

Property and the Clash of Cultures

BY KEITH THOMAS

LAND RIGHTS for the Australian Aborigines became a major political issue in Australia during the 1970s and will become more urgent and maybe even violent in the 1980s. This is the conclusion of a book published in Australia¹ which seeks to avoid the crisis by establishing a treaty between black and white Australians which would centre on the ownership and control of lands sought by the Aborigines.

The issue is a complex one, with ramifications in terms of Aboriginal culture, multinational companies, minority group rights, conservation, the appropriation of land values, nuclear power and race relations – amongst other questions. Only some of these can be dealt with here.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND²

When the European settlement of Australia began in 1788, the settlers' commander, in a matter of minutes, took possession of the entire continent. This deprived the 250,000 Aborigines – with a 40,000 year history of occupation – of land ownership according to settler law. Thus the settlers felt free to take up as much land as the law would permit – and they promptly did so.

The Aborigines, however, had not been consulted and over the next century fought to keep the land of their forefathers from the foreign invaders. For invasion it was, not "settlement" as whites described it at the time. It is important to emphasise at this point that the Aborigines were not primarily a desert people, scratching a living from an inhospitable land; the majority of them lived in the lush coastal forest areas and had a standard of living equalling that of the average European in 1800. However, these people were either killed by whites or driven from their traditional land into that of their more marginal neighbours, and the subsequent fighting between blacks combined with white invasion and diseases to reduce the Aboriginal population by about three quarters within a century.

In the 1960s Aborigines were finally granted citizenship in their own country and the same decade saw an increasing interest by mining companies in the bauxite, manganese and uranium deposits in some of the lands retained by the Aborigines as reserves.

LAND AND CULTURE

Western society is as pervasive amongst Aborigines as it is among third and fourth world peoples everywhere. No Aborigines now live completely off the land in traditional style³, but most are on reserves (traditional land not taken by whites for pastoral leases) in the states of Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and the Northern Territory.

Aboriginal culture and world view are diverse and in a period of rapid change. Yet it is possible to characterise the Aboriginal attitude to land. Firstly, Aborigines do not regard the whole earth as open to the industry and enterprise of the human race which has the duty and a right to exploit the earth's resources. The Aboriginal position is far more subtle than this, and more difficult for Westerners to apprehend.

In the simple act of eating a berry the Aborigine recognises that he is consuming the fruit of the land. The berry is of the land and it is thus the land which sustains him and gives him vigour. Furthermore, as the berry becomes a part of him, so he becomes a part of the land. As well as its present meaning, the land also has an important historical meaning. Each Aborigine inherits an elaborate

structure of belief and myth which answer in terms meaningful to him the age old questions 'Where did I come from?' 'Why am I here?' 'Where will I go after earthly life?' These answers are understood through the medium of a parabolical journey through his tribal land, in which certain of the area's landmarks are visited in an order peculiar to the individual, and their spirits become part of him for his life's course. Thus the individuality of each person is consolidated in both his own eyes and those of his fellows.

Land for the Aborigine has, therefore, a spiritual and religious meaning which, for him, is prior to the economic significance of the land. If we refuse to pause and try to understand this we are perpetuating the arrogance of the invaders and demanding that Aborigines change their culture before we will acknowledge it.

ABORIGINAL LANDS AND MINERS

Pastoral industry did not threaten the Aborigines to the extent that they are threatened by the mines. The cattle station owners certainly exploited their workers, but they left the land virtually unscathed and permitted Aborigines access to their traditional lands. The miners, on the other hand, will use the devastating strip-mining technique to uncover uranium, bauxite, lead, zinc and copper ores. In all, it is planned that hundreds of square miles of top soil will be removed, taking with it the trees, rocks, streams, meeting places, hunting grounds, sacred sites and their interlinking paths. The culture of the affected peoples simply cannot survive this onslaught.

It is easy to understand why the Aborigines have repeatedly stated that they would greatly prefer to do without the wealth of mining royalties in order to retain their ancestral lands undisturbed and so protect their culture. Yet they seem to have capitulated in some instances, most notably that of the Ranger uranium mine. This capitulation, like others, was forced upon the Aborigines by the very structure set up to express their views. Their body, the National Lands Council, has independence in that it is not funded by Government, yet it must, by law, draw its funds from mining royalties.



Further pressure has been placed on the Aborigines by the Government who are determined to see mining begin.

In effect, the Aborigines can either agree to the mining and negotiate meagre royalties or refuse to sanction the mine. The latter course would leave them without a say in the royalty payout when the Government finally allows the mining to begin – as they have indicated they will do.

THE ISSUES

Uranium mining. It is generally accepted in principle that no individual should appropriate for himself values created by the community. If the Aborigines do manage to do this it will be because they have had to negotiate and think within the existing framework of Australian commerce and law. They therefore also seek freehold rather than leasehold titles to their land and the power of veto on mining. Australian conservationists have clouded the issue with a catchy slogan: 'Land Rights Not Uranium'. But this ignores the logical possibility that Aborigines, especially the more Westernized younger ones, might agree to uranium mining in the future. The involvement of white conservationists in the land rights issue has not reflected well on conservationists, who have shown themselves to be like the miners they oppose. They are imposing their own narrow views on the Aborigines and so focusing their attention on only part of the overall problem.

Resource conservation. If uranium is mined and exported it must be used either in weapons programmes or in the production of electricity. In both cases it will be used to propagate the highly materialistic and environmentally destructive Western way of life essentially opposed to the Aboriginal life style.

Health and Safety. While most mines will not produce for more than a couple of generations, their effects will be much more permanent. The second report of Australia's Ranger Uranium Enquiry revealed what that mine will do to the Aboriginal land. A massive dam will be built of earth walls 40m high and 1km long, to hold 45

million tonnes of contaminated radioactive sludge. It *must* last for centuries, and any leak would devastate flora and fauna and endanger people. Another 60 million tonnes of waste will be dumped nearby. There are also the well-documented hazards of working at uranium mines and mills and the probability of radiation entering the food chain through fish, bird life, etc.

Minority Rights. The least reasonable and the most threatening of Aboriginal demands come either from an insignificant number of them or can be traced to the unsympathetic obstinacy of the Australian Government. Racists have argued against privileges for blacks, but interested Australians are now concerned to compensate the Aborigines for the wrongs done them in the past and negotiate a treaty¹ to provide a foundation for the cultures to live in harmony in the future.

THE ABORIGINES stand in positions similar to the Brazilian and North American Indians and other tribal peoples whose life styles conflict with an economically and technologically dominant Government and monopoly capitalism.

In dealing with government and mining companies, in submitting to deadlines (which mean leaders and not communities decide important issues), in coping with misrepresentation in the Press, and trying to put across their own case, the Aborigines are, by these very acts, having to change; and to the extent that they are changing, they are losing their culture. In effect, they are having to argue against the extermination of their culture and for the ownership of their land, questions quite foreign to their thought; can we come anywhere near comprehending this? Can we wonder that there is stress, dissension and disenchantment within their own numbers? And all this before the mining begins. Then we will see an influx of adventurous, vulgar, single, well paid white males to their societies. This must change them further and can anyone doubt that such change will be for the worse?

The enforced dispossession of the Aborigines resembles, in some respects, the enclosures in Britain. Since the arrival of the invaders, they, like the English peasantry,

have been deprived of the basis of their livelihood and the foundation of their society. For both subject groups the relationship between community and land did not amount to proprietorship as it is understood in contemporary law and economics.

When Aborigines speak of land rights they generally mean gaining the full control of lands already reserved for them — reservations made before the discovery of the underlying mineral wealth. There have been no serious claims for the return of alienated land. There is also a call for some form of compensation for the loss of those traditional lands which cannot be restored to them and for the destruction of their traditional livelihood. Dr. H. C. Coombs, chairman of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee, has suggested that this compensation could be a percentage of the unimproved capital value of all lands within Australia other than those already held by Aboriginal owners.⁴

The reluctance to grant Aborigines their land rights stems in part from Australian racism which refuses to acknowledge them as true Australians. But are the British and American holders of thousands of square miles of pastoral land and the foreign miners likely to act more in the interests of the Australian people?

The Aboriginal case is also affected by those who idealize and romanticize the Aborigines. These are the people who talk in terms of single panaceas (land rights, compensation, treaties) and who ignore the background of many generations of oppression and who deny them the right to be human and fallible. Whatever the outcome of the current struggles of the Aboriginal peoples, their recovery will be painful, difficult and slow.

THERE CAN be no simple and effective solution to the problem. For, as well as the legacy of racism and oppression, all proposed solutions ignore the fact that an attempt is being made to fit the Aborigines into an unnatural, soul-less monopolistic and distorted society. The Aborigines, as outsiders, see this but do not comprehend its causes nor its cures. In their confrontation with unreasonable and partly meaningless white society, it is small wonder that their reactions are seen as unreasonable by whites.

Traditional Aboriginal society was never static; it was evolving in the struggle for survival and in the mastery of its environment. But the pace of change must be much more rapid today and the changes will be far-reaching in both spiritual and physical terms.

Behind the Aborigines' call for land rights and compensation is a cry for the understanding, patience, recognition and generosity of the dominant society, a cry which, in all humanity, must be heard. Both parties must pause to listen and understand the other.

Mining and despoliation of traditional lands must cease for a generation or two while this understanding is achieved. No one will suffer while this dialogue is developed, and mutually agreed developments can be made gradually as the needs arise; the proposed treaty could be a worthwhile first step. The holding of the minerals in the ground will harm no one and the well-being and pride of the Aboriginal people should be enhanced. And that is something from which all Australians will benefit both practically and spiritually.

REFERENCES

1. Harris, S. *It's Coming Yet*, Aboriginal Treaty Committee, Canberra, 1979.
2. Roberts, J. *Massacres to Mining, War on Want*, 1978 gives a detailed account of Aboriginal culture and the impact of mining.
3. *Survival International Review* Summer 1978, Vol 3, No 3, p.61.
4. Harris, *op. cit.* p.11.

Cossiga woos speculators

ITALY's leading conservation group, Italia Nostra, has accused Francesca Cossiga's new Christian democrat, Socialist and Republican Party coalition government of ruthlessly wooing votes from the country's army of land speculators.

The government announced that property speculators would be offered an amnesty for all the crimes and infringements they committed between 1967 and 1977. The proposal for the amnesty came just before the regional and local elections held on June 8.

Speculators, say the conservationists, will interpret Cossiga's amnesty as a mandate to do what they like in the future. Since the supreme court ruled earlier this year that most of the latest 1977 planning legislation was invalid, there has been chaos in the building industry, reported *The Sunday Times* (11.5.80).

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