europeanised’ subjects through the exercise of power is also complex. Following Brock I perceive that at Koonibba Lutheran missionaries sought to transform the very personhood of Aboriginal people: they were to become domesticated, working, sedentary, individuated subjects, possessed of Christian moral values. Thorough transformations along these lines were certainly effected, but resistances to the hegemonic missionary project remained embedded “within everyday practices” (Morris 1989:75). Like Brock I perceive that Aboriginal people actively engaged in a process of re-making themselves, and struggled to do so according to their own priorities. I endorse Brock’s (1993) reluctance to emphasise missionaries’ all-encompassing capacity to re-make others in their own image (contra Attwood 1989). Brock (1993:156) wrote, “I suggest that we should see Aborigines making themselves rather than being made.” Koonibba was both the site of the transformation of personhood and also the empowered regeneration of a collective Aboriginal identity in a hostile world.

Rather than everyday cultural practices, anthropology’s focus continues to be on the intellectual encounter between Christian and Aboriginal cosmologies and the impact of Christianity on Aboriginal beliefs (e.g., Austin-Broos 2010; Schwartz and Dussart 2010). In terms of this privileged intellectual encounter, anthropologists have sometimes looked at the “failure” of Christianity to displace Indigenous belief systems (e.g., Kolig 1988; Tonkinson 1974). The most paradigmatic case of missionary failure is perhaps that of Jigalong in the Western Desert where, during the 1960s,
Christianity had made few inroads. Ceremonial and religious life flourished despite the missionaries’ presence; male initiation ceremonies involving sub-incision and circumcision continued in secret at Jigalong throughout the 1960s, and the missionaries dared not venture into the camp in which Aboriginal adults lived (Tonkinson 1974:69).

At Koonibba, daily life had been transformed by the 1920s, by which time Christianity had certainly also captured people’s imaginations. It is Aboriginal people’s memories of the mission, I argue, that are “tradition-oriented”, to use Tonkinson’s term, and which stress the persistence and presence of the old ways on the mission. More recently emphasis has shifted onto the dynamism of Aboriginal belief systems, and the capacity of Aboriginal people to interpret and incorporate Christian beliefs in creative ways (see Magowan and Gordon 2001).

**Mission Experiences, Tradition and Authenticity**

Some twenty-five years since Rose and Swain (1988) criticised anthropologists’ fixation with pre-colonial cultural forms, it is Aboriginal people who find themselves in an impossible bind: they must themselves embrace and emphasise those aspects of their worlds most ‘unpolluted’ by the colonial experience in order to advance land and native title claims to their country. As numerous authors have shown, access to an often-reified realm of ‘traditional’ Aboriginal cultural knowledge is key to staking legitimate claims to authentic Aboriginality in the present, upon which the acknowledgement of rights in land rests (e.g., Merlan 1998; Merlan 2006; Povinelli 2002; Wolfe 1999). Dispossessed by colonial processes, Aboriginal people find themselves having to demonstrate the extent to which they managed to evade the impact of these same colonial processes, in order to regain rights in country.

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3 Tonkinson (1974:135) pointed out the irony of the fact that: “the mission, unwittingly and indirectly, has facilitated the retention of the Law and its focal manifestation, the religious life. By allowing large numbers of tradition-oriented Aborigines to congregate on a permanent basis at Jigalong, where they were fed, the mission has enabled them to pool their religious knowledge and has given them ample spare time to devote to religious discussion and activity.”
Of immediate relevance to this article is Trigger and Asche’s (2010) consideration of the ways Christian beliefs and practice have been figured or ignored in a selection of land and native title claims. Trigger and Asche (2010:103) bring to light several cases where the influence of Christian intellectual beliefs on Aboriginal traditions were ‘downplayed’ in native title claim material, despite the fact that researchers were tasked with establishing the evolution of connection to country through the frame of continuity. In many of the areas under claim, rights in country and understandings of country intersect strongly with and have been refigured in light of Christian beliefs. The reasons for this elision are complex and carefully considered by the authors. Trigger and Asche (2010) show that researchers risk reproducing an unsophisticated account of cultural transformation in failing to submit accounts of the way the Christian faith of claimants is entirely commensurate with intact traditions.

In the case I describe, Aunty Vera and Aunty Joan are vehement and perceptive critics of the native title claims process, from which they have withdrawn their energies (Vincent 2013). But still they find themselves implicated in the moral/political economy surrounding such claims. Across Australia, even in urban areas, Aboriginal people face a situation today where legitimacy and authenticity at a local level are derived from having some access to the realm of land-based, ‘traditional’ culture (Cowlishaw 2010). The state’s “demand for tradition” (Merlan 2006:85) creates both burdens and opportunities, and requires that Aboriginal people narrate their life-stories in new ways.

Focus of this Article

My emphasis in this article is on the ways Aboriginal people draw on the mission past in the present in order to express, negotiate, and sometimes affirm, contemporary self-representations and imaginings. A comprehensive account of life on Koonibba is beyond the scope of this article. I proceed by way of a roughly chronological account of the mission years, embedding the historical detail in contemporary Aboriginal people’s divergent responses to selected aspects of the mission’s history. I hope to show West Coast Nungas’ dynamic engagement
with their past, as they craft narratives about historic events that speak to and about the demands and dilemmas that shape the present. In conversations about Koonibba I encountered a range of opinions about the fact of its very existence and overall legacy, as well as ambivalent responses to the relationship between the mission experience, assimilation policies and the stolen generations. After flagging this last important discussion, I return to consider in more depth the relationship between recollections of life on Koonibba and pre-colonial cultural ‘traditions’ – the ‘old ways’. It is this aspect of remembering Koonibba that is especially striking: mission childhoods are valorised in the present because of the access they are perceived to afford to aspects of a form of Aboriginality that the Lutherans applied themselves to transforming.

The Making of ‘Mission Mob’: Koonibba’s Beginnings

In August 1897 Pastor Kempe, formerly of the central Australian Hermannsburg Mission (Austin-Broos 2009:28), visited the west coast for the purpose of identifying a suitable site for a Lutheran mission. The founder of the Denial Bay township, William McKenzie, took Kempe to the Hundred of Catt, an area of thick mallee scrubland, in the pouring rain, leading him to the camp of Micky Free and Sarah-Rose Button (Eckermann 2010:30). These were the grandparents of Kokatha-Mirning woman Iris Burgoyne. In her memoir, Burgoyne (2000:21) says that her grandmother made tea for Kempe and McKenzie in the billy, “sweetening it with sugar used from a tree called womma.” European goods and foodstuffs, then, were already being used in Aboriginal camps, and were blended with local food sources. Free, also known as Willis Michael Lawrie, was the son of Michael Lawrie, a London-born Irishman who worked as a boundary rider, and Tjabilija Catlin Mingo, a Mirning woman (Burgoyne 2000:14). I was told by one of Free’s many descendants that Michael Lawrie, “the Irish fella,” jumped ship down at Eucla, atop of the Great Australian Bight. Michael Lawrie and Tjabilija were married, describes Burgoyne (2000:14), in a traditional firestick ceremony. In 1897, Free led Kemp and McKenzie through dense woodlands:
The timber became thicker and thicker, until it was almost impenetrable. They had to leave their vehicle in the middle of the scrub, and continue on foot. The whole block was criss-crossed from every direction and inspected by [their] keen and knowledgeable eyes. In places there was low, in places, high scrub; in places small open plains. Everywhere, they startled and set into flight the great variety of animal and bird life. Abundantly convinced that the land was suitable for agriculture, and accompanied by their admirable and competent guide, they arrived, completely exhausted, back at the vehicle.

(Eckermann 2010:30-31)4

While he did not settle there permanently until 1906, Micky Free was instrumental in gathering people at Koonibba to begin the task of scrub clearing, necessary for the establishment of a farm. The Lutheran Church secured a lease in the Hundred of Catt with a right of purchase in two years. Eckermann (2010:33) says that the name “Koonibba” is possibly based on a poor transliteration of the term “Kuru Hibla” or “iris of the eye”, which may have been the name given to the Koonibba rockhole, a permanent water source on which the mission depended. Aunty Vera, however, said to me slowly, “Koonibba. See – goona...”. Goona, or shit, was a word I knew well. According to Aunty Vera, Koonibba meant “pile of shit”. Aunty Vera’s sister, Aunty Joan, told me the same thing, adding, “The Nungas had the last laugh over the missionaries on that one.” These comments indicate the extent to which a separate world of meanings is and was maintained by mission residents, beyond the grasp of the missionaries.

In the early years of the mission it was the ready food supply that attracted Nungas to Koonibba. Between 1898 and 1901 Koonibba was without a pastor. It was effectively a farm, overseen by a white, Lutheran-appointed manager who welcomed Aboriginal people as workers, or simply to camp undisturbed on the Church’s lease. Koonibba mission took over the function of distributing government rations to the old, sick and to children from McKenzie (Brock 1993:66) and also distributed rations in return for work. Even after the first missionary’s arrival, says Brock (1993:80), “Many resented the work required from the able-bodied, preferring to go to Denial Bay or Penong where they could camp without labour demands

4 This passage is indented in Eckermann's work however no reference for the original is given.
and still obtain food.” Instilling a work ethic was an early and major objective of the missionaries and they wrestled constantly with the need to provide food, so as to hold Nungas to Koonibba, and an ideological reluctance to issue rations except as a reward for work (Brock 1993:79-80). Koonibba’s first missionary, Pastor Wiebusch, was evidently intent on establishing disciplined routines of the kind Foucault (1991) has described. Aboriginal people’s “docile bodies” were to be “subjected, used, transformed and improved” into working bodies: this was the relation of docility-utility, according to Foucault (1991:136-137).

Scrub cutters worked with axes and bare hands. Horses were used to drag the felled trees and the cleared areas were burned (Burgoyne 2000:24). Free had previously acted as a foreman on Aboriginal teams already employed as scrub cutters around the district (Eckermann 2010:28); indeed Aboriginal workers continued to command better wages scrub cutting off the mission than on it in years to come (Eckermann 2010:145), underlining the vital role of Aboriginal labour in various rural economies across Australia (Beckett 2005). The task of “snagging” was particularly arduous and disliked on Koonibba: this involved “cutting back to ground level the stumps and shoots on the cleared ground” (Eckermann 2010:123).

A memorial to the early Koonibba scrub cutters is on display in the Koonibba Community Council office today. It is based on an early photo of the scrub clearing underway: a silver plaque depicts the same scene in relief. The text praises the hard labour involved in pulling out the tough mallee trees, with their knobbled roots, in order for the workers to build “a place to call home”. When I interviewed Aunty Vera’s nephew, Jamie, he proudly explained that he was descended from one of the early scrub cutters. But when I went to Koonibba with a visiting Melbourne friend she raised an eyebrow on reading the dedication, commenting drily, “Presumably they already had homes.” My progressive friend did not recognise, and could not be expected to know, that Nungas are proud to see something of their own past in the contemporary landscape. Her viewpoint reflects more widely shared progressive assumptions; Aboriginal people are rarely credited with desires and aspirations for modernity or new experiences. Ceduna Nungas, however, perceive both that their ancestors’ world and homes were destroyed and that their ancestors helped create and shape
a new world (which was certainly not of their own design). Ceduna is an outback country town structured by the unequal, and unstable, race relations Gillian Cowlishaw (1988, 2004) describes. In hegemonic local discourse, white “pioneers” are alone venerated as establishing the early towns and economies of the region, in a distant period characterised by hard labour and deprivation. The scrub cutting plaque recognises Aboriginal creative efforts against this local backdrop of denial.

Koonibba offered, in Brock’s (1993:71) terms, a “refuge” to Aboriginal people increasingly displaced by new land use and on the brink of starvation, providing especially a “safe haven for their children.” The more significant point is that in Koonibba local Aboriginal people intuited and seized the potential for establishing a stable base from which to camp as a large group (something becoming increasingly difficult in the district); to re-energise ceremonial life; and collect a regular food supply. At Koonibba, the seeds for an emergent collective identity were sown.

Brock (1993:63) paints a picture of the early Koonibba population, which fluctuated greatly:

The Lutherans were told that there were 500-600 Aboriginal people on the west coast in 1898. The west coast area was able to support very large gatherings at this time. It was not unusual for 200-300 people to meet together for ceremonies. In the first years of the mission, groups of between 150-200 would gather there prepatory to moving on to ceremonial grounds.

After the bulk of people moved on for ceremonies, only a handful remained at Koonibba, “the old and sick and a few people of mixed descent who did not want to participate” (Brock 1993:66). After Weibush arrived in 1901 he threw himself in to the task of religious conversion (Eckermann 2010:47-61). Other conversions were also taking place, notably in the domestic realm.
‘The life of the wurley’: The Symbolic Distinction Between Camps and Cottages

For Brock (1993), a focus on the transformative processes by which the missionaries attempted to re-make Aboriginal subjects entailed greater attention to spatial rather than temporal dimensions of the mission experience (see also Lydon 2009; McLisky 2010). In Brock’s (1993) sketch, the early landscape of the mission was divided into “two poles,” the mission settlement and the camp on its fringes. “As the mission became established, the camp remained physically and ideologically separate,” says Brock (1993:67). What the missionaries imagined as a transition from one mode of being to another was initially symbolised by the move from wurlies and humpies in the camps to stone cottages, which were preferentially allocated both to the converted and to the most indispensible workers.

Burgoyne (2000:39) explains that “many of the old people” from Talewan, Ooldea and the Bight area resided in camps on the outskirts of the mission. “Camp people,” she says, “lived in the bush, eating lizards, emu eggs, wombats and kangaroos” (Burgoyne 2000:39). As a young girl she often visited the camps for something to do. “We could not afford a television or radio,” she relates, so instead the children “flopped down on blankets and talked” with the old people (Burgoyne 2000). It was here, she concludes, that she learnt about “Mirning culture, rules and Law” (Burgoyne 2000:39).

Camp life, then, was not just an important aspect of the early years on the mission, but a long-term feature of Koonibba life. Aboriginal people continued to visit Koonibba for periods of time – from Ooldea and further north – up until the 1950s, and camp on the fringes of the mission settlement. Aunty Joan, born in 1951, remembers the arrival of such campers from the north, and the whole community attending “corroborees” for a week or so. Then suddenly these camps would disappear.

While the spaces of camp and settlement were certainly distinct and “ideologically separate” from the point of view of the missionaries, camp Nungas were a part of the lives of those living and growing up in stone cottages. Burgoyne (2000) tells of a childhood spent moving between these spaces, regularly visiting and spending time with her kin. Camp people also
occasionally visited their kin now housed in cottages, if they needed to check on or look after someone. However, she says, “they [camp residents] much preferred to drink their cup of tea outside, rather than go inside the house” (Burgoyne 2000:39). Further, those Aboriginal people living in houses did not necessarily use their domestic space in the way it was designed to be used. Aunty Vera and Aunty Joan’s mother, now deceased, grew up in a two-room home on the mission: one room held a woodstove and kitchen, the other room slept her parents and the twelve children. Damper was sometimes cooked in the ashes in a fire outside of the house, and, as there was very little crockery, people simply ate with their fingers. Many people opted to sleep outside, under the stars, on hot summer nights. Such re-fashioning of domestic space occurred, and continues to occur, across Australia (e.g., Musharbash 2008:151-152).

Those people who lived in houses on Koonibba routinely went to Denial Bay to camp for the summer. Here they built wurlies and slept on seaweed mattresses. Aunty Vera and her four sisters have strong memories of these camps. While Aunty Vera remembers Clydesdales pulling a dray down to the camp spot, Aunty Joan remembers arriving “on the back of the mission truck”. She says, “The missionaries would drop us off there and we’d stay there for a couple of weeks of the holidays.” At Denial Bay, the community simply camped in the scrub, eating fish, crabs and shellfish.

I am arguing that it was possible to experience a form of camp life, even if one was normally living with one’s family in a house. Aunty Vera’s family treasure memories of the Denial Bay camps in the same way Burgoyne (2000) treasures her time visiting camps on the mission. This was a space in which a version of the “old ways” was taught and lived. Memories of summers at Denial Bay centre around the gathering and sharing of food: collective, kin-based bonds and food-collecting skills are emphasised.

5 Today, too, the Koonibba mini-bus often brings people from the Koonibba Community down to the Denial Bay beach on hot summer days. With music blaring from the car stereo, community members cook up food in the picnic area, swim and wade in the shallows, and sometimes dance in the car park adjoining the jetty.
‘Koonibba people’: Life on and off the Mission

A summary of the financial circumstances of the mission provides a crucial aide to understanding its history. Up until 1921 Koonibba was a fully functioning cattle and wheat farm, with full employment of Aboriginal men its policy, and self-sufficiency its goal. Aboriginal people undertook farm work under the supervision of a white overseer or, when they were not available, “the more reliable Aboriginal workers (mostly of mixed descent) acted as supervisors” (Brock 1993:79). While working men left during World War One to take advantage of a European labour shortage throughout the district, after the war’s end they were back on the mission (Brock 1993:89). Brock (1993:90) argues that by this time the missionaries’ policy of full employment – whereby labour was demanded in return for a combination of wages, rations and clothing – had succeeded in its objective. It had ensured a potential pool of converts who had reason to remain on the mission, and enabled close and constant supervision of the newly converted. This period resulted in a generation of Koonibba women who were trained housekeepers, and men who were “capable teamsters, shearers, wheat lumpers, stevedores, stone masons, carpenters and blacksmiths” (Brock 1993:90). In 1921 the church board, heavily in debt, decided to abandon full employment, as it could not afford so many wages on a 12,000 acre property with poor soil, and to switch from cattle to sheep (Brock 1993:90). While the last decision created more work in the short term as fences were sheep-proofed, and the policy change took some years to implement, increasingly Koonibba men had to seek work off the mission, mostly in the region’s towns but also on farms and pastoral stations. By the mid-1930s the church had given up on farming altogether, leasing the mission’s land to local white share-farmers, who employed just one or two Aboriginal men at any given time.

Aunty Vera’s maternal grandfather, or Papa, had been trained on Koonibba, and was an accomplished stonemason who worked both on the mission, and around the district. Aunty Vera remembers, as a little girl, jumping up and down on the piles of sand Papa was using for his mortar at the site of a house that still stands in the centre of Ceduna today – and getting into trouble for her efforts. Aunty Vera recounted to me that she once told the then mayor of Ceduna this but he denied it, asserting that his
father had built the house that still stands. Aunty Vera told me, “I swear to almighty God that Papa built that house and not [the former mayor’s] father! But see because we’re black people nobody is going to take notice of us.” As well as a stonemason, he was, I’ve been told, a “gun shearer,” much sought around the district for his speed and skill. He travelled the district with his brother, also a shearer, on a pushbike.

The 1921 change in policy at Koonibba coincided with opportunities for greater mobility on the west coast, via cars and a new railway line, and the advent of telephone communications with the outside world (Brock 1993:91-92). Koonibba residents often purchased second-hand cars from nearby farmers. Brock (1993:92) says:

Cars became a common sight on the West Coast. The mission bought its first car in 1925...By this time some Aboriginal people had already acquired their own cars with wages they had earned, not only farms but on the railways and at the new deep sea port at Cape Thevenard. Cars gave them increased mobility and independence at a time when they might have to travel long distances in search of work.

Koonibba men, sometimes alone and sometimes with their families, went to live for periods in improvised fringe camps on designated reserves on the outskirts of small rural towns such as Ceduna, Wudinna and Port Lincoln, where they worked a variety of working class jobs. These camps formed part of Koonibba Nungas’ ‘beats’ in Jeremy Beckett’s (1994:131) terms. Writing in the early 1960s, Fay Gale (1964:101) noted the centrality of Koonibba as a source of identity for these fringe camp residents, writing, “Only one third of the so-called ‘Koonibba people’ still live on the mission; the others are scattered across Eyre Peninsula.” What though of the lives of those who remained on the mission?

**Assimilation, Welfare and the Lutheran Missionaries**

I turn now to consider the threat of intrusions by “welfare” onto the mission during this same period, a spectre powerfully evoked in Dylan Coleman’s (2012) award winning novel Mazin Grace. The relationship of the missionaries to assimilation policies is complex, and was seriously mulled over by Aunty
Vera’s family. Some Aboriginal people I know are firmly of the view that at Koonibba the Lutherans helped them evade the state’s welfare apparatus rather than facilitated the removal of ‘half-caste’ children. The significance of this view is that the method of escape from the state is intimately tied to the assertion of cultural legitimacy today: vulnerable, fair-skinned children hid for days at a time in the scrub eating bush foods in order to hide from “welfare”. Some context is needed to establish the missionaries’ imbrication with the state apparatus of the assimilation era.

At Koonibba the most repressive facet of the bitterly resented protectionist act, the *South Australian Aborigines Act 1911*, found its clearest expression in the Koonibba Children’s Home, the most controversial aspect of the Koonibba experience. At this residential institution, generations of boys were trained up to work as farm labourers and girls as domestics. The Home opened in 1914, entered a period of decline in about 1955 and closed its doors in 1963 (Eckermann 2010:107-109). In building it the church incurred a huge debt, which was to “haunt the mission board for many years” (Brock 1993:83), and have profound ramifications: later, Aboriginal labour was effectively exchanged for donations to the mission as children, especially girls, were sent out to work for Lutheran families in South Australia and Victoria.

The Home housed children whose parents continued to move either around the district for itinerant work, or through their country because they continued to live tradition-oriented lives. Either way, most Home children’s parents did not reside permanently on Koonibba. Children’s dormitories were a common feature of missions around Australia, serving different functions in different places and often accommodating children whose parents lived permanently on the same mission. There also seems to have been great variation, in terms of the regularity of, and restrictions surrounding, children’s contact with their kin (Blake 2001:67-84; Choo 2001:142-169; Tonkinson 1974:122-124). In all cases, missionaries believed that instilling new values in young children was the key to the successful production of Europeanised Aboriginal subjects.

Under the 1911 Act the Chief Protector of Aborigines became the legal guardian of all Aboriginal children under 21 (HREOC 1997:638). Koonibba mission staff were extremely
concerned about provisions in the Act relating to ‘half-caste’ children. The Protector had the power to take charge of all ‘half-caste’ children found “wandering or camping” with Aboriginal people and put them under the control of the State Children’s Department (Brock 1993:16). In 1912 the Protector warned the Koonibba missionaries directly that ‘neglected’ children of mixed descent were to be removed from their parents and that “if these children were to remain at Koonibba the accommodation would need to be upgraded” (Brock 1993:82-83).6 Eckermann (2010:105-106) relates that the mission decided, “with the full approval of the concerned parents...that a children’s home should be built at Koonibba.” The Home was to ensure children stayed in contact with their families: children were only ever placed in the home voluntarily and parents could “visit daily...so that family bonding would be maintained” (Eckermann 2010:106).

The Home was conceived then out of genuine concern, in order to circumvent aspects of the 1911 Act. Yet it evolved into an institution with aims entirely congruent with nationwide policies of Aboriginal child removal, severely curtailing children’s contact with their kin and setting them on a course to assimilation into white society.

Once a child was voluntarily installed in the home they were not allowed to leave. Historian Cameron Rayne (2009:57-76) refers to home residents as “inmates” or “prisoners” of the home, especially single young women trapped there under a rule known misleadingly as ‘the 21 rule’. As Raynes (2009:63) explained, this rule “stipulated that young Aboriginal women should not be allowed out of the home until the age of 21 [as they were under the guardianship of the Chief Protector], unless to marry.” However, Raynes’ (2009:63-64) archival research has brought to light cases of women being held in the home for much longer than this; there they continued to be a source of free labour, assisting with cooking, cleaning, sewing, washing, ironing and mending.

6 Historian Anna Haebich (2000:199) shows that in South Australia the Protector continued, for some time after the passage of the 1911 Act, to remove Aboriginal children using the provisions of the State Children’s Act 1895. This Act included a definition of a “neglected child” as a child found “sleeping in the open air, without home or settled abode” (HREOC 1997:636-637).
Eckermann (2010:157-158) detailed how the church board’s debt was eventually cleared during the Debt Liquidation Campaign of the 1930s, with help from Lutheran congregations in South Australia and Victoria. In return for those people’s generosity, the Home provided domestics and farmhands to these areas for years to come: girls and boys were trained up in the Home and then “sent out”. There is no doubt that the regime was hyper-exploitative, but warm and loving human relationships still flowered – both within the Home, and also between Home children and Lutheran families (see Mattingley and Hampton 2008:206-208).

On the subject of those young women sent out as domestics, Aunty Vera commented, “But I’m not sure that you’d consider them part of the stolen generation, because they did come back?” This, in a nutshell, points to the conflicting interpretations the Children’s Home experience has spawned. Extensive Australian scholarship demonstrates that from around the 1930s state-based assimilation policies had as their object the dissolution of Aboriginal identities via the ‘absorption’ of people of Aboriginal descent into white Australian society (Haebich 2000; Read 1999). The violence that accompanied this process – physical, sexual and institutional as well as ontological and spiritual – was revealed by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families in the late 1990s, and culminated in then prime minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations.

For his part, Eckermann (2010:110) seemed stunned by the fact that he was called to appear before the aforementioned inquiry in Adelaide, stressing that the rationale of the Home was never to permanently sever Home children’s ties to their family. The residents of the Children’s Home were, after all, placed there “voluntarily,” in stark contrast to the stories of removal by means of coercion, deception, compulsion and sheer force that the Inquiry brought to light. But the families who entrusted their children to the care of the Koonibba Children’s Home did so with a full awareness that if they did not do so their children might well be taken away, and all contact with them lost. The Home cannot be represented as separate from the policy of forcible removal, and innocent as to its effects, as it relied on the spectre of removal for its own *raison d’être*. Furthermore, it is clear that
once placed in the Home, Aboriginal children found themselves committed to an institution with a disciplinary function; missionaries acquired enormous discretionary powers over every aspect of the children’s lives; and the children’s labour, especially the girls’, was exploited.

The Determined Maintenance of Relations with Country

In contrast to Rayne’s work and Eckermann’s dismay about appearing before the Inquiry, Aunty Joan remains adamant that throughout her childhood it was the Lutheran missionaries who colluded with mission families to outwit the state. As ‘half-caste’ children growing up on the mission in the 1940s and 50s, Aunty Joan and Aunty Vera remember hiding out bush to escape the long reach of “welfare”. Aunty Vera talked about eating both galahs and eggs found in birds’ nests, while Aunty Joan remembered old people catching food, “even wild cat,” while she was hiding out bush for days with the mission’s fairer-skinned children. In 1996, she told Sue Anderson and Keryn Walshe:

I remember those tracks through the night and it was real dark and it was all half-caste kids, the older ones carrying the little ones and with the Grandparents – one up the front, one at the back and a couple down each side, keep us in line – and we’d go to Koonibba siding to my uncle’s place and he’d feed us there and – wouldn’t stay any longer than it took time to eat – and then we’d be off back through the scrub again. And the old people had to catch us food, even wild cat. But we would be out for three days sometimes.

The bush, in these memories, is a hospitable place that is credited with protecting, sheltering, feeding and nourishing fair-skinned mission kids, in the process ensuring that they maintained their ability to locate themselves within the local Aboriginal world. This point is significant: those whose Aboriginality was regarded as most indeterminate and malleable by the state in the past were afforded an opportunity to experience something that is valued by the state as a central prerequisite to authentic Aboriginality in the present: comfortable, familiar and dependent relations with country.
Memories of the presence of the “old ways” were a central theme stressed by all of my interviewees. The Lutheran missionaries, “of course,” tried to discourage ceremonies on Koonibba, says Auny Vera, “but Koonibba is a big traditional area.” She says:

I can remember going down halfway between Koonibba and what we called three-mile gate, that’s the entrance to the community now and inma, corroborees. Mama threw a blanket over our heads and every time we’d peep she’d whack us on the back of the head – well not whack but tap us on the back of the head, cover us over. So we pushed a hole in the blanket, so we could see. And I’d be looking and [my sister] would say ‘my turn now, my turn now’. So, yeah, we saw what those corroborees are about.

Witnessing is not the same thing as embodied participation in ritual life, but such an association is prized, as high-stakes contests about legitimacy and cultural differentiation have escalated in the native title era. Aunty Vera’s memories of this scene segued into boiling anger at being called a “Johnny come lately” by other Aboriginal people. She told me, “A lot of people now say that we don’t know anything about tradition. Sadly those people never ever attended a traditional ceremony.” For Aunty Vera, growing up on Koonibba was equated with a certain level of exposure to, and access to traditional cultural knowledge: experiences that are highly esteemed in the contemporary context. In my interviews the substance of these experiences was not stressed so much as the significance of having grown up in a setting where “the old ways” remained an ongoing part of one’s life. Nungas who grew up on the mission also remember protocols regarding strangers entering the country, Aboriginal visitors waiting to talk to the appropriate people before they stepped on to the mission.

Aunty Joan also offered instances of the eruption of “old tribal” ways into everyday life in her interview with Anderson and Walshe (1996), identifying these as making a strong impression. She told her interviewers:
I can remember when one Uncle died and his whole family, his wife and his kids, had to go from house to house wailing, you know, really tribal, wailing and then everyone had to join them as they went – his family came to our house and then our family had to join them and go on to the next house and everybody finished up together somehow. All wailing and all. That was one that stuck in my mind, it was so loud.

Aunty Vera talked to me at length about learning Kokatha while growing up on the mission. The Lutherans “would have preferred us to speak pure English,” she says. However, she mused, “I think the beauty of growing up the way we grew up is the ability that we develop to jump from one culture immediately into another without taking a breath.” Cultural, in this case, linguistic fluidity, rather than domination or assimilation characterised her account of life on Koonibba:

See, if I had somebody here that I had to speak to in language it would be nothing to just leave you sitting there and let you listen. It’s not the rudeness of the thing: it’s how we spoke at Koonibba when I was growing up.

Aunty Vera’s grandmother, however, spoke another form of Kokatha, which gives us some sense of the fact that the language spoken at the mission was not static, “I used to say, ‘Mama whatta you talkin? Whatta you sayin? Tell me!’” Her grandmother would reply, “I’m talking deep Kokatha.” Deep Kokatha, Aunty Vera told me, was “the old Kokatha,” spoken by people who didn’t speak English at all. Aunty Vera then said, “Her deep Kokatha could also have been Pitjantjatjara...Mama was multilingual, speaking Mirning, Kokatha, Pitjanjatjara, whatever, whatever.” Kokatha wasn’t spoken in front of white people on the mission. But, it was said, “as soon as the non-Aboriginal people would turn around and walk away – back to language!” Aunty Joan emphasises that her mother’s generation faced great pressure and scrutiny while they “stood up front”, but her grandparents concentrated on teaching the kids instead, “behind the missionaries’ backs.”

But by far the strongest theme of my interviews was food and the constant struggle to get enough to eat on Koonibba, the mission having long ago abandoned any efforts at food production. From the Anderson and Walshe (1996) transcripts I
learnt that the government ration comprised flour, tea, sugar, potatoes and onions. And quince, says Aunty Joan:

Quince was always the fruit. It was part of the rations. And we’d do odd jobs for the older people and they’d give us their quince. But I can’t stand it now (laughs). That’s probably why.

Rations were supplemented with kangaroo and possum meat and wild fruits: burrah, the wild peach or quandong, which is native, and wulga, the prickly wild tomato, an introduced species. Women went for rabbits using crowbars, while men sometimes hunted rabbits with spears and waddies. Nearby farmers sometimes came to the mission to sell eggs and fat, but the milk procured from the mission’s cows went to the Children’s Home and to white mission staff. Water was carted from an underground tank at the blacksmith’s shop; the well at Koonibba rockhole was too far to walk to for drinking water, but was a popular swimming spot for the children in summer. A small shop sold tobacco, biscuits, jam and lollies. Aunty Vera recalled:

[The shop] sold fruit and vegetables that were brought in. The farm [which was being share-farmed], as far as I can remember, didn’t actually produce fruit and vegetables for the community. Sheep and wheat farming was the go there, but once a week they used to kill so many sheep and then sell it in the morning at the meathouse, but us all kids would line up around the slaughter yard to get the offings, because nurundjerrie – sheep’s stomach – that’s good meat.

Aunty Vera remembers eating rabbits and also galahs. The white gaze sometimes made its presence powerfully felt in these exchanges. Aunty Vera continued, anticipating recoil from the idea of eating galahs, “Some people would screw their nose up at it, but it’s poultry. They eat quail, so they shouldn’t screw their nose up at that.”

Aunty Joan talks very positively about “learning how to survive by our own wits.” The mission kids routinely spent their days catching gulda (sleepy lizard) and playing in the scrub. She told Anderson and Walshe (1996), “And when we would wander off for a full day, just kids, we’d come back full, we weren’t hungry.” Guldas would be cooked on little fires built out in the
scrub, or brought home. Overall, Aunty Joan remembers Koonibba in the following terms:

There was no money-money, it was very poor in the ways of money. But as far as the family and the culture and the living off the land went...We were rich, we were really rich.

Aunty Joan continues to collect bush foods from the bushlands that lie north of Ceduna, underlining that her knowledge of these ‘traditional’ practices was acquired in her childhood on the mission, and in those periods of time she spend hiding from “welfare”.

Conclusions

On the far west coast of South Australia, Aboriginal people draw on the Koonibba mission experience today in ways that tell us much about the constitution of Aboriginality in the present moment. Certain Ceduna Nungas assert that to experience the world of the mission was to experience and be immersed in a world belonging to Aboriginal people, despite this world being so fundamentally organised by white outsiders in ways that both reflected and imposed their structures of thought.

Memories of the “old people” and the “old ways”, the determined maintenance of certain cultural practices as well as secret ceremonies, and the speaking of Kokatha are all stressed today. Memories of material deprivation, which centre on hunger, are recounted less with bitterness than pride in the fact that Aboriginal people continued to travel regularly, on foot and in horse-drawn sulkies, in the bush north of the mission, to hunt and provide for their less able kin. “Mission mob” maintained a relationship with their country via these frequent expeditions, visiting and drinking from the permanent water sources that occur in this country and which are important cultural sites. More complex still is the experience of Aunty Joan and her siblings. Memories of hunting while hungry, and of eating bush foods while hiding from “welfare” are stressed today as openings onto a way of being Aboriginal that the missionaries and the state were intent on foreclosing.

Aunty Joan reflects that sometimes she would accompany the men from the mission for days, ostensibly to hunt kangaroos, but, as she told Anderson (1996), “it was
something else.” These treks provided the opportunity to visit the mythical sites of their country, maintaining ongoing relationships with the rockholes that dot this arid landscape, and to source ochre for ceremonies. It is this not-quite-defined but ever-present “something else” that has come to be identified as the significant feature of this time spent out bush. Koonibba people, it is remembered, remained a people who found opportunities to move about their country and hunt on it. The missionaries could not stop mission residents from hunting, as they were unable to feed them adequately. This contact with country meant that Koonibba Nungas’ spiritual lives remained as much oriented to a relationship with country as the weekly devotion suppers and Sunday church services. In the contemporary moment, Ceduna Nungas have found new ways to tell the Koonibba story, centring their narratives on everyday experiences that go some way to satisfying the state’s “demand for tradition” (Merlan 2006:85). They stress that Koonibba Nungas worked against the forces that were trying to sever them from another way of life.

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