

HOMO NULLIUS: THE STATUS OF TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL  
DANCING IN NORTHERN QUEENSLAND<sup>1</sup>

For many people "northern Queensland" means Townsville, the Gold Coast, Cairns -- perhaps the Atherton Tablelands -- but not Cape York. Popularly, Cape York is known in Australia as "the deep north": a wilderness area. On many current maps, the towns and settlements I visited are not shown. Cape York in this context is simply a large blank space, with the words, 'Aboriginal Reserve' written here and there. On better maps one can clearly see that bittumen roads stop a few miles north of Cairns, which is generally known as the northernmost outpost of civilization.

From Cairnes on to Laura, where an annual dance festival takes place, there is only a tiny line indicating a road, with typical warnings about the seasonal impassibility of it. On some maps, the tiny line continues to waver and turn its way in a northwesterly direction, indicating 350-400 miles of bulldust holes, loose gravel, streams to ford, leading to Musgrave, then to Coen and finally Weipa. On a survey map, one can see that it is possible to turn off this road, head in a southwesterly direction to Aurukun on the west coast and south to Weipa. As the semanticist, Hayakawa, pointed out long ago, maps often do not give accurate indications of a territory.

There is a sense in which this essay attempts, however, to give an accurate conceptual map of a territory of certain aspects of the human act of dancing, seen from the standpoint of an outsider: that is, an American-born, British-trained social anthropologist who was a professional dancer and who has studied dances in West Africa, England and America. There are many forms of dancing available for study in Cape York. It is difficult to know how many readers will follow the distinctions made among various forms, e.g., "shake-a-leg" (a kind of popular form of dancing which originated with Aboriginal peoples); "islander" styles of dancing (which are importations into Cape York from peoples whose homes were in the Torres Strait; Micronesia or Polynesia, and European styles of dancing).

Because of this, some preliminary explanation of two of the terms in the title of the essay is necessary before a discussion of traditional dancing can responsibly be undertaken. The subject of dancing is fraught with ambiguities; thus, an attempt to clarify the major thesis of the essay, which pertains to the fragility of traditional Aboriginal dancing in northern Queensland, to its real or potential vulnerability to artifactualization, and to the extraordinary complexities of the situation.

### Traditional Dancing

Where the term "traditional" dancing is used, it will mean (1) dancing (and the singing which accompanies it) that transcends certain ordinary life concerns (von Sturmer, 1987:63); (2) songs (and their accompanying dances) which were transmitted, like the Wanam songs and dances, from creator beings, who were in turn tied to particular sites and localities (von Sturmer, 1987:68); and (3) dances which demonstrate the presence of spirits (von Sturmer, 1987:69-71).

In general, it is in the nature of this kind of traditional dance performance to identify and define. Such performances make manifest the existence of spirits which might not otherwise be discernible. The act of dancing in this context is a participatory act which seeks to bring dancers, spirits, tradition into living juxtaposition with one another and into manifest being.

Traditional Aboriginal dances, from the best evidence we possess,<sup>2</sup> were meant to close space/time gaps between past and present for the groups of people in the society who owned them. The problem of futurity does not enter into consideration of the semantic content of the dances. In fact, futurity may be a problem only (a) to those members of Aboriginal communities who see these dances as living reminders of identity and of a rich, proud heritage and (b) to members of the international non-Aboriginal community who would mourn the loss of these traditions and their potential contribution to the international worlds of art and social science, in terms of an emerging historical consciousness of unique Aboriginal contributions to Australian culture.

Against the stated definitions of traditional Aboriginal dancing given above, it is well to remember that there are categories of dancing which are not being discussed which exist side-by-side with the traditional dances; "shake-a-leg" is one of these. It did not emanate from creator-beings; for a start; nor does it fulfill the other stated criteria for traditional dancing. The many forms of synthetic Aboriginal-Islander dancing are also not meant to be included, nor is disco-dancing, although the latter is a form of dancing with which younger generations of Aborigines are more familiar than they are with traditional dancing in any of its forms. In none of these cases, however, does the notion of 'primitivism' or 'primordialism' enter into consideration. The distinction between traditional dancing, as defined, and 'primitive dancing' is important because the two modes of description are often conflated.

### Homo Nullius

Since it is the purpose of traditional dance performances to identify and define, and since the traditional aboriginal dances of Cape York such as the Wanam, the Winchinam, the Putja and Apalech

dances are forms of dancing which existed prior to Captain Cook's encounter -- his 'discovery' of eastern Australia -- it became necessary to attempt to identify the people who own and perform these dances, not only in their own terms, but in the terms of the dominant society in the context of which they are still performed in 1987.

Many forms of dancing exist in Cape York Peninsula. During the field investigation, I saw examples of everything listed above, and I saw dances which were transmitted from creator beings which were tied to particular localities and sites (i.e., Edward River, Holroyd River, Cape Keer Wee and Aurukun). It was perfectly clear to me who the people were who were performing the traditional dances. It was perfectly clear what the space/time orientations were which pertained to the dances from the standpoint of the singers and dancers. I nevertheless had some problems during the time I watched the dancing take place -- and afterwards -- because I was acutely aware of the disparities between (a) different folk definitions of the spaces of these dances and (b) the folk definitions of these dances and the dominant culture's definitions (or, more accurately, non-definitions) of both the dancing and the folks who were performing the dances.

Research into dancing is maximally concerned with time/space orientations and with their meanings to the people who perform them, but it may not be obvious that any performance also includes the people who are watching and their definitions. I sought answers to the question, "What kind of spatial, linguistic and time dimensions, what kinds of conceptual dimensions, do these dances represent?" Thus it was that the term homo nullius arose, and the first definition of it as descriptive locution connotes a wholly ambiguous, null category in the legal, political and governmental structures of modern Queensland. It is possible that the category might apply elsewhere in Australia too. I confine my exegesis to what I know firsthand, so to speak.

It seemed reasonable to coin a term which has defined the status of Aborigines in Queensland since unilateral possession took place, when it was still New South Wales, hence homo nullius is a term which is meaningful historically, but equally meaningful now, since the dances and the people who perform them have persisted in transmitting and maintaining them for a long time.

### Terra Nullius

For some readers, the derivation of the neologism homo nullius (people who are no one; non-persons; people possessing no social personas within the definitional systems of another group) from a prior concept of terra nullius (no person's land; land belonging to no one; uninhabited land) which pertains to the denial of Aboriginal land rights by the English at the time of the early settlement of eastern Australia will be obvious. For others, this

may not be obvious, hence a precis of the notion of terra nullius and its place in Australian history is in order.

The rubrics of British colonial possession from the mid-eighteenth century onwards are fairly well-known (see Frost, 1981, Gammage, 1981, and Reynolds, 1980). Indigenes could be persuaded to submit to overlordship, or, rights to settle could be purchased from them, or land could be claimed by the potential colonizer through "unilateral possession." That is, the land had first to be discovered (called "first discovery") and then "effectively occupied" (Frost, 1981:514).

To persuade indigenes to accept overlordship or to negotiate purchase of land connotes prior assumption of ownership by indigenous peoples. The third rubric -- that of unilateral possession, involving "first discovery" and "effective occupation" -- did not assume prior ownership. The eastern seaboard of Australia was discovered and settled through the rubric of unilateral possession.

The reasons why Aboriginal ownership was not recognized are these: Europeans understood (through a combination of ideas stemming from Grotius, Pufendorf, Genesis and John Locke) that they could acquire rights of property in remote areas through the first two rubrics of persuasion or purchase if indigenous peoples had "... advanced beyond the state of nature and mixed their labour with the land" (Frost, 1981:515). If they were not deemed to have advanced beyond the state of nature or mixed their labour with the land, then the third rubric was available to the colonizer.

"Mixing one's labour with the land" meant visible evidence of things like cultivation, fencing, primitive road-building, perhaps, house and settlement-raising, and something that by modern anthropological standards was comparatively ill-defined, i.e., 'society formation'. Evidence of these kinds of things, excepting society formation,<sup>3</sup> is not so easily discernible (given the conditions of superficial observation and no real knowledge) in contacts between Europeans and nomadic or hunter-gatherer peoples throughout the world.

Contrary to contemporary anthropological thinking, the mid-eighteenth century definition of society formation consisted only of specific kinds of external evidences of sedentary types of settlement. This is in contrast to twentieth century definitions of society formation which begin with kinship structures and language, tending to rely less on empirically-perceivable structures and more on structural characteristics of the human mind. To mid-eighteenth century Europeans and Englishmen, however, a people who had language plus a notion of 'family' and kinship structures only sufficiently complex to form human societies were to be classified with Nature, not Culture. From the start, then,

Aborigines were classified with all things natural; they were not regarded as having, or belonging to, human culture.<sup>4</sup>

To early explorers, including captain Cook (and not withstanding the fact that he had considerable interaction with aboriginal peoples), Australia was uninhabited; it was no person's land and belonged to no one -- it was terra nullius. Its status changed, in European thinking, from Terra Australis, a land which existed mainly as terra incognita in European imaginations, to a slightly more real geographical location, but it seems reasonable to assume the term homo nullius for the people whom Captain Cook saw in Australia. They were creatures who looked like human beings; they had fully developed clan societies, languages and complex kinship structures. They had domi-cultures (Chase and Hynes, 1983), although they had no domesticated animals, fences, towns and such. Regardless, they were classified with nature -- with non-human species of sensate beings, and I believe that this went much farther than the fact that they were not an authorized nation. They were effectively exotica; part of the flora and fauna of an uninhabited land. There is a sense in which, therefore, the history of Aboriginal peoples under colonization is the history of what happens when one people's image is expropriated by members of another group.

Homo nullius is a conceptual category which, for anyone unfortunate enough to occupy it, defines a basically meaningless categorical slot because historically, such people had no legal or political entities through which they could negotiate with "discoverers," settlers, invaders or whomever. The history of Queensland (see Fitzgerald, 1982 and 1984) seems to substantiate this claim and to support the validity of its continuing usage with regard to present-day communities of Aborigines and their traditional ritual dances.

For example, although it is known that some tribes of Aborigines in Cape York (notably those from Palmer River; see Loos, 1982) fought what would now be called 'guerilla wars' against encroaching European and English settlers, these actions were not recognized as 'wars' (as the wars of the Kalkadoon of Mt. Isa were also not recognized); hence Queensland Aboriginal people, like others throughout Australia, did not achieve the doubtful status of vanquished enemies, unlike Maoris, American Indians or New Guinea peoples. This fact is significant because, in a male-dominated society, a vanquished enemy possesses an important status; an enemy is regarded as an equal, as someone to be reckoned with. A vanquished enemy is someone with whom negotiations and treaties are made.

It seems to me that Aborigines in Cape York have never achieved the status of people with whom negotiations are carried out even today. As I shall later explain, it appears that they were (and still are) in the eyes of the Queensland government

simply a problem to be solved and/or a resource to be exploited. This will become clear later on when we examine the Laura Dance Festival, for there is an important sense in which the traditional dances are 'problems' as well.

Given the fact that Aborigines themselves were put on reserves and protected (mainly, one supposes, protected from carrying on economic activities which the State government did not control) along with other natural resources like wildlife, rain forests and crocodiles; a kind of artifactualization of them and of the products of their culture has taken place. Artifactualization is an artificial formula, but it is a fact of present-day Aboriginal life. Traditional dances are becoming artifactualized, and my current preoccupation pertains to the direction and purposes that the artifactualization might take. That is why I wanted to see what kind of 'artifact' was produced by conditions set up at the Laura Dance Festival.

### The Laura Dance Festival

Earlier in the history of Cape York Dance Festivals<sup>5</sup> circa 1972-1975, the guiding principle behind their organization (in the pre-government participation period) consisted of providing a place and the means whereby Aboriginal peoples could come together in a context controlled by Aboriginal people themselves in conditions conducive to the preservation, transmission and strengthening of their heritage among themselves. The early Festivals provided a place where Aboriginal peoples could become acquainted with each other, as it were. The ideology governing the events was the opposite of a 'divide and conquer' ideology. Now, however, the event of a dance festival appears rapidly to be turning into a tourist attraction, with the result that a contrived 'primitive' Aboriginal form of dancing is emerging.

At the Laura Dance Festival, July 3-4, 1987, the dancing was combined with an afternoon of competitions which illustrates the point very well.<sup>6</sup> There were four classes of competitive event consisting of boomerang-throwing, spear-throwing, didjeridu-playing and fire-building with traditional fire sticks. Cape York Aboriginal peoples traditionally used a variety of spears: fishing spears, hunting spears and killing spears (so-called because they were used exclusively on human beings), augmented by the use of woomerahs, so that this class of competitive event, along with the fire-building might be said to retain something of aspects of traditional life and art.

Not so easily understood, however, were the boomerang-throwing and didjeridu events, because didjeridus were never an indigenous Cape York musical instrument (authoritative statements by ethnomusicologists indicate that they were unique to Arnhem-land, and spread from there through cultural exchange). The important point here is the fact that the didjeridu is popularly associated

with all Aborigines and all forms of Aboriginal dancing and singing. To many people, if a didjeridu is not played, then it is not authentic Aboriginal music or singing. This is a total misconception. Similarly, the boomerang has become associated with all Aboriginal cultures. Although boomerangs seem to have been used in parts of Cape York, for example, on the coastal plains and beaches, they seem to have been primarily a desert weapon. Why? As one old man said to me at the Festival: "Boomerangs? We never used them -- too many trees!"

The competitive events were upsetting to some of the dance groups who attended the Laura Festival, primarily because they cut out an entire afternoon of dancing, but the rationale given for substituting the competitions for dancing was that they would be "enjoyed by visitors," many of whom got bored with dancing. There is no doubt that the additional business which might be attracted by competitions instead of dancing (anyone can understand winning and losing; it requires far more effort on the part of an audience to understand a dance) is good for local non-Aboriginal entrepreneurs. It is especially so for those pushing the ancient rock art on the Quinkan rock faces, which are popularly thought to have been painted mainly by Dick Roughsey (now deceased), some of whose canvases are also on sale by the pub owner in Laura who sponsored him.<sup>7</sup>

It is clear that the townspeople of Laura envision themselves and their town becoming a major northern tourist centre over the next few years as the traffic in primitive art, primitive competitive events and primitive dancing builds up. Pro Acta, a Cairns-based photographic outfit, has exclusive rights for making video-tapes of the dancing at the Festival -- not even Aboriginal people are allowed to photograph any of the proceedings, and no differentiation is made between photography done for commercial purposes as against education, research or other non-commercial purposes. More and more, the Aboriginal dance groups who attend the festival are being encouraged to bring their performances of dancing into alignment with tourist industry and western media expectations.

This is going to present certain practical difficulties, apart from the ones which already exist: the traditional dances which I witnessed in Cape York, if they are fully to be enjoyed as 'spectator sports' and, as spectacles at the Festival or if they are to be adapted for a western stage, are going to require extremely subtle and clever handling indeed to cope with the danced forms without destroying their spatial and much of their semantic integrity. The wanam dances, for example, turn around a horizontal spatial axis established by the singer, who in a sense is controlling the performance. The dancing thus takes place within a tight circle of dancers which leaves no room for an open 'wall' or viewing space such as that required for presentation on a

proscenium stage or in a roped-off arena such as that provided at the Laura Festival.

Moreover, these dances are mainly solo pieces and they are very short, sometimes lasting only 16-18 beats. A few such pieces are done with two, three or four dancers at a time, but their narrative content, even then, is secondary. In western staging terms, wanam is 'intimate'; it is not designed to carry over long distances and it holds little of the typical appeals for western (or westernized) audiences who have been brought up on an intellectual and aesthetic diet of European theatrical dance forms, commercial or otherwise. Much more could be said about characteristics of this kind of traditional dancing, but for now, these brief remarks will have to suffice. Apart from anything else, traditional dances such as wanam, pucha and apalech were never representational forms of 'art' dancing in the first instance; nor was their primary purpose that of entertainment.

The issue at stake here is well-known in anthropological circles: for example, the Hopi Indians of the American southwest have no term for 'art' in their language; they have so far successfully resisted extreme pressures to present their ceremonies as 'art' on a western stage, and it is easy to see the resemblances between their position and that of Cape York Aborigines. One can only agree with a well-known anthropologist of the dance who has put the problem succinctly:

... there can be powerful and dissonant side-effects from the insistence of including art as an interface to dance. The manipulative attitudes of superordinate peoples can force adaptation by subordinate peoples that is not the same as an internally developed evolution. We may, for example, eventually force the Hope kachinas onto the proscenium stage and Hopi "dance" may become an art. If this happens, the world will lose at least as much as it gains (Keali'inohomoku, 1980:42).

And this is not the only problem: there are several justifiable reasons for making the distinction between 'traditional' and other forms of Aboriginal dancing with which this essay began, and it is to a discussion of traditional and so-called 'primitive' dancing that we all now turn.

#### Primitive Dancing vs. Traditional Dancing

I did an informal, 'convenience' survey' of audience members for my own purposes whilst at the Laura Dance Festival, asking them what, specifically, they expected from the Festival and what they had come to see. Non-Aboriginal members of the audience invariably told me that they were there to see authentic 'primitive' dancing. Of what, we might ask, does this category of dancing consist?



For the purposes of this paper, 'primitive dances' will refer to any example of a contrived form of dancing which conforms to media and tourist industry expectations and conceptions of what 'primitive peoples' look like when they dance. Such fabricated traditions are not unknown elsewhere in the world. Keali'inohomoku speaks of

... a kind of pseudo Afro-Caribbean type of dance. This so-called primitive dance has been stylized ... until it has become a kind of contrived tradition in itself. But are Afro-Caribbeans primitive? The answer is that these groups whether or not we can designate them as 'primitive' have their own dance traditions which are totally unlike each other. There is no such thing as 'primitive dance'. The term is meaningless (1970:90).

Members of the audience at the Laura Dance Festival undoubtedly meant primitive Australian Aboriginal dance, not primitive Afro-Caribbean dance, and they probably knew nothing about nor cared about the distinctions that Keali'inohomoku makes, but is that kind of ignorance about the nature of dancing justifiable?<sup>8</sup>

Primitive (Afro-Caribbean) dancing has been for some time a commercial asset to some choreographers in the United States and elsewhere, especially to those who do work for the film industry where Africans (as in the Tarzan films), American Indians (as in Western films) or Oceanic peoples (in various 'South Seas' productions) are depicted, not usually as 'themselves', but as 'primitives'.

Anthropologically, the interesting thing about these contrived forms of dancing is that they are a product of the defining consciousnesses of people in the dominant culture. As such, they rarely, if ever, have anything to do with the defining consciousnesses of the people in the area in which they are supposed to take place or in the structural space/time which they are meant to depict (see Ardener, 1987:38-54, for a thorough discussion of this kind of thing). It is as if the minds of the choreographers of 'primitive dancing' are so full of categories and images regarding the 'primitive' (which are generated by the 'social' in the choreographer's own cultural spaces) that he or she does not realize that the dancing which is created is itself not the dancing which 'X', 'Y' or 'Z' people actually do (or did) but what the choreographer imagines that they do, or might do, given the (usually fictional) situations in the film.

It is too bad that in these cases we do not possess a similar convention of disclaimers such as those which are common with reference to fictional characters and personalities of films and the like. That is, I have many times wished for a disclaimer at the end of a film (the most recent example seen in Australia was the televised showing of the film, Ashanti) where primitive dancing

has been displayed that says, "Any resemblance of the dancing in this film to actual dancing done by the peoples of 'X' is purely accidental and was not intended to be taken as a real depiction of their dances or their culture."

The ironies of this kind of problem are that often, after a passage of time, when younger generations of 'Africans' or 'Caribbeans' no longer know what their real dance tradition is, or what the dancing or the rituals of which the dances were a part amounted to, they either adopt the primitive form as 'traditional' because that is all that is available to them, or, there are known cases where members of an African or Caribbean group have produced dances from their real traditions which do not conform to the popular notion of 'primitive dancing' by spectators which have either been skeptically received or rejected outright.

Another irony consists in the fact that in the move, so to speak, from spectators and their categories to the 'spectated' (i.e., the dancers themselves), the dancers become homo nullius, either because they are seen as little more than 'surfaces', or they are not really 'seen' at all when their surfaces are not those which conform to audience expectations -- but I now digress. The greatest difficulty of all is that there are few scholarly discussions about these issues in the literature on dancing, especially with regard to the issue of real (i.e., authentic) as against faked 'traditional' dancing.

#### Beyond 'Traditional' vs. 'Modern'

In a thoughtful and highly sensitive chapter on Aboriginal-European culture contact, Ellis makes the observation about one aspect of the kind of problem alluded to above. She could as easily be talking about Africans or American Indians as persons of Australian Aboriginal descent when she says,

Aboriginal people are now much in demand for teaching Western school children about traditional life patterns, beliefs and experiences. There is usually no attempt on the part of the school to ascertain which cultural generation the Aboriginal speaker comes from, about which he may speak knowledgeably. The Aboriginal university graduate may quite unrealistically be expected to speak on tribal life, as if from a base of personal experience. This has led to further anomalous situations.

For instance, there are now a number of completely Europeanized Aboriginal people who have heard tribal songs or didjeridu playing, or have seen boomerang throwing, and who attempt to reproduce these skills to display their so-called tribal knowledge, usually for commercial gain. Their musical performances are highly Europeanized ... and the performers have no knowledge of the significance of the songs ... these

pseudo-tribal singers can have a marked effect on white people's understanding of aboriginal music (Ellis, 1985:148-149).

Critics may object at this stage of the argument, saying that what is really happening is that I merely advance yet another permutation of the old 'traditional vs. modern' argument in which purists line up on one side and their opponents line up on the other side of the tired old polarization (see Nettl, 1964:180-184) and a great deal of fruitless word-mongering takes place. If this is what they think, they are wrong. I have no intention of denying anyone the rights of 'internal evolution', 'modernization', 'creativity' or anything of the kind. I do intend to point to two issues, which rarely surface in a 'traditional vs. modern' argument.

1. If I said that I do not want to deny Aboriginal peoples these rights of invention, modernization, creativity and such, then I fall into a trap of assenting to a European invention of 'Aboriginality' as a synonymous term with 'primitive', and the synonym in this case means 'inferior' -- and not that they were the original residents of Australia.
2. Anyone who attempts to help traditional, tribal practises to resist the onslaughts of 'adaptation', 'assimilation', 'detrribalization', 'modernization' and so on, is usually looked upon as one who advances the anachronistic and basically indefensible position of wanting (to put it crudely) to see Aborigines 'bare-assed and in the bush'. The idea is, of course, that they should return, somehow, to a 'state of nature,' which is where mid-eighteenth century Europeans categorized them in the first instance. All of this entirely misses the point I wish to make.

The point is to discover how, while all these processes are going on simultaneously, to guard against the loss of ritual/dance traditions in their tribalized forms (see von Sturmer, 1987, for an exegesis of what these are and why they are important). One of the ways in which that loss can be guarded against is through modern methods of documentation. Movement (including danced movement) is not, generally speaking, literate. The notation of traditional dances plus the construction of texts by a writer who is also an anthropologist, would be helpful. Such preservation-documentation of the traditional dances/rituals, which, true, would make texts out of them, is neither going to halt the flow of progress, nor is it going to deny anyone the rights to create, evolve new dance forms or anything of the kind. The exercise will, however, go some way towards helping those who are interested to comprehend the distinction between traditional dancing and primitive dancing (and its accompanying notions of 'primordialism'). That could only be an advantage.

The position advocated in this paper is neither that of 'traditionalist' nor 'modernist' in the commonly understood definitions of these terms, because both positions are equally indefensible in view of the actual situation which presently exists in Australia, which is still co-existence. Ellis has attempted to document this co-existence through a "table of cultural generations" (1985:136, Table 6:1). Her formulation is somewhat over-simplified, but it is invaluable because (a) it pertains to ritualized dances and bodily expression as easily and as well as it does to musical expression, (b) it draws attention to the co-existence of several generations of Aboriginal cultural knowledges and practices which are to be found simultaneously existing in any Aboriginal Reserve or community in northern Queensland and elsewhere, and (c) it draws attention to a complex process of social change too complicated to be discussed here, which in turn points to the fragility of the group she calls "Generation 1".

Generations 1 and 2 are those who know and teach traditional rituals and dancing. Generations 3, 4 and 5 are those who want to see the traditions preserved. Generations 6 and 7 are those to whom traditions in any culture are of minimal value, and those to whom 'primitive dancing' is as likely to be accepted as 'traditional' whether it is or not. No matter how the situation is viewed or from what standpoint, a simple polarization of issues into 'traditionalism vs. modernism' where terms are logically mutually exclusive simply will not do. To stress a distinction between 'traditional' dances and 'primitive' dancing where 'traditional' means dancing which is generated out of the defining consciousnesses of its owners/practitioners, and 'primitive' dancing which is a fictional construction that is generated out of the defining consciousnesses of persons outside of the group is to attempt to look at the issues involved from a non-reductionist's point of view.

#### Why Not Ask Them?

Many Aborigines are caught in cultural conflict. Some part-Aboriginal people may want to return to some form of tribal patterning in their lives. Others want to associate closely with their non-tribal relatives while still attempting to become acceptable in the white community. At present these aims are incompatible because many members of the white community regard any association with aboriginals as an indication of inferiority (Ellis, 1985:137).

And it is equally true that

The feeling that traditional aboriginal culture is primitive and inferior will take a long time to disappear from the thinking of [some] non-tribal Aboriginal people. Appreciation of tribal music, for instance, runs contrary to the

expectations white people have of "right" and "good" behaviour or "beautiful" music (Ellis, 1985:148).

and, one might add, 'beautiful dancing' -- or, to return to a theme, it will take a long time to replace notions about a public display of infantile or regressive behaviours (which is also a valid common definition of 'primitive' dancing) with real education about real tribal forms of Aboriginal dancing.

There were three groups who performed something like real traditional dancing at the Laura Festival in 1987. They were Edward River, Mornington Island and Lockhart River. To the trained eye, the differences between their dancing and that of some of the other groups was enormous. It was very clear that some of the dancing was done by groups who were undergoing the kinds of conflict in their home communities that Ellis points out above. The dances themselves expressed these kinds of conflict.

Different kinds of dancing are going to emerge from different cultural generations, and not all of it will be traditional dancing, as defined. In the traditional dances, we see the creation of spaces which originated in the minds of the definers of a tribal inheritance as they know (and knew) it and as they experienced it. In a contrived tradition, we often see the creation of imaginary spaces which originate in the minds of the definers of the dominant culture. Part of the role of the anthropologist turns around the notion of 'asking them'; of constructing, insofar as that is possible, what is known in the profession as the 'folk model' of the danced events, whatever that may be -- and the purpose of this is to understand what is going on. The difference between doing this and being a dancer is great, but one would want to say that the combination of anthropologist and dancer in the same person becomes important here, because it is perhaps the case that only someone who has danced professionally is able to add an ontological dimension to the epistemology implied in the anthropological enterprise with regard to an activity that many anthropologists will insist that they know nothing about.

Generations 1 and 2 are in an embattled position: not only are they faced with the problem of maintaining their traditional identities insofar as they are manifest in their dances and songs, many of the demands made on them are inappropriate for their needs, which seem to cluster around education and training rather than 'entertainment'. Then, too, they often think that they are absorbing the members of the dominant culture in some way by performing their traditions.

As far as I am aware, there are at least two or three positions on these matters among the holders of the traditions themselves. The Festival experience is again relevant, because I attended it in the company of Mr. Eddie John, who is the traditional boss of the Weipa South area. He is seventy-two years

old, has recently had a stroke, and wanted to attend the Festival for what may be the last time. His position, as holder of the Chivaree tradition (the main 'dreaming' of the Weipa South area) is very difficult to accept, yet it is one which is not unknown elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia. He has steadfastly refused to transmit his not inconsiderable knowledge of the traditions he represents to his sons or to anyone else. He has not taught anyone the dances, told of the initiations or anything pertaining to his clan(s). He is designating an eight-year-old granddaughter to succeed him as boss of the Weipa South area, which is tantamount to saying that the traditions will die, because women were traditionally excluded from such knowledge. He knows that in fact, the traditions which he holds will die with him, and this is the way that he wants it.

He was fully aware that the dancing that the Weipa South group did at the Laura Festival was dancing, not from Weipa country or 'stories', but from Aurukun, which was mixed with a secular form of "shake-a'leg". When I asked him what he thought of that, he simply said, "Weipa South has no dancing anymore of its own. What I know will die with me. It has no place in this world." Eddie John's requests (in his will) for the disposal of his remains following his death are, according to traditional customs, unorthodox as well: He has stipulated that (a) he is to be cremated, and (b) the ashes are to be sprinkled on the Watson River from a specified location. The Watson River is in his mother's, not his father's country. (See Roth, 1984, on burial ceremonies and customs.) Had I known Mr. John better, I might have argued with him, although it is not usually considered a standard part of the role of an anthropologist to argue with the people from whom one is learning the culture. However, I recorded conversations with other older people who live in Weipa South who disagree with Mr. John's decisions -- but this does not mean that they will argue with him or that they will attempt to change what he has decreed.

Other holders of other traditions, like the Wanam, do not feel or think the same way: They would like to see full preservation-documentation done of the traditions which they hold so that future generations, whatever they may want to create or discard in future, have some record of the traditions as they were, in context, with as little extraneous influence as possible.<sup>9</sup> Undoubtedly there are a range of permutations of these two opposing Aboriginal views of the matter which could be placed between these, as on a spectrum.

Many of the senior men and women to whom I spoke in Cape York were concerned over the fact that some of their children, far less their children's children, have not experienced any feature of the traditional culture in the ways that they did. They are concerned because few, if any of them, know even one of the five or six spoken languages that they know. Younger people do not have direct knowledge of the sites and locations of the creator beings who transmitted the dances and songs, and they do not understand the

cosmologies which traditional singing and dancing entails. It is for these reasons that every assistance should be given to those elders who want their heritage documented and preserved as well as current research methods permit, as a legacy to members of future generations who may want to know something of what their grandparents and great-grandparents understood.

But now, I should like to turn to some talk about Aboriginal anthropology; that is, to talk about the anthropologists who study Aborigines and the discipline of social anthropology itself, rather than the Cape York people, who in this case, were the subjects of the study. Traditionally, social anthropologists have practised anthropology in areas of the world which were considered 'remote' from civilized European cities and culture. As the discipline developed, however, anthropologists began to study their own and parallel cultures; they worked in areas of their own societies which, although geographically very close (as were Ardener's studies of Welsh language, tradition and culture) were distant in another sense (see, for example, Ardener's article entitled "Remote Areas: Some Theoretical Considerations").<sup>10</sup> The question here is, are Australian anthropologists doing anthropology 'at home' or in 'remote areas'?

#### 'Remote Areas As 'Home'

An Australian anthropologist at home has often spent several years in the Outback, but he or she is professionally tied, through universities and/or research centres, to the heavily populated eastern coastline, including Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne, or, in Darwin on the north coast, Adelaide on the south coast, or Perth on the western side of the country. From any of these geographical vantage points, 'the Outback' covers not only the whole of the central and western desert areas, it is a term which designates the majority of the total land-mass of the continent, including the rain forests, mangrove swamps and outlying islands of Cape York.<sup>11</sup> Within the island-continental borders of Australia, there is thus a mobius-strip-like reversal of the familiar European 'centre/periphery' contrast, for the Outback here is the geographical centre (see Foss, 1981, for an Australian discussion of these matters).

There is an important reason for drawing attention to these kinds of things, which have to do with how we conceive of the world and the people who inhabit that world, including ourselves. The imaginary Terra Australis was replaced roughly three centuries ago in European and English consciousness during the age of discovery. This was followed by more limited, specific and mundane realities of the Australian continent itself; however, the Englishmen who discovered and then settled Australia brought with them their consciousness of cultural centredness, in spite of the geographical remoteness or the peripheral nature of Australia itself to the home countries of Europeans and English people.

It is important to remember, too, that in contrast to the Aborigines, even the convicts who were brought here possessed social personas, albeit of a somewhat negative kind; the convicts were persons, temporarily stripped of their rights. They were certainly not homo nullius as defined.<sup>12</sup> This concept of cultural centredness is interesting because it does not exist in the geographical centre of Australia. The concept of cultural centredness only forms the topographical periphery of everything out-in-back-of the coastal, urbanized fringe of Australia. And, it consists in reality, of cities which are multi-cultural melting pots from all of the remote areas of the world. We might ask, "who are the Australian anthropologists anyway?" What are their ethnic origins?

The category 'Australian anthropologist' certainly includes individuals of white, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic and European descents whose families have lived in Australia for two, three or more generations, but it also includes Papuans who are doing fieldwork in New Guinea from Australia. There are Mauritian who are taking Doctoral degrees in Ethnomusicology who have done fieldwork in their own country, and many others. Dutch, Malaysian, American, Japanese, Chinese anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, for example, who may be working in the Australian Outback, but who are equally likely to be found studying immigrant forms of language, music, dancing and social structure in Sydney as they are studying tourism in Fiji or Ceylon. As yet there are no qualified anthropologists or ethnomusicologists of Aboriginal descent (except one). It is to be hoped that there will soon be more.

Personally, I find the study of traditional Aboriginal dancing in Cape York no more remote than a colleague's studies of Japanese Tokaku music and dancing (Marett, 1985 and 1986), or the Brazilian samba (Ryan, 1988), or any number of other current anthropological or ethnomusicological projects which have been taken up in Australia over the past thirty years, but, the quality of remoteness to which Ardener points (1987:41) is not solely a quality of individual apperceptions and experiences. Anthropologists who live and work with Australian Aboriginal peoples become, I think, as remote from mainstream Australian concerns as the Aborigines themselves seem to be in commonly understood terms.

The actual geography is not the overriding feature -- it is obviously necessary that 'remoteness' has a position in topographical space, but it is defined within a topological space whose features are expressed in a cultural vocabulary (Ardener, 1987:41).

Then, too, Aboriginal people are not geographically remote in all of Australia: the Sydney suburb of Redfern is hardly distant in that sense from the rest of the city and its residents -- Redfern is "merely present" (Ardener, 1987:42). Yet, Redfern shares with



Weipa and Aurukun (which are roughly 850-1000 miles away from Sydney) the aura of 'remoteness' because both are inhabited by people who, in the defining categories of the superordinate culture, are homo nullius. An anthropologist who participates in their sub-culture by definition also shares the classification.

There is even a sense in which one could say that Redfern is anthropologically more remote than Aurukun, for nothing has been written about Redfern, in contrast to Aurukun, about which a great deal has been and is being written. Yet, the people who live in Redfern are constantly in contact with the 'outside' world, and their suburb is a part of (near-central) Sydney City. Aurukun, and other Aboriginal communities on Cape York Peninsula are, by this criteria, not at all remote -- at least to anthropologists, but these communities too are annually visited by hundreds of people in ever-increasing numbers over the years. Ardener asks,

How shall the inhabitants of a 'remote area' evaluate the arbitrary love-hate of its visitors? Are alternating periods of 'unspoiledness' and violence their inevitable fate? After the destruction of one generation of strangers, how is it that they are asked to play the role of ideal society to the next, before being unthinkingly redeveloped or underdeveloped out of existence by the next? (1987:43)

My relatively short visit to Cape York Peninsula was marked, from the first day (and from the first field tape) by the visit of a prestigious political figure<sup>13</sup> to the Weipa South community who had with him all the paraphernalia, including recently constructed survey maps, which contained the State government's new plans for the next stage of 'development' on the Peninsula. The accompanying policy is known as 'self-management' or 'self-determination,' where, among other things, Aboriginal people are meant to buy tracts of land from the areas designated by the Queensland government so that they can 'develop' them.

In order to show proof of their ability to develop this land, the same criteria have been laid down for them as were expected in 1788: house, perhaps, road-building, gardens and such. In other words, they must show proof that they are "mixing their labour with the land". If this is not done, then in two or three years time, the land will be taken away from them. The point is that the land is still regarded as terra nullius but now, the Aborigines are being given the opportunity to purchase it and develop it.

Not unexpectedly, the Aboriginal inhabitants of Weipa South do not understand why they are expected to buy tracts of land from the government, which in their frame of reference already belongs to them and has always belonged to them. In their understanding, the state of Queensland, its cities, mines, farms, paddocks and all the rest, occupies Aboriginal lands. They are not asking for these portions of land which have been used for settlement purposes by

Europeans to be given back to them. They realize that that would be impossible. What they do want are the tracts of land which are theirs (the 'Reserves' and surrounding areas to be recognized as theirs -- and to be left alone to do with them as they see fit; to develop the land or not as they choose, not as the State government chooses. The fact that the land they want (and which is designated on the survey maps as "Aboriginal land") is marked by blank spaces seems to be irrelevant.

Questions about their original ownership are, however, met with ill-concealed derision.<sup>14</sup> They are told that they do not understand: that they are obstructing the new Minister's benign motives and plans for them, which are of course contrasted to the old Minister's devious and malicious purposes.<sup>15</sup> Constant allusions are made by the new Minister to the advantages that the new government policies will bring -- and not the least among these advantages are events like the Laura Dance Festival, which goes hand-in-hand with plans for putting down a bitumen road from Cairns to Laura, which will make the town and surrounding areas more easily accessible to tourists.

The festival is, to representatives of State government, a clear demonstration of how highly the dominant culture values, indeed requires, traditional Aboriginal culture (or something that looks like it). What is interesting is the fact that the Minister himself and the members of the Queensland Department of Community Services, who administer the event, know nothing about the differences between 'primitive' dancing and 'traditional' dancing. As far as I am aware through conversations and questioning, they are unaware of the connections that traditional dancing has with specific sites and localities, so to them, the solution to the problem of traditional dancing in northern Queensland is quite adequately taken care of with events like the Laura Festival.

In fact, the status of traditional dancing in northern Queensland, to government representatives, is simply that it is an excellent product (seen in terms of tourist industries), which will (a) increase revenues for businessmen, (b) increase entertainment possibilities for tourists to the Sun State, (c) make it possible for Aborigines to make money with their traditions which they would otherwise not be able to make, and other arguments of a similar nature. Bluntly stated, the Aborigines are in this case, merely another expendable resource.

Aboriginal people (or anthropologists) who might have a different point of view, who see the whole matter of traditional dancing in a different light (basically that of the defining consciousnesses of the holders of the traditions themselves), are equally discredited before they have uttered a word. They become homo nullius because there is simply no categorical slot available in which a different view of the matter can exist. Who wants to be labelled 'anti-progressive', 'anti-business', 'anti-government'?

And even if these labels are acceptable to an individual, who wants to be pronounced persona non grata? There are all kinds of ways in which research can be frustrated or stopped. Yet, this very position is one of the major features of those who can also be defined by the term homo nullius. It means that the anthropologist is 'no one' in the sense that he or she possesses knowledge and a point of view which others simply do not want to hear.

It may be unnecessary to say that Aboriginal people who reside in Weipa South, Aurukun or Lockhart River do not feel themselves to be 'remote,' yet I will say it rather than risk readers overlooking the point. Residents of Weipa South will say that they and the generations of Aborigines who preceded them for thousands of years are quite 'at home' in their places of residence, and that it is the case that it is their homes which have been invaded for at least two hundred years by strangers -- both Europeans and Islanders, and by many others, including the 60,000 Oceanic peoples from as far away as the Solomon Islands who arrived in the Cape during the days of 'blackbirding' for the purposes of having sufficient labour in the sugar cane fields.

Some Aboriginal people in Weipa South will say that they are 'strange' to the land, in the sense that their home country was Old Mappoon,<sup>16</sup> and that they were made to live in Weipa South, Umagico, Cowal Creek or some other part of the Cape. These are people who have sometimes been forcibly removed from traditional sites for various reasons and who have been 'relocated' into other people's traditional sites -- but it is unnecessary to repeat what is a matter of easily accessible historical record here.

### Conclusion

When I ask myself what conceptual dimensions are represented through the traditional ritual/dance complexes which still exist in Cape York Peninsula after having thought through some of the issues which they generate in a preliminary fashion, I am struck by their extreme vulnerability. Traditional dances are, to use Ardener's terms, events which are "high information content" (1987:49). They are examples of events which have thus far resisted the process of randomization<sup>17</sup> through the efforts of people, not all of whom, like Eddie John, have concluded that their significances no longer have any place in this world.

On the whole, the tiny group of elders who are holders of still-existing traditions in Weipa South, in Aurukun or Edward River have their own definitions of the dominant culture, and they exist in communities which are littered with the detritus of 'development,' 'depopulation,' 'protection' and all the rest. Like the Bakwari in the Cameroon, they are often defined as "dwindling, dying and out of time" (Ardener, 1987:49). It would seem that "event-richness" in the Cape York Aboriginal case with regard to the traditional dances is well and truly

... the result of the weakening of, or probably the continuous threat to, the maintenance of a self-generated set of overriding social definitions, including those that control people's own physical world, thus rendering possible the 'disenchantment' of individuals and that over-determination of individuality, to which I referred (Ardener, 1987:49-50).

This is why traditional dances are in an Ardenerian definition, "crucibles of the creation of identity" and why Australian anthropologists, ethnomusicologists and mainstream Australian society need to take special notice of them.

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#### NOTES

1. This paper is one of a set of three resulting from field research trips funded by the then Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies to Cape York Peninsula. It is connected with the first trip taken during the months of May-August, 1987, which was undertaken to assess the conditions in which traditional dancing presently exists in the Cape. The question was whether or not there are sufficient grounds to justify further publicly supported research into the existing traditional dance/ritual complexes. The author lived in Weipa South for most of the allotted time, using that community as a base for trips to Laura in the southeastern quadrant of the Cape for a dance festival, to Aurukun on the Carpentaria side for a house-opening, and to Lockhart River on the upper quadrant of the Pacific side of the Cape to inquire into synthesized Aboriginal-Islander traditions. The paper is dedicated to the memory of my B.Litt. and D.Phil. supervisor, Edwin W. Ardener, St. John's College, Oxford, about whose untimely death on 4 July, 1987, I learned while living in Weipa South. It was publicly presented for the first time at the Fifth International Conference on Hunters and Gatherers, Darwin, N.T., Australia, on 31 August, 1988 [CHAGS 5].
2. See, for example, Bell (1980), Berndt, C.H. (1950), Berndt, R.M. (1952), Boorsboom (1978), Clunies-Ross and Wild (1981); Goodale (1971), von Sturmer (1987), Stanner (1966), Wild (1977-78), and Wild Clunies-Ross and Donaldson (1987).
3. 'Society formation' is often not easily discernible among hunter-gatherers or nomadic peoples unless one's observations proceed from the point of view (not held in the mid-eighteenth century) that the presence of language and kinship structures

marks the existence of the prior conditions for the formation of human societies. The early explorers must have seen Aboriginal encampments, but these are different from sedentary peoples' settlements, even though the site of the encampment may be used over and over again. The early definition of 'society formation' relied heavily on empirical evidence of settlement, and it is reasonable to suppose that Aboriginal languages at that time possessed the same or similar status in European eyes as did African languages; that is, they were often not considered to be 'proper' languages at all.

4. It is relevant to note that the mid-eighteenth century usage of the term 'culture' was pre-anthropological, if E.B. Tylor is taken to be the originator of the modern discipline. He did not formulate his neutral, anthropological definition of the term until the middle of the nineteenth century. The earlier usage was decidedly ethnocentric and tied to concepts of culture as against barbarism and savagery.
5. The history of the government-sponsored Festivals and those events which preceded them has yet to be written, but the earliest gatherings took place circa 1962 through the efforts of anthropologists under the auspices of the Elizabethan Trust and then the Aboriginal Arts Board. Detailed information is available from John von Sturmer (University of New South Wales Sociology Department) or Athol Chase (Griffiths University, Brisbane, Queensland).
6. From the information which I was able to gather regarding the introduction of competitions into the 1987 Laura Dance Festival, it seems to have been the Park Rangers who thought that it would be a good idea, and who proceeded with the organization of the afternoon's substitute activity. Informants, including members of the DCS (Department of Community Services), were extremely vague about the matter and seemed to resent the fact that I had asked.
7. Authorities on the rock art at Quinkan tell me that there is no question of their authenticity. Dick Roughsey did not do the paintings which are to be found there; however, it is of great anthropological interest that many people believe that Mr. Roughsey did paint the ancient rock art. A possible source of confusion could be the fact that Mr. Roughsey did some paintings and collected stories which were incorporated into a children's book some years ago; work that was to some extent resented locally because he was from Mornington Island and not from the Laura area. The significance of the popular misconception lies in the fact that it is something that several people believe to be true, thereby creating an attitude towards work done hundreds of years earlier at Quinkan.

8. The term 'primitive' by itself is not meaningless, nor would Keali'inohomoku or I say that it was. She is saying that the term 'primitive dance' is meaningless against a background of numerous arguments, none of which appear in the short quotation cited. The locution has caused enough difficulty for pre-readers of this manuscript that some further comment seems to be required: (a) There is a perfectly legitimate, non-pejorative usage of the term 'primitive' (as in primitive western art) in connection with, say, Picasso's paintings, but that usage is, unfortunately, not connected with the notion of 'primitive dance' in any way. Saying that does not mean that the notion of 'primitive art' is wrong, meaningless or that such a notion does not exist. It simply has to do with the issue at hand, which is an attempted examination of what 'primitive dance' consists; (b) the term 'primitive,' when attached specifically to dancing, seems to have become synonymous with regressive or developmentally childish behaviour, and this, regrettably, is the interpretation which the term bears in the majority of cases when it is used in connection with dancing.
9. An ethnographic case illustrates what is meant very well, one of the major singers of the Wanam tradition presently resides in Aurukun. His son, who is an excellent dancer and a potential singer, lives in Weipa South. The younger man, without recordings and explanations of the songs by his father, cannot learn the songs or even begin to learn them in the situation without recordings to work from. The son has very mixed feelings about the traditions; he lives with his father's brother, who has rejected them entirely and doesn't want his nephew to learn the singing and dancing. There is no way of predicting what will happen in this case, but it is likely that at some future time the son will be glad of tape recordings and texts of the dances and songs that his father knew.
10. See the 1987 ASA monograph entitled The Anthropologist At Home, edited by Anthony Jackson, for Ardener's article. Since this essay is dedicated to Ardener's memory, it is appropriate to address some of the issues he raised about doing anthropology in remote areas. For me, it was especially relevant, because this essay grew out of a lengthy letter addressed to him about the Weipa field experiences when I was informed of his death.
11. It is necessary to say that a 'Sydney-sider' might not include Cape York in his or her conceptual map of Outback territory, but others do. 'Outback' to Cairns residents does include Cape York.
12. Although convicts might be considered to be homo nullius in the sense that they have had their rights as citizens taken

away from them, they are not homo nullius in the same sense as people, like the Aborigines, who never enjoyed citizenship rights in the first instance.

13. Mr. Bob Katter, Jr., is the present Minister for the Department of Community Services in Northern Queensland. The first field tape (available through the A.I.A.S., GPO Box 553, Canberra, A.C.T., 2601) consisted of an interview in which he outlined present government policies regarding Aboriginal and Islander peoples with reference to self-management and self-determination and the proposals for Aboriginal purchase and ownership of land.
14. Also available at the A.I.A.S. are fieldtapes #2, 3 and 4, which document public meetings and Council meetings held at Weipa South, where such questions are asked and answered.
15. An infamous name among Aboriginal people in Cape York is that of Pat Killoran, the man who proceeded Mr. Katter, Jr., in the position of Minister of the DCS.
16. For just one example of forcible police removal of Aborigines from their traditional homes to relocation sites, see Roberts (1975), which is the story of the Mapoon incident by the Mapoon people themselves.
17. I do not mean to imply that the dances and ritual traditions have not changed at all. They have. There is, I think, no such thing in any non-literate peoples' traditional life that remains entirely static and unchanging over hundreds of years. This is a subject which will be taken up in the second paper of this series with specific reference to the Punka (Wallaby) dance belonging to the Wanam tradition [See Jashm 6:2 Fall 1990]. For now, suffice it to say that the people who want documentation and preservation are fighting a losing battle.

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