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The Australianist work of Erhard Eylmann in comparative perspective

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Paul Erhard Andreas Eylmann is still little known to most Australianists because his significant major work, *Die Eingeborenen der Kolonie Südaustralien* (1908), remains largely untranslated.² This chapter provides perspective on Eylmann and his work, partly by comparison with that of Spencer and Gillen, who are much better known. Their research took place around the same time, in some of the same places. Eylmann made personal contact with Gillen in Central Australia, and continued to correspond with him from Germany, where he wrote his 1908 book. I contend that Eylmann, in combining in a single work both an effort at documentation and his subjectively framed experiences of travel and fieldwork, achieved a quality of writing that is in many ways more in tune with our sensibilities today than is the work of his major contemporaries, including Spencer and Gillen.

1 Thanks to Anna Kenny for sending me the Monteath paper, and to Jesse Rumsey-Merlan and Alan Rumsey for comments on a draft.

2 The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) library refers to partial translations into English of Eylmann's major work as follows: by Kevin Sherlock, of chapters XIV, XIX and XX (Call no.: SF 57.5/1), held in the same library; selected chapters compiled by Robin Hodgson, translated by Renate Hubel, 1994, MS 3369. Further, Courto's (1990) thesis gives an account of Eylmann's life and studies, and includes a two-page translation of Eylmann's introductory remarks to his 1908 work.

To what extent are significant differences in their work relatable to Eylmann's belonging to a hypothetical 'German' anthropological tradition (Gingrich 2005)? In brief anticipation of my conclusion, there is some connection between what we may consider German work of the period and Eylmann's orientation. But the difference between him and them is multifactorial. This chapter attempts to specify some of the relevant differences and what they indicate about the writing of ethnography, the overall Australianist ethnographic tradition, German contributions to it and German developments of the period.

Biography and orientation

Eylmann (1860–1926), scion of a well-off farming family from near Hamburg, was professionally trained in natural sciences and medicine (Schröder 2002). After practising as a doctor in Cairo for three years (1891–94), the tragedy of his wife's death there was the impetus for him turning to research in Australia. He studied further in numerous relevant fields in Germany to prepare himself for this. During this time, Eylmann came into contact with Adolf Bastian, who had by then been director at the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin for nearly two decades, and was also a mentor of Franz Boas.

Eylmann made his first solo expedition of over two years' duration, 1896 to 1899, crossing Australia south to north from Adelaide to Darwin, with a shorter side-trip to Lake Albert and the Grampians; another trip, in 1900, to Point Macleay, Kopperamana and other nearby destinations; and a third and final expedition, in 1912–13. Between the second and third trips, back in Germany, he completed his major work of 1908. Eylmann hoped to visit other parts of Australia, but, in the end, his research concentrated on the north–south swathe between Adelaide and Darwin—his principal contacts with Indigenous peoples (so far as these can be reduced to known tribal identities) having been with Ngarrindjeri, Diyari, Luritja, Arrernte, Warumungu, Kaititja, Wagaj, Tjingili and Waray. His work was wideranging and never concentrated in just one region, as was the initial work of Spencer and Gillen in Central Australia. Eylmann did, however, spend periods of months in a number of locations. He also visited towns on his route, considering them scenes of interest. He inquired of all Aborigines he met where they came from, often finding people in towns and at other points of settlement to be well outside their country of origin. He roughed out a social and linguistic mapping

of groups. His work thus provides clues to earlier distributions of named sociolinguistic groupings in a number of places where these have changed quite significantly over the decades since Eylmann's publication.



Plate 11.1 Erhard Eylmann and Frieda, the daughter of one of the missionaries.

Source: SRC 06342, Strehlow Research Centre, Alice Springs.

Eylmann never held a university post. He was a research 'loner', for the most part: he travelled alone, but stopped and visited or made acquaintances at many places. He found temporary companions on the way, made acquaintance with pastoralists on whose properties he camped and also took advantage of German-speaking contacts in Adelaide and at mission stations such as Bethesda in South Australia and Hermannsburg in Central Australia, to assist him in making further acquaintance and advancing his research.

Eylmann was a relatively liberal-minded, non-evolutionary empiricist; he believed in the value of field investigation and observation. With his background in the medical and natural sciences, he displayed a strong interest in human physicality but also human social qualities of a generally comparatist and non-racist sort. He also developed a keen interest in and practice of collecting and museology. There was no touch of diffusionist or *Kulturkreislehre* ('culture circle theory') thinking about him such as was gathering steam in Germany at the time. He was acquainted with the various schools of physical anthropology of his day but was comparatively liberal in tendency. He closely observed the nature of interactions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, but harboured no evident negative thoughts concerning race mixture or what some (Fischer 1913)³ called 'bastardisation', as had a subset of German natural scientists from the eighteenth century onwards, and as did also many Australians and anthropologists informed by Anglo intellectual developments.

Australianist field research and formal and informal writing

Certain understandings configured Anglo-linked ethnographic research and related writing in the early phases of Australianist work in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The period's scholarly interests—shaped largely in major intellectual centres of Europe and North America—focused on comparative institutions and an evolutionary framing of societies. In the resulting scholarly economy, highest value was attributed to the description of recently contacted, colonised people and

3 Fischer was director of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity and Eugenics between 1927 and 1942. He was appointed rector of the Frederick William University of Berlin by Adolf Hitler in 1933 and later joined the Nazi Party.

cultures as they were before Western intervention, with special reference to topics including (group) marriage, totemism and rite. This complex was later superseded intellectually by Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalism and its particular synchronic orientation.

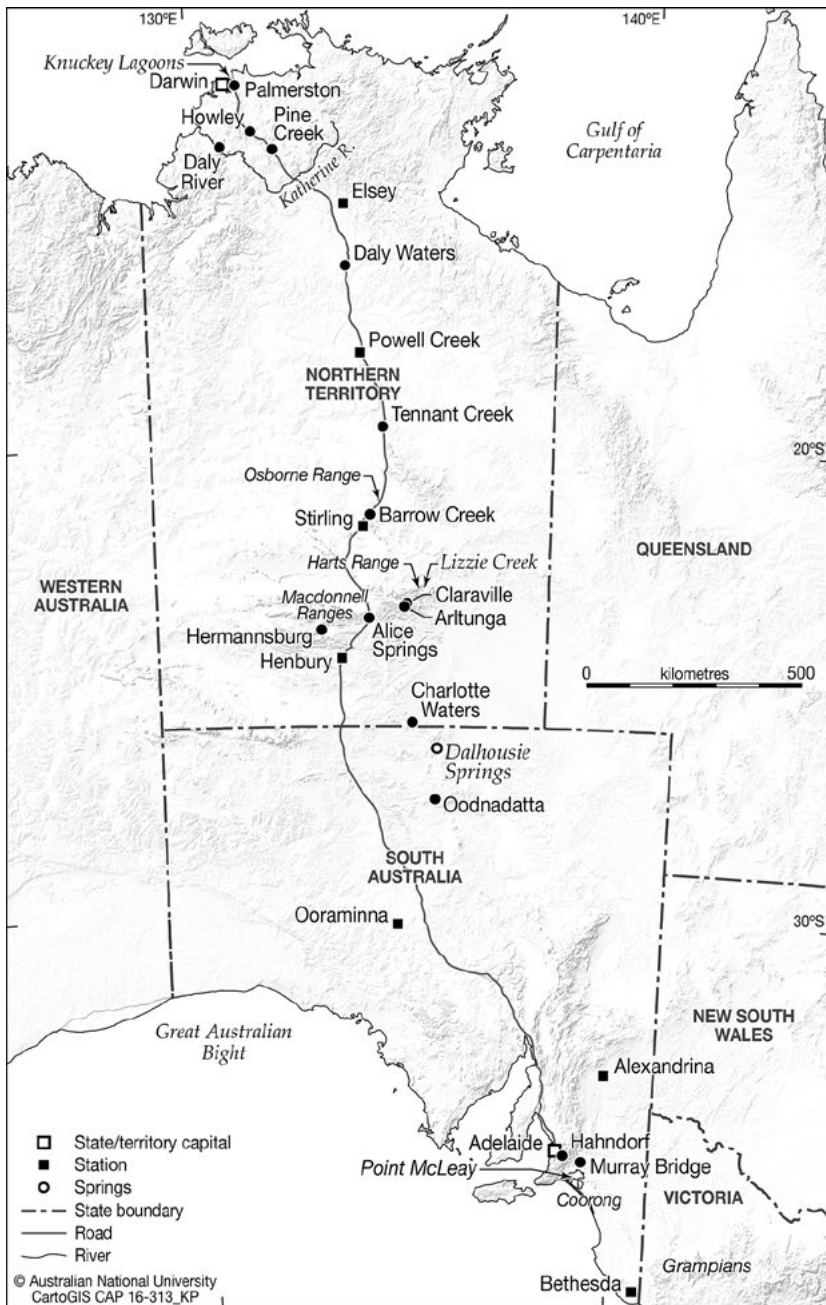
The period was marked by a gradual shift away from study of comparative institutions largely intellectually grounded in the ancient Western world, towards study of colonised peoples. An approximate division of labour developed in Australia and elsewhere between what counted as scholarship, on the one hand, and fieldwork, on the other, defined by the necessity to get information on certain topics from immersion 'in the field', but to shape it, descriptively and interpretatively, in terms of the prevailing scholarly interests.

Individuals and (often) pairs of workers bridged this division between scholarship and fieldwork in a variety of ways. In the United States, Lewis Henry Morgan—lawyer, would-be Iroquois Indian, founder and participant in numerous investigative, activist and scientific associations, fieldworker among Indian tribes, businessman, public servant, supporter of causes and traveller—was both scholar and fieldworker, but was crucially informed and assisted by his Iroquois protégé and colleague Ely Parker.

Lorimer Fison and Alfred Howitt formed an Australianist scholar–fieldworker pair (publishing *Kamilaroi and Kurnai* in 1880).

The division was famously bridged in the work of Émile Durkheim through his reliance on Spencer and Gillen as the empirical basis for his own intellectual grappling with questions of religion, the sacred and profane and morality. Spencer and Gillen, in turn, formed a pair roughly personally matched to, and bridging, the difference between scholarship and fieldwork. Spencer, a professor of biology, was acknowledged between them as the intellectual leader of their joint research, and Gillen, employed in postal and telegraph work in Alice Springs, was the indispensable person with extensive knowhow, local knowledge and contacts with Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, especially in Central Australia.

GERMAN ETHNOGRAPHY IN AUSTRALIA



Map 11.1 Places visited by Eylmann on his travels.

Source: CartoGIS, The Australian National University.

The difference between intellectual framing and scholarship, on the one hand, and fieldwork, on the other, was largely realised in a related polarity between formal, objectifying ethnographic representation and the more subjectively framed experience of travel and fieldwork. Most researchers of the time published on these two aspects of the research work separately, even where—as in the comprehensive works of Spencer and Gillen, individually and jointly—we clearly see connections between the scholarly and travel works, and references to the same anecdotes and events in both kinds of writing. Formal writing counted as professional publication, capital and authoritative representation. The informal work of Spencer was intended for a wider, general, if not exactly popular, audience.

Spencer and Gillen published together *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) and *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904) as scholarly works under both their names. Later, Spencer published the large two-volume *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928), which covered in diarist and travel-writing mode his comprehensive experiences as researcher, scholar and administrator in Central and northern Australia. Gillen, on the other hand, produced a diary that has been issued by the Libraries Board of South Australia with the subtitle *The camp jottings of F. J. Gillen on the Spencer and Gillen expedition across Australia 1901–1902* (Gillen 1968). This diary, his son noted on its issue, was written in four exercise books to give Gillen's wife—who he had to leave for a year to travel with Spencer—an idea of his day-to-day activities. Consistent with his own sense of his contribution to the research project, the writing of the diary was in some large part an act of devotion to his wife and family rather than something he intended for wider publication.

Characteristic of the formal writing of the period is the elevation of description over narrative and certainly over reports of conversations or interactions, producing a sense of generalisation and normativity from close description of particular events. The formal is also characterised by effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject to a significant extent (see Pratt 1986), particularly the authorial subject, how he may have been part of the scene and how he experienced events and people. The focus is decidedly on the 'object', the 'other', not on self or relationship.

Characteristic of the informal or travel writing is a diarist's organisation—a chronological account of things done, undertaken, places and people visited and events—and a narrative style much more fully involving the authorial personality. Their travel works contain many

incidents of Spencer and Gillen's being together with Aborigines, often providing some background concerning how particular ceremonial events or other encounters were organised or came about, and a dimension of humour or implicit comment that the writers do not allow themselves in the formal works.

Eylmann's major work on the Northern Territory melds the two dimensions—personal writing and scientific account—to a much greater extent than do Spencer and Gillen. The divide exists in some ways in his work, but in a less distinct form, and many parts of his text are permeated by descriptions and expositions in which he appears as experiencer and recorder, as well as by descriptive, 'scientific', interpretative and analytical passages. Eylmann does not seem to imagine himself losing what was later called 'ethnographic authority' (Clifford 1983) through his own inclusion, even in the recounting of episodes that many of his contemporaries, probably including Spencer and Gillen, would have deemed unacceptably low-life, even off-colour. In fact, his work breaches the convention of the division in many ways; overall, the weighting of personal narrative and scientific description and analysis is very different than in Spencer and Gillen.

As he travelled, Eylmann kept field journals and notebooks, which served him as sources for his published work. There was never any question of his intending to publish those field materials as such. They are, in the main, descriptive, not reflective or analytic, and daily entries often consist of remarks on a number of diverse topics, while the 1908 work is organised much more thematically.

Eylmann's book begins with a short preface outlining his travels. The reader has a sense of him as traveller all the way through the book as he contextualises the Aborigines and others whom he meets. One encounters them in large part in their relation to him, and not as if they were entirely separate from him and other colonials. While this may not adequately represent those parts of their lives that were lived in greater separateness from whites, locating them in colonial context often seems fully justified in that many were living near or on stations, at missions or around towns, where they were sometimes deliberately placing themselves in contact with whites, Chinese and other Aborigines. The overall effect is quite the opposite of a portrait of Indigenous society as if it were entirely separate from the colonial one.

Eylmann met Francis James Gillen, Spencer's collaborator on *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (Spencer and Gillen 1899) and the postmaster of the Alice Springs Telegraph Station, on his first trip north, in 1896, on the recommendation of Amandus Zietz of the Adelaide Zoo.⁴ Gillen gave Eylmann the benefit of his great practical knowledge of the region, helping him to make contacts with Aborigines and Europeans alike (see Monteath 2013: 4). Eylmann and Gillen had common interests in geology and other natural sciences, and Eylmann shared with Gillen his Berlin-period exposure to the work of the German natural and cultural scientists including Bastian, Hackel, Virchow and Graebner. According to Schroder's account, Baldwin Spencer, who first met Gillen in 1894, harboured some concern that Eylmann might get in his way or be interested in some of the same subjects as himself (Schroder 2002: 193; see also Monteath 2013: 4). Again, according to Schroder, Gillen was at some pains to convince Spencer that Eylmann's interests were quite different from his own and that they were not anthropological—seemingly a distinct prevarication of Gillen's understanding of the situation. Eylmann never met Spencer himself.⁵

Organisation of the 1908 work: Margins and middle

The organisation of Eylmann's book overall does reveal a manifest and even encyclopaedic plan to portray Australian Indigenous people, society and especially material culture in traditional terms (as Eylmann would have absorbed from Bastian, and also from other field manuals available at the time; see footnote 5). Besides chapters that are fairly standard in

4 Monteath (2013: 4) mentions the significant number of Germans hired into scientific and organisational posts in Adelaide by the time of Eylmann's first visit.

5 Monteath (2013) argues that Eylmann and Spencer and Gillen operated with a view of their research as entirely within a scientific paradigm devoted to observation and factuality. Though this may have been the contemporary normative ideal, I think this is a serious underestimation of the Eylmann text's subjective dimensions, which Monteath does not make much of. Monteath (2013: 3) mentions that Eylmann probably would have read the *Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen* (*Guide to Scientific Observations on Travels*), brought together by Georg Balthasar von Neumayer (1875) and available as a compendious field guide (of 1,600 pages!), with the needs of the German Navy to collect data particularly in mind. Von Neumayer had considerable field experience in land survey in Victoria. This volume is now available online. It certainly has a scientific caste but in no way forms the model for Eylmann's main work, although undoubtedly he was possessed of some of the same drive for detail and exhaustiveness as von Neumayer. *Anleitung zu wissenschaftlichen Beobachtungen auf Reisen* includes sections on such subjects as photography as an aid in land survey, botanical geography, collecting and pressing plants, magnetic observations, marine animals and a host of other topics.

encyclopaedic ethnographic works of the period (e.g. on religion, burial and material culture), Eylmann also features chapters on 'Bodily and spiritual character', as well as 'Illness and treatment of the sick', reflecting his medical and wider interests. Two final two chapters, entitled 'Relations between Indigenes, Europeans and Asians' and 'Missions', would never have appeared in Spencer and Gillen, given their conception of their work; a scan of the table of contents of their *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) suffices to demonstrate this. Spencer's disparagement of Aborigines encountered at Oodnadatta as 'well clothed as we were and too civilised to be really interesting' is also indicative (Spencer 1928: Vol. I, p. 16).

Spencer's attitude is not surprising for the time, but highlights two important differences that Eylmann represents in this period. First, despite the obvious architecture of his work, bookended by travelogue at the beginning and Indigenous relations with outsiders at the end, the book is permeated by a sensibility for the nature of Aborigines' changing relations with outsiders and, relatedly, among themselves. To convey this sense, the work is punctuated throughout by comments from Indigenous people, which Eylmann reproduces fairly directly about all of the subjects he attempted to investigate. He regularly depicts himself as the traveller, the asker, the experiencer and a person approached by Aborigines as well as attempting to find ways to spend time and talk with them. This contextualises and renders the particularity and often the expression of the Indigenous people he was meeting. He identifies by name some, though not all, of the Aborigines from whom he gained detailed information. He also regularly wrote into his journals information and hearsay he gathered from settlers and officials who claimed knowledge of Aboriginal practices: Mr Bogner at Hermannsburg, Mr Cowle at Illamurta, Frank Gillen at Alice Springs, Pater Marschner at Daly River, and so on. He cites his interactions with Aborigines, in particular, and with others, evidently without anxiety concerning whether his relaying of many events and experiences in ways that reveal his personal involvement casts any shadow on their documentary value. For him, that documentary value was evidently not neatly or completely identified with scientism or rigorous 'factuality' conceived purely observationally, apart from the human relations in which the Aborigines, and he himself, were entangled.

This points to a second aspect of Eylmann: he occupied a dual position as fieldworker and researcher, interested both in traditional society and in contemporary social relations. On the one hand, he was interested,

like others of the period, in documenting traditional Indigenous society as it was before colonisation; but, on the other hand, he was not an ideological evolutionist. That is, he did not come fully immersed in that logic by which Aboriginal society was revelatory of earlier human history and social arrangements, and by which its primary interest lay in what research through that lens could reveal. Like Spencer and Gillen and many others, he did see, and to some extent lament, that Indigenous society was changing rapidly, and, like them, he believed and observed that it was changing for the worse—largely through their interaction with Europeans. But he also recognised in his observations ways in which Aborigines were making new terms for themselves in the various structures and conditions of colonial settlement, and he was clearly very interested in how they were doing so. In these terms, his ethnographic interest focused on the relations of Aborigines and himself in interaction with Europeans of the outback—his portrayal of them, in drink and other ways given to excesses, often not very flattering—and with Chinese, with whom Aborigines of Pine Creek and Darwin had a great deal to do, mostly by way of material and sexual trafficking.

In looking at these relations, Eylmann's observations often come to rest on what seemed to him confronting and perhaps confounding, such as the fact that Aborigines newly arrived into Knuckeys Lagoon around Darwin—the 'uncivilised Aborigines'—manifested extreme jealousy concerning their wives and women, and sent them out of sight to keep them away from strangers, but rapidly took to offering them, and under-aged girls, to anybody who had a little bit of tobacco in his possession, as well as to Chinese to obtain opium. At the same time, he notes:

Any time an indigenous married couple made its way to my camp, and sat down with me without having been asked, I knew that, after a long talk about quite indifferent things, I would be asked if I wanted a woman. (Eylmann 1908: 459)

He was, of course—like Spencer and Gillen—fully aware of the extent to which the offer of women among Indigenous men was a regular aspect of social relations. With respect to the puzzle set up by these different behaviours, he tended to explanation simply as a difference between the 'uncivilised' and more acculturated Indigenes, and never arrived at any deeper insight concerning gendered relations in the Indigenous–non-Indigenous context, save one: that to an extent, the women themselves had some personal investment in sexual self-valuation, and rapidly took to

demeaning him as a cheapskate when he refused such offers. In any event, his interest in such frictions of intercultural contact keeps his text from becoming generalising in many places. Instead, it remains more often narrative, with some focus on specific interactions and conversations. And in these ways, too, the overall portrayal is not of Aborigines as untouched by history nor as survivor-victims of European imperialism (which he even tends to downplay in places), but as human beings whom he could approach in their present condition, and himself as someone who was regularly approached by them for their own purposes.

Medical man

As medical man, Eylmann displayed great interest in the bodily character of Australian Aborigines and their skeletal remains, as well as in their notions of sickness, health and curing, and their everyday practices relating to bodily condition in their own terms. He begins his volume, in fact, within the chapter on 'Bodily and spiritual nature', with a long (Eylmann 1908: 1–33) disquisition on the physical characteristics of Aborigines, justifying this on the basis that these are overall among the people most strongly differentiated from other peoples in the world, but also noting that there are significant regional differences among them. His discussion moves from physical properties of every part of the body to hair types, skin colouration, the physiology of ageing, bones, teeth, bodily strength, bodily capacities of sight, hearing and movement to sleep, tolerance of cold, damp and pain, and food preferences and tastes. He also comments extensively on evidence of introduced disease, such as syphilis. He remarks on what he found to be a lively aesthetic, visual and musical sensibility. This discussion grades into what his chapter title labels the 'mental⁶ nature' of Aborigines, to which I return below.

Given his frequent comments on sexual practices and relations, especially between Aborigines and non-Aborigines, it is again worth mentioning that he speaks of *Mischlinge* ('half-castes') without apparent disparagement, generalising that they are physically larger than the mother and her kin, and that the offspring seem generally healthy, of pleasing appearance and somewhat more intelligent than 'full-bloods' (Eylmann 1908: 65).

6 Perhaps the best translation of German *geistig* is 'mental' in this context, contrasting with *körperlich* ('bodily') in the chapter title. But *Geist* is clearly broader than simply mentation, and can encompass the 'psychological' and 'moral'.

In other places, he refers to specific part-caste children as ‘pretty’—one like a German farm girl in her blooming appearance (Eylmann 1908: 65)—also reporting from what he knew that the girls become sexually involved with whites and Aborigines from an early age. He noted that the number of part-castes was disproportionately small given the rather considerable sexual traffic between Aboriginal women and non-Aboriginal men, attributing this both to low fertility on the part of the women and to his understanding that many mothers killed such infants. (Spencer and Gillen similarly comment on the paucity of children; 1904: 327.) Eylmann also seems, whenever possible, to have asked after intimate sexual practices, reporting a finding that women apparently regularly expel the sperm following coitus—another explanation, he thought, for the small number of children, including part-caste ones.

Spiritual characteristics

Spencer and Gillen, like Eylmann, had some interest in the spiritual and moral character of Aborigines. Spencer reserved his most detailed commentary for *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (1928: Vol. I, pp. 197–204), consistent with what he seems to think is the more interpretative and tenuous nature of this compared with the more observationally grounded formal ethnography. The issues that people commented on back then seem to have been fairly standard: the gratitude or ingratitude of Aborigines; their capacity for cruelty or sympathy; men’s treatment of women; cannibalism; and treatment of the elderly and sick. Comments on these matters by Spencer tend to be limited to what were contemporary commonplaces, such as that Aborigines do not express gratitude but simply treat whites as they would a fellow tribesman (1928: Vol. I, p. 199); that they are completely childlike, with no thought for the morrow (p. 203) and generally lighthearted; and that it is unsafe and unwise to judge the actions of a native ‘from the standpoint of view of the motives and feelings that govern our own’ (p. 202).

Eylmann goes much further in the fullness of his characterological discussion. He does so partly by considering certain commonplaces—‘what is often said’—but also by developing discussion from concepts that allow for elaboration and comparative comment, and of a range of phenomena that reveal new perspectives. He also regularly considers certain characteristics as he sees them among Aborigines, and between Aborigines and settlers.

In his discussion of the 'psychic nature' of Aborigines, he flatly rejects the settler commonplace that Aborigines have no feelings of love and compassion for each other, declaring this to be completely baseless; the result of a superficial knowledge of and lack of contact with Aborigines in daily life. In refutation, he describes moving scenes he has witnessed among Indigenous people.

He attempts to specify a range of feelings for and in relation to others, framing this to some extent under the rubric of *allgemeine Menschenliebe*—whether Aborigines display a generalised love of humanity. A certain inclination towards those with whom he regularly lives is present, he notes, but he says relations to distant people are characterised by lack of respect and even hostility. He wonders about Aborigines' relations to whites: do they ever really come to respect and like them? Certainly, he observes, kinds of dependencies develop on white suppliers of food and livelihood. He notes in several places Aborigines' purposeful avoidance of whites and apparent dislike of them (Eylmann 1996: 218, 256). These reflections are exemplified from his experiences (e.g. Eylmann 1908: 35).

His work provides insight into the kind of relations he cultivated with people and camps on his longer stays, not only with Aborigines (for example, at Knuckeyes Lagoon in Darwin), but also with Europeans living at Sterling Station, whom he saw as among the roughest types he had encountered anywhere, with no kindly feelings for Aborigines (Eylmann 1908: 10).

In his survey of the kinds of emotions and feelings that Aborigines express, he notes their love for their dogs, which they value greatly, but also the regularity with which children torment and torture animals as a form of play. Exemplifying this, he records that the young children dealt with the proliferation of cats on Sterling Station by spearing them in the anus, and that even his threats to shoot the children had little effect. He compares them with young children back home in Germany who delight in blowing frogs up until they explode (see below on Eylmann's penchant for such comparison).

Eylmann discusses and offers examples of Aborigines being very self-preserving, such that in times of drought they will unhesitatingly leave the sick, weak and elderly behind, not harming but also not helping, and go off to seek a living elsewhere. He comments on the desire to obtain goods and the readiness of women to prostitute themselves, as he sees it, for any advantage of this kind.

He considers the topic of what we would now call ‘demand sharing’ (Peterson 1993)—that is, social demand on Aboriginal people who have food or other goods to share with their closest associates. With regard to this topic in Indigenous–non-Indigenous relations, he comments that Aborigines sometimes seem to have regard for whites only when they can fulfil their demands—and treat them with much less regard when they cannot. But, he observes, such behaviour is no rarity in ‘our own country’ (Eylmann 1908: 39).

Eylmann (1908) offers extensive commentary on the differences in behaviour and presentation that he observed between men and women, the former often presenting an outwardly composed and controlled mien (p. 38), the women exhibiting much less control under many circumstances. He also counters the commonplace that women are seen merely as slaves (Eylmann 1908: 51), though he does suggest there is a need for them to be urged to work by their men (p. 52) to combat their tendency, he thought, to take things easy. In a number of places, he compares what he sees as a certain limited set of mental foci on the part of women (matters to do with daily food supply, sex) with the greater breadth of men’s interests, also commenting, typically, that women here resemble women at home in these ways (Eylmann 1908: 59; cf. Courto, in Eylmann 1996)!

Eylmann discusses jealousy, dislike and competitiveness, but also what he sees as admirable characteristics often encountered among Aborigines: physical courage (in which, he says, the Aborigines outstrip whites by and large) and uncomplaining behaviour even under extreme conditions of hunger, thirst and wounding. He sees men as not given to braggadocio (Eylmann 1908: 44), and their demeanour overall as generally somewhat withholding, though he does not discount the effects of white settlement on them (p. 45).

Eylmann suggests that Aborigines are not particularly given to high valuation of peaceableness for its own sake, nor do they particularly seek out fights; he credits women with being more *streitsüchtig*—readily looking for fights.

There is readiness to lie, but, he suggests, it is not so great as among ourselves (who he designates *Kulturmenschen* in this context). But he finds them to often give the answer that seems to be anticipated—what has been called elsewhere the ‘pleasing answer’—noting that this presents special difficulties for the discovery of facts of matters.

Eylmann sees *Stehlsucht*, or a tendency to steal, as very limited, commenting that Aborigines in remote places he passed through, at least, regularly left things around their camps without fear of theft, and that he himself had things apparently stolen, or at least taken, from his camp only in a few limited instances.

He also writes extensively on the common attribution to Aborigines of laziness and lack of foresight or care for the future (*Sorglosigkeit, Unstetigkeit, Mangel an Voraussicht*; Eylmann 1908: 50). He has clearly closely observed the work of hunting, caring for and preparing weapons by men, and finds little justice in such attributions, especially under the environmental conditions he came to understand. While he found lack of cleanliness to be an objective fact, in terms of both lack of bodily washing and food preparation, he sharply condemned devaluation of Aborigines on account of their inattention to it, finding it consonant with often limited water supply and of no disadvantage to them.

He comes to a view on what we might translate as evaluative rationality (*Urteilsvermögen*): that whites tend to be superior in this regard, and that Aborigines find it difficult to overcome superstition (Eylmann 1908: 58) and are more suggestible. But he makes comparative comments favourable to Aborigines of his experience with respect to their ability to master foreign languages (Eylmann 1908: 58), a superlative awareness (*Wahrnehmungsvermögen*), an unmatched ability in spatial orientation (*Orientierungssinn*), memory and observational acuity (*Beobachtungsgabe*) and in no way inferiority in imagination and capacity to concentrate compared with the people of a north Hannoverian town!

And, with respect to children, after observing their performance at the mission school at Killalpaninna, for instance, he found them in every way equal to their German or English counterparts (Eylmann 1908: 60).

At the end of all these considerations, which make up the main 'mental' aspect of the chapter's attention to 'bodily and mental nature', Eylmann comes to a consideration that considerably alters his occasional use of the contrast between *Natur-* and *Kulturmenschen*, or 'uncivilised' and 'civilised', as we might best translate it. He says, in the end, that there are no thoroughgoing *Naturmenschen*, or uncivilised (French *sauvage*), peoples, but perhaps only 'half-civilised' ones (*Halbkulturvölker*). This is because all the characteristics that Aborigines display, and that he has tried to describe, come about because those people have lived for immeasurably long periods in the terms of their own societies, and have developed those

characteristics that are necessary in their relations with their own kind (Eylmann 1908: 60). Thus, he reasons, there are no real *Naturmenschen*—in the primary sense of uncivilised ‘children of nature’. They are children of society.

It is also worth noting that, although we may translate his *geistige Beschaffenheit* as ‘mental nature’, in contrast with the physical, he was interested in both, and generally considered practices and events as revelatory of character; he was not interested in romantic notions of spirit and soul. It has already become clear, I hope, that he did not posit any brute connection between physical characteristics and intellectual capacity. In general, he leans towards a view of general similarity of human capacity, which he occasionally pronounces to be slightly superior in the long run in the scheme of European human social development. He presents a view of Aborigines as highly active, capable and intelligent—with a certain caveat regarding the women, but all women, not just Aboriginal ones! Although Eylmann displays a certain elitism with regard to his German lower-class compatriots, in general terms, he inclines to a view of the largely shared nature of human capacities that are developed differently under different societal conditions.

Eylmann often adopts a comparative mode of making a point, as illustrated in several places above. His comparisons are made largely in relation to Europeans with whom he feels familiar, and generally to counter various negative commonplaces that he experienced north Australian settlers to express in relation to Aborigines. For example, he judged Aborigines as no more *arbeitscheu* (‘work shy’) than Germans or other ‘civilised’ people—provided they may do the work they know and are not forced into ‘narrow, dull spaces’ for work that is unfamiliar to them and that has for them no apparent purpose (Eylmann 1908: 50). On lack of cleanliness, he compares Aborigines with the lower, and even upper, classes of north Hannover, and finds the latter to also not be assiduous about bathing (Eylmann 1908: 53).

Commenting on the fact that Aborigines often have limited English and that number systems are undeveloped in their languages, Eylmann (1908: 58) observes that Aboriginal boys and men, possessed of excellent memory and awareness, can usually tell much more quickly than white bushmen whether an animal is missing from their herd, and can describe exactly what the missing one looks like. He also attributes to them much more acute species recognition than to north German farmers, comparing them favourably in terms of imagination and concentration (Eylmann 1908: 59).

Against the constancy of such comparison, its relative scarcity in Spencer and Gillen's work is noticeable. A rare example is in *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (Spencer 1928: Vol. I, p. 200), in which Spencer, arguing that Indigenous women are not treated with excessive harshness, says: 'The life and treatment of the black lubra are far preferable to those of hundreds and thousands of women in British slums.'

To cite so many examples of comparison might make it seem that Eylmann tries too hard to prove the worth of Aborigines against opposing commonplaces. But, distributed as these examples are over the book, they do not seem strained, but rather point to his conviction that Aborigines were people who had, in general terms, no lesser capacity in many ways than his countrymen, and some of whose capacities outstripped theirs in their present condition. What is striking, however, is his insistence on the commonality of the sisterhood, both Aboriginal and European, in being strife-prone and given to pettier thinking than men.

Strategy and agency

Eylmann was very sceptical of the missionary project, and he seems to have let that be known in the various mission stations in which he spent time: Hermannsburg, Killalpaninna and the Catholic mission at Daly River.

In his view, the relations between mission and Aborigines were of an unhealthy nature. Eylmann saw that, out of their desire to gain converts, the missionaries placed too much trust in Aborigines' apparent piety, which he saw as largely situational. The converts were also not held to a work regime and were, as a result, overfed and underactive, in his view. He gives a lengthy, tongue-in-cheek account of a church service, held by Pastor Carl Strehlow in Arunta. He reports that, in his view, the sermon made little impression on its audience, except that they later recounted with great amusement the language mistakes the pastor had made.⁷ Eylmann placed little stock in the sincerity of conversion of the majority of Indigenous people at Hermannsburg, understanding them to be more fully absorbed in their own social events and corroborees.

7 See Monteath (2013: 8) on the lack of warmth—indeed, the animosity—between Strehlow and Eylmann.

He describes ‘corroborees’ he saw at Hermannsburg and elsewhere, reminiscent of some of the long and detailed accounts in Spencer and Gillen of similar events. One of Eylmann’s points in recounting this was how much notionally converted Aborigines continued to value sacred objects.⁸ He observes that some Western Aranda and Jingili told him that these ‘fetishes’ were ‘blackfellow money’, with which one could negotiate for women, weapons and instruments. He found this equation interesting, and notes the men had independently come to making this equivalence through their exposure to work for settlers, not through any questions of his.

Though he admired and regarded key practitioners (of sorcery and healing) as adepts, keen observers and knowers of people, and as highly disciplined—even hardened—he does not idealise or in any way romanticise Indigenous ceremonial practices. Instead, in places he refers to them as *Hokuspokus* (Eylmann 1908: 225), raising the question, as he does for many Indigenous relations to Christianity, how seriously people may take them.

Eylmann, German anthropological tradition and Spencer and Gillen

Although Spencer and Gillen, each in his own way, differentiated their formal work from their travel and personal accounts, this by no means guaranteed a greater sense of coevalness (Fabian 1983) between themselves and their subjects in the latter than in the former. I suggest that the primitivist and evolutionary prism through which they engaged their Aboriginal subjects as scientists was largely the same one through which they engaged with and wrote about them as part of their travelogues.

8 With some apparent compunction, Eylmann (1908: 199) admits to having removed some fetishes, learning their location from revelations of caches to him by people he calls ‘boys’. (In using this word, he is apparently voicing the local English-speakers.) Of what he did, he uses the word *Entwendung*, which can only be understood as ‘theft’. His phrasing suggests compunction, but the reader never learns any more about this, or what became of the material. On Eylmann’s death, a significant number of artefacts he had collected went to the Übersee Museum in Bremen (Monteath 2013: 9). In addition to these appropriations, as Courto (in Eylmann 1996) notes, Eylmann reports himself going uninvited into camps and opening and examining graves, only prevented from doing so, for example, by missionaries at Killalpaninna (Eylmann 1996: 263) in the case of graves of people whose relatives were living at the mission.

Eylmann, too, made use of some of the framing organisation and discursive tropes of primitivism (specifically, engaging the originally Herderian opposition between *Natur-* and *Kulturmenschen* in some places, but sparingly). However, through personal inclusion of himself in his relations to Aboriginal people, Eylmann distinguishes himself from Spencer and Gillen. He blended 'scientific', or documentary, and personal writing in ways that make his work more fully in tune in many places with current ethnographic sensibilities and writing. In places, he tends towards comparison—between 'them' and 'us', the 'us' of his discourse often explicitly the working classes of his home region—much more than do Spencer and Gillen. While Eylmann never fully identifies himself with those working classes, his forthright inclusion of himself in many episodes, his presentation of himself in interaction with Aborigines and others, gives his portrayal of those relations a coeval quality that traditional ethnographic writing has often been accused of lacking.

Many of the kinds of things Eylmann wrote about were outside the framework of Spencer and Gillen. Their view of their research task was more fully enclosed in an evolutionary view, from which perspective they mainly saw and foretold degeneration and degradation, concerned that it would make impossible their research task as they saw it. As Spencer and Gillen say (1899: 8):

When the remnant of the tribe is gathered into some mission station, under conditions as far removed as they can well be from their natural ones, it is too late to learn anything of the customs which once governed tribal life.

There is little flexibility, in Spencer and Gillen's view, on the part of the Aborigine, who is characterised by rigid conservatism: 'As amongst all savage tribes the Australian native is bound hand and foot by custom. What his father did before him that he must do' (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 11, 13–14, 510–11).

While it was certainly true that knowledgeable old men were disappearing and young men's interests were turning to other things, the statement has a characteristic death-knell quality. These attitudes did not, of course, diminish but rather fuelled Spencer and Gillen's zeal to conduct fieldwork of a particular kind, and they came up with valuable detailed descriptions of ceremonies, for example, that can never be reproduced in the same way.

Although Eylmann certainly thought that Aborigines were being radically and negatively affected by European settlement, he did not take the view that they were characterised by rigid conservatism. His narrative, event-based and subjective approach to his writing meant that he was constantly revealing unexpected and particular responses to situations that were incompatible with a view of them as rigidly conservative. His emphasis is, rather, more often on Indigenous accommodation or even—as in the case of Hermannsburg—on what he thought was Aborigines being able to adapt to and make use of the kinds of positions and flexibilities that a particular European settlement regime offered. Rather than being exclusively focused on tradition and custom, Eylmann saw Aborigines' relations with Europeans and Asians as worthy of being included in the main body of his work, even if at the margins to some extent, but also interspersed throughout the body of his narrative.⁹

In his view of the native as 'mentally' merely a child, who acts, as a general rule, on the spur of the moment (Spencer 1928: Vol. I, p. 204), without the 'slightest thought of, or care for, what the morrow may bring forth' and living 'entirely in the present' (p. 203), Spencer does not come close to thinking of Aboriginal 'character' in the more diverse terms that Eylmann set out. And it is no part of Spencer and Gillen's discussion to set out so many ways in which they found Aborigines to be particularly gifted or to be endowed with specially developed capacities, and to compare them favourably with other peoples.

Was Eylmann's style, or aspects of it, born of German training and thinking? Certainly, not being captivated by an evolutionist view was possible for a German trained in the natural sciences, with a strong empirical bent and a determination to do fieldwork, and only a studious rather than committed relationship to the evolutionist bent of many of the arguments coming out of emergent British anthropology and the study of comparative institutions. His concern with recording language is also typical of German interests in folklore, philology and linguistics.

Gingrich (2005: 86) has commented on some principal tendencies of the first period of academic anthropology in imperial Germany, and of the two central actors at the time, Bastian for *Völkerkunde* and physical anthropologist Virchow:

9 He also wrote a shorter work on European Australian travelling bushmen whom he encountered, and their indigence (Eylmann 1922).

Both were political liberals, both had received their first academic training in medicine and the natural sciences, and both were committed to an empiricist positivism of a nonevolutionary kind that followed the model of the natural sciences. (see also Berghahn 1994: 170–85)

Gingrich (2005: 89) also describes *Völkerkunde*—the comparative study of (non-European or other) peoples—as classifying and generalising the results of a strictly descriptive ethnography. While his work certainly fell within some of these terms, and he pursued *Anthropologie* in Virchow's sense of it as physical anthropology, Eylmann also had a sensibility for social relations that went well beyond the limits of contemporary conventions of natural science inquiry. Certainly, his inclusion of Aborigines, Europeans and Asians within his frame of interest opened on to a field of interrelationships that others did not consider worthwhile at this time in Australia or central to their ethnographic observations. While Eylmann documented these relations with interest, his interpretations of them were not as developed or rich as his observations.

Eylmann had a strong desire to accomplish documentary work of a lasting kind, and to that end assiduously studied the physical and material aspects of Indigenous life, coming up with what would count as objective representations of many phenomena. But he also remained committed, without ever saying so in so many words, to representing the subjective nature of his field research, giving the particulars of people and events as part of his efforts to provide a sense, and interpretation and analysis, of Indigenous life at the time.

Of course, many writers in the early period of anthropology were concerned to differentiate their work from travel writing and other similar genres, and to establish themselves as authoritative and scientific. Spencer was very consciously part of a natural science tradition, and this bounded his imagination concerning possible ways of understanding the situation of Aborigines in the Northern Territory. In reading both his and Gillen's main volumes, one feels that there is a large amount of description of ritual, but little interpretation or linking of that material to any discussion of Indigenous lives, social relations and colonial impacts. Because Eylmann was outside these debates—he was also a relative outsider to academic debate in Germany—he had no hesitation in presenting both documentation and subjective experience as part of his overall work. What Mary Louise Pratt (1986), for example, describes as a hegemonic divide in anthropology, a contradiction between objective and subjective

representations, was preceded by some diversity in which practitioners such as Eylmann could present and interweave these two aspects of field experience in their writing. He did so without any metacommentary, of course, oblivious of explicit debate that was to emerge in anthropology only 50 years later.

It seems of likely relevance that Eylmann had been a medical practitioner and was presumably experienced at listening to and working closely with his patients. One might note that Spencer was a different sort of biologist, an academic one, who may not have been called on to develop that degree of immediacy of attention and empathy.

Despite what I have called a certain elitism in his attitudes towards his fellow Hannoverians, Eylmann spent a great deal of time with Aboriginal people, interacting with and accessible to them, and encountering them on a certain common ground, compared with the thinking and related field practices of Spencer and Gillen. In his field research, he located himself with Aboriginal others in the same time and space. His writing attempts a blend between ethnographic representation and the subjective experience of fieldwork without loss of acuity and with a strong component of interpretative and comparative comment, together with a certain amount of fairly ungrounded speculation common to the period. Spencer, on the other hand, remains fundamentally an evolutionist even in his personal, ‘informal’ writing. His personal narrative does not treat the Aboriginal other as coeval with him; rather the other, in his view, remains ruled by custom, childlike temperamentally, on the way out and of little interest to the extent that he has changed. Indigenous people as willing and forced to accommodate, living in unequal entanglements with variably well and ill-disposed outsiders were some of the things that Eylmann was able to describe, while Spencer and Gillen ruled them out.

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