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Socialization during childhood on a remote traditionally oriented Aboriginal settlement

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SOCIALIZATION During Childhood
On A Remote Traditionally
Oriented Aboriginal Settlement

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Socialization During Childhood On A Remote Traditionally Oriented Aboriginal Settlement.

The photographs and comments contained in this booklet should be read in conjunction with the paper "Socialization During Childhood On A Remote Traditionally Oriented Aboriginal Settlement" This paper is based on a number of interviews carried out with a female Aboriginal informant now in her mid-thirties, and is available from:

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The social environment of the Aboriginal child is very different from that of the normal Western European Australian society. There is no compulsory afternoon nap, feeding time, time for play etc.

"Even though at first he is too young to understand or notice, it represents an environment which he probably comes to take very much for granted. From the beginning, he lives his life to some extent in public. This is not to say that he has no private, or rather personal life: but personal life goes on in the open virtually in public." (Berndt 1964 p.128).

The small boy sitting on his father's lap remained there for the duration of this ceremony. The father, the key songman and ceremonial leader for this particular moiety has a number of sons following in his footsteps. Recently (April 1975) the family shifted to an outstation located in the country of his wife in order to start a small self contained fishing industry while retaining much of the value system and culture traditional to this family. The question of future "schooling" as opposed to education is an interesting one.

The ceremony in this particular case is a mortuary ceremony. Children are part and parcel of the whole range of human emotions associated with birth through to death.



Aboriginal parents are, on the whole, very indulgent. They pet and spoil their children, and stand a great deal from them in the way of bad behaviour, or even disobedience. When they do punish it is likely to be severe — a sudden slap or a blow, when a mother or father loses patience: but punishment is rarely carried out in cold blood. A child who does not get his own way throws himself down on the ground in tantrums, writhing and kicking, crying or whimpering for hours at a time, ignored by everyone nearby, except that every now and then someone may turn and scream exasperation at him. A few girls continue to do this even after puberty. Boys have fewer opportunities for it after their first initiation rite, because from this point onward responsibility for disciplining them begins to pass from the boy's immediate family to the adult men of his particular mada and mala.

(Berndt 1964:135)

The warmth and permissiveness exhibited by Aboriginal parents towards their children is very evident in all of the communities that I have lived in or visited.

For example, on a number of occasions I have observed small children entering the store with ten dollars clenched in their hands for the purchase of anything that may take their fancy.

While traditional foods provided an adequate and balanced diet given the child rearing practices described above many children exist on a lemonade, damper and syrup diet. There is certainly no insistence on eating your greens.



There is a conspicuous lack of guilt regarding the genitals which is evident also in the relaxed attitude towards infantile nudity shown in this and subsequent photographs.

Mothers spend considerable time playing with their children. In this case the child is dancing to the beat of ceremony taking place in a nearby camp.

Children take for granted the bodily contact of the sexes in copulation, it is often incorporated into their play. Though this form of play is publicly acceptable, it is tacitly understood, according to my informant that by later childhood it will be kept out of sight.

With the onset of puberty this type of action takes on an entirely different meaning.



Children are actively involved in their parents' activities. The employment of people in 9-5 jobs is beginning to present some problems, though the spirit of compromise is very evident on many settlements. Pre-school children ride on the 'hygiene' cart with Dad, small children are found in considerable numbers around and in the sewing room, gardens, store etc.

Children are also exposed to and learn portions of adult songs that are performed as part of 'open' camp ceremonies. Many of these activities that take place in the camp (or community) prepare the children for the rites of passage that mark their passing through puberty into the adult world.

This photograph further illustrates the point made on the previous page. These pre-school age girls are dancing on the outskirts of a larger group of women involved in the early stages of a boy's initiation (circumcision) ceremony.





While this and the following photographs illustrate obvious differences between the two generations it is difficult to apply these differences to the area of values and beliefs.

The richness of contemporary ceremonial life is still available to the driver of the heavy machinery despite the outward changes in his life style. My informant had difficulty in determining just how much alteration had taken place in ceremonial life due to new work and leisure time activities increasingly followed by the younger men.

[Faint, illegible text, possibly a caption or reference]





An example of approach avoidance and the depth to which socialization practices have been effected is illustrated by this photograph. The Aboriginal girl is Birrkil Gupapuyngu and the same moeity as my informant. As a result of this classification and the close relationship between my informant and myself (generally regarded as her brother) an avoidance relationship between myself and the girl should exist. This made teaching slightly difficult in that the girl was reluctant to speak directly to me and channelled the majority of her requests through other students. My wife on the other hand being of the opposite moeity falls into an approach category and became extremely friendly with the girl and became in fact a further intermediary between the two of us. The point here is that the girl could be a future mother in law for myself and this is one rule that is emphasized during childhood even if other wrong associations and relationships are tolerated and ignored up until the onset of puberty.

This situation is quickly and easily understood by the children of this community even if the Malk (skin or subsection) system is undergoing considerable changes in order to meet modern pressures.



Banumbirr (Morning Star) is an important part of the song cycles associated with the dhua moeity of Elcho Island.

The dancer, has since left this community and is attending a residential college for Aboriginal students set up on the Gove Peninsular. The extent to which his attitude is likely to alter towards active participation in ceremonies such as these is difficult to gauge. In a recent discussion (April 1975) he indicated a firm intention to return to the outstation of Lake Evella and work in the school or the sawmill which have recently been established there.



Involvement in dancing is considered on a number of settlements as a normal part of the school program. Teachers come from the wider community after appropriate 'vetting' by the ceremonial leaders.

The school gardener also involved in this session emphasises the multi-role nature of Aboriginal society where everyone is a 'teacher'.



Sniffing petrol dance, involving both circumcized and non-circumcized boys, is basically a fun dance. Within the Yirritja moeity anything that is foreign or from outside can be incorporated into the classification system. A lengthy association with 'Macassans' has been accepted into and formalized within the Yirritja system.

There are a number of humorous treatments of "wrong behaviour" though it should be realized that it is not altogether fun as in many cases the stories refer to territorial rights centred on specific areas.



In N.E. Arnhem Land women play a more positive role in ceremonial life than in other areas. Schoolgirls as supporting dancers are involved in a non-secular ceremony. The problem in drawing a line between secular and non-secular is extremely difficult. The whole development of child rearing practices may be described as a religious based system of socialization. This theme is developed by Catherine Berndt in an excellent chapter on Oral Literature that draws fairly heavily on N.E. Arnhem Land sources (Berndt & Phillips 1970). The dance being performed in this picture is a demonstration of a link between the people and the land that is difficult for Europeans to comprehend. Constant involvement in activities of this type direct the child towards the inner meaning of life which few can easily articulate in English.



Although my informant is in many respects European orientated, particularly when it suits her in regard to possible moves to arrange a traditional remarriage, she is easily persuaded to join in traditional activities.

I suspect that the trauma involved in cultural discontinuity is far less severe for women than it is for men.

She supported this contention in her vehement acclamation that the men must not lose their ceremonial life (identity).

Ceremonies associated with the Djanggua cycle are still maintained as large 'open' events involving considerable numbers of people including young initiates. The following day at school was a bit of an anti-climax for all concerned.

THE TWO SISTER

Once upon time there was a big water hole and at there live a two sister. They were fishing on the other side of their house. After that when they finish fishing they said there is an fresh water we must stay until some fresh water come out we must go and drink. After that they wait and wait and still the fresh water did not come out. When they wait they saw something waving for them and they stood still and it was a little wind and when they stood still the wind blow them up and they change into the wind.

Yäku waja Nupurray. Bala ñayi nhäjala djanda gapulili miljurrili, ñayi dar'taryarrana ñäkula ñayi gapu murryunara bala ñayi dar'taryarrana. Bejurudhi bala ñayi guya yäku Nurrubula bala ñayi dar'taryurruna.

As an example of the relative futility involved in translating a complex oral tradition into written English this story reduces components of a great song cycle to the level of stilted school girl English. As Catherine Berndt (Berndt & Phillips 1973, p.76) points out, "The story-line in many such myths is slight; the sequence hinges on 'who did what, and where', and on the implications for human beings now. Less sacred myths and ordinary stories told at least partly for entertainment, had symbolic and other meanings too, and were regarded more lightly; and the interest of the story-line itself might outweigh these other considerations, from the standpoint of the persons telling and listening to them. Of course, the response was never likely to be uniform: especially when an adult was telling a story to a child, the depth of meaning and the interpretation of events and relationships were not the same for both. (But children were exposed to a great deal of adult type material, including a fair amount on sex and a lesser amount on violence, which was expected to 'make sense' to them as they grew older.)". There are various gradations between what are simply children's songs and that which is sacred/secret. The story on the following page taken from the complex Djanggua story illustrates a section of that cycle and remains basically unintelligible without a wider knowledge of the place of this story in the total world view of this community.

Both stories were written by grade 5 and 6 children who were in my class a number of years ago.

The name of that place is Nupurray. He saw djanda the goanna's bubbles in the water. He sang. He heard the noise of the bubbles and he sang about it too. After that he went on further; he saw the fish named Nurrubula then he sang about it.



A certain degree of cultural revitalization is illustrated in this and the next picture.

The girl is cooking fish by using a traditional stone oven. The girls involved in this exercise were being taught this 'forgotten' art by an older woman from a neighbouring settlement who had decided that the school had cut off the older generation to an unnecessary and undesirable degree.



The bala or mosquito house was built next to the store as a reminder of past traditions and crafts. The children playing on and in it made fairly short work of its destruction.

Because of the permissive attitude and non material orientation of the majority of the parents this was not regarded as an act of vandalism but rather as an inevitable event.

A number of dugout canoes were also lost as a result of children playing in them and failing to beach them properly before wandering back to the camp. Heavy handed censoring in the part of a number of Europeans had little effect highlighting their limited role as agents of social change.

Circumcision ceremonies are a key event in the socialization of boys approaching puberty.

In N.E. Arnhem Land this may take place when the boy is as young as eight years of age.

As the event involves a considerable number of people and entails detailed and intricate planning extending over a fairly lengthy period of time there must be certain ramifications in terms of self-identity and group membership insofar as the initiate is concerned.

The learning aspects are clearly illustrated by this and the following photograph.

The details of the ceremony are intricate as well as poetically exciting — for the interested onlooker a wonderful aesthetic experience. For the initiate an important step in the process of growing up.





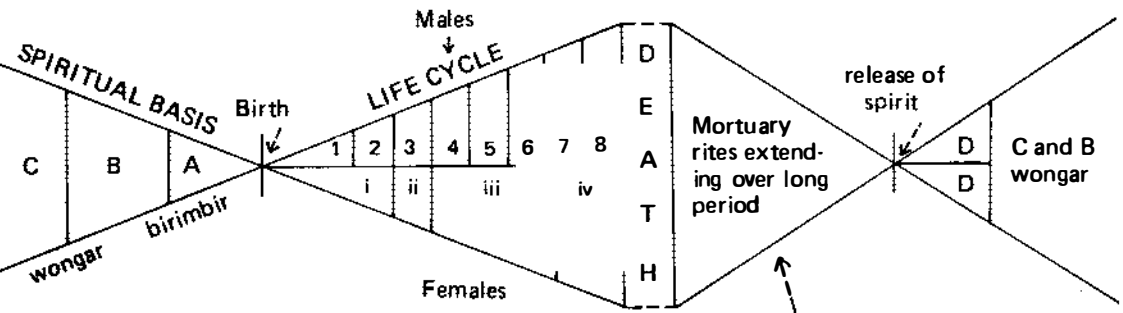


One positive aspect, insofar as European education is concerned, emerged from the discussions with my informant. And that was the invaluable role played by Aboriginal people as teachers in European initiated and directed schools. At the very least they play a vital role as a link in the vastly different socialization practices of the local community and the school.

FIG. 11. Life Cycle:
North-east Arnhem Land.

MALES:

1. Infancy and early childhood.
2. First initiation: circumcision: segregation from females.
3. Later initiation.
4. First marriage.
5. Initial parenthood
6. Further religious revelations.
7. Final religious revelations.
10. Old age.



- A** Unborn spiritual state: resident in clan totemic waterholes.
- B** Direct relationship of A to Ancestral Beings and spirits, from which they are derived.
- C** Traditional heritage of the group.
- D** Land of the Dead: one for each moiety; immortality.

FEMALES:

- i Infancy and childhood.
- ii Puberty: first marriage.
- iii Initial pregnancy: parenthood.
- iv Menopause followed by old age.

Spirit still present and can appear to living: divisible into 'good' (human) and trickster (non-human) or *mogwoi* spirits. The latter may remain in the bush to haunt the living and eventually be forgotten.

To conclude I have included an illustration of the North-east Arnhem Land Life Cycle taken from Berndt (1964: p.183) as a means of summing up a number of my observations.

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