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Doing research in the Kimberley and carrying ideological baggage: A personal journey

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Is there a German tradition in anthropology?

In discussing the German anthropological tradition's involvement in Australian Aboriginal studies, my perspective in the first instance is that of 'participant observation'. That is, I am drawing on my personal acquaintance with some German anthropologists and on having used their work in my own research into Aboriginal socioculture. In this undertaking, I am instrumentalising my narrative to explore briefly and in some particular contexts what 'German tradition' means. On this level, I am purposely ignoring some poorly researched works that mistakenly refer to me as a German anthropologist (see Hill 2012). But by giving the preamble of the symposium from which this volume arises about the 'German anthropological tradition' in Australia a slightly wider scope and renaming it the 'German-language tradition of anthropology', it changes the perspective. By removing the nationalist innuendo and giving it a linguistic tinge, I become an exponent of this tradition, which I believe justifies my approaching this topic at least partly in terms of a personal journey. In my case, 'German anthropological tradition' thus needs to be understood in a larger context, which includes the Viennese school of anthropology.

In an intellectual sense, the close kinship—perhaps even identity—between German and Austrian anthropology is undisputed, although not so much in terms of homogeneity as in terms of incessant cross-fertilisation. To name only a few outstanding anthropologists who demonstrate by their career the closeness of German and Austrian anthropology: among the founding fathers of today's anthropology department at Vienna University, the Societas Verbi Divini (Society of the Divine Word: SVD) Patres Wilhelm Schmidt and Wilhelm Koppers, were German nationals by origin; Felix von Luschan, director of the Berlin Ethnological Museum for many years, was Austrian; and Helmut Petri, of whom I shall say more later, studied for a while at Vienna University under Schmidt, Koppers and Heine-Geldern,[1] before he became curator at the Viennese Ethnological Museum for a short period. In a much less fortunate sense, the closeness of the national branches of this discipline also manifested itself during the Nazi era prior to and during World War II, as in both countries the racist, politically instrumentalised agenda dominated (see Linimayr 1994).[2] Thankfully, globalisation processes have meanwhile already largely overcome nationally defined, even linguistically bounded, anthropologies and advanced the shaping of a largely global academic discipline that, despite its diversity, has created worldwide, transnational networks for the exchange of ideas, sharing of research and methodologies and, by and large, has developed a common foundation of ethical guidelines.

My investigation makes no claim to illuminate the essence of German anthropology—if there is one—or to strive for definitional objectivity; nor do I have normative ambitions to characterise the German input into Aboriginal anthropology. In this context, by interweaving the so-called German tradition rather egocentrically with my own work, I will examine only the 'German' sources that were relevant to my work. Moreover, the perspective of my contribution is located in the past (mainly the 1970s and 1980s). I cannot relate my experience to very recent developments in Aboriginal anthropology nor to the most recent evaluation or appreciation of the German-language contribution, as, for some time now, I have relocated my professional interests to other anthropological fields.

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1   Lack of space prevents me from naming the dozens of similar careers.
2   The instrumentalisation of anthropology for colonialist purposes in the United Kingdom and France pales into insignificance in comparison with the misuse of anthropology by the so-called German Reich.

In the year before I joined the anthropology department in Perth (at the end of 1969), I had done fieldwork in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan. I then completed my PhD thesis at Vienna University and had a short stint at the Berlin Ethnological Museum, where I was selecting representative objects from the museum's large Australian Aboriginal collection for display in a new wing. By that time, I had accepted—with much optimism and a little trepidation—the challenge of doing fieldwork in Australia at the invitation of Ron Berndt, the then head of the West Australian anthropology department.[3] I was to undertake fieldwork in Fitzroy Crossing in the southern Kimberley; a place, as I learned later, where a couple of researchers had previously declined to work.[4]

Not long after my inauguration into Aboriginal research, I was invited to address the Anthropological Society of Western Australia on the topic of the Viennese school of anthropology. While I had fond memories of my years of study at the Viennese anthropology department, its fundamentally Catholic orientation had—for me, as an agnostically inclined Protestant[5]—been a source of alienation. (I felt I had been given to understand—in the nicest possible way, of course—that my professional future was not within the hallowed halls of this institution.) Another anthropological branch offered at the department, also historically oriented though less Catholic, was focused on Africa and worked in an ethno-historical mould. The Institut für Völkerkunde (Institute of Ethnology), as its proper name was at the time, was grounded in Catholicism because it had been dominated for a while by members of the Catholic order of the SVD. Most of them went on to become exponents of the *Kulturkreislehre* ('culture circle' theory) until its scientific demise shortly before my entry into the anthropological scene. But the institute's founding ethos lingered. Patres Wilhelm Schmidt, Wilhelm Koppers and others (Patres Gusinde and Schebesta) still had a shadowy presence (to some extent thankfully having survived the brief Nazi interlude). Among their legacy were the institute's totemism studies—mainly in terms of classification,

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3   I owe Ron Berndt a debt of gratitude for having given me this chance and Catherine Berndt for her desperate attempts to mould my stubborn continental individualism into something more conventional in Australian anthropology.

4   A short personal résumé can be found in Burke (2011: 151–3). It would be churlish not to express my thanks to the many people—although I cannot name them here—in the field and in academia who helped with advice and deed: colleagues, missionaries, both Protestant and Catholic, welfare personnel, and many others.

5   Before the increasing secularisation of the bureaucratic apparatus wiped this practice out, all official personal documents (such as matriculation and enrolment papers) contained a reference to the person's religious affiliation.

definition and phenomenological description—which were, of course, of some interest to my new undertaking. But its hypothesis of the primeval *Hochgott* ('supreme god' or 'all-father') belief, vigorously propounded by Schmidt (1912–54) and Koppers (1949)—and, I believe, accepted by Carl Strehlow, but not by E. A. Worms[6]—was a different matter. It led me later to reject it in a small publication (Kolig 1992) in which I argued that where this belief could be found in Aboriginal Australia (e.g. the Baiame belief), it was of missionary provenance. In my view, it represented a cognitive shift in the traditional Aboriginal cosmology, but, at the same time, also revealed a clinging to a traditional conception of the workings and control of power. In my view, it was a first paradigmatic step in the transition from the somewhat static pre-contact mental universe towards a more fluid, innovative framing of political thought. This was quite different from the idea of the persistence of an ancient cosmological concept. However, at least the patres' firm argument about the primordial *Hochgott* cult turned the view of the *Naturvölker*'s primitiveness on its head by attributing respectable religious beliefs in a creator divinity—comparable with 'the best' of Christianity—to ethnicities that were widely regarded as the most 'ancient' and most 'primitive'. (In Lewis Henry Morgan's evolutionary diction, Aborigines represented primordial savagery par excellence.) It gave them at least a semblance of respect. I felt almost sorry that I could not agree with the monotheistic *Hochgott* theory.[7]

I am purposely referring to my background in some detail as an antidote to the mistaken belief that, as the label German tradition would insinuate, there is or was an intellectually cohesive, monolithic form of a coherent theoretical and philosophical orientation, perhaps even a school of thought, whether inspired by Herder or not. Viennese anthropology rested heavily on various brands of historical anthropology. However, I am doubtful that the Catholic manifestation of anthropology owed much to Herder's thought, despite its profound devotion to a historicist perspective. Equally, the purely ethno-historical school—an offshoot of the fundamentally diachronic approach of much of the German-language tradition, which was also represented at Vienna—had an exaggerated empiricist basis, probably as an antithesis to the speculative character

6   A short dalliance with this idea can be found in 'Djamar, the creator' (Worms 1950).

7   In the 1980s for a short while there seems to have been an attempt to create a centre for Aboriginal studies in the Viennese anthropology department. The initiative collapsed with the untimely death of the main agent. I believe it was meant to continue with the totemism studies that had been undertaken earlier. See Haekel (1950).

of other offshoots of the historical method. Lingering shades of the *Kulturkreislehre* and other cultural-historical perspectives were on offer, as well as extreme, empirically based diachronic serialisation, all of which provided a rather narrow theory range for aspiring adepts of anthropology. It meant that, by and large, I was without a spiritual home. Beyond that, the bewildering maze of what may be called the German-language tradition in anthropology invited me to construct, like a bricoleur, my own homespun anthropological nest. Internally totally incongruent and fragmented, not to say illogical, it was concocted from a mixture of holistic anthropology, relativism and phenomenology à la Husserl, Dilthey and Gadamer, with a shot of Bastian's *Elementargedanken* ('elementary thoughts'), ethno-science and Max Weber's melange of historical, idealist and materialist strands woven together. It then was rather wilfully and illogically pressed into G. F. Hegel's progressivist cosmology as presented in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes* ('phenomenology of the spirit') (see Kolig 1977). Cultural particularism and universalist leanings formed strange bedfellows in the composition of my anthropological world view. Looming in the background, though unacknowledged at the time, was probably also Herder's nationalist romantic legacy, which inclined me to turn my interest to 'culture' in the sense of world view, values, oral traditions, ethos and other intangibles and house all this within a relativist, mentalist framework, which, in turn, was cocooned in a universalist gossamer. With hindsight, it seems I embraced Herder's cultural relativism as a method of understanding, but not as an overarching cosmological structure where, in my mind, Kant and Hegel had the whip hand.[8]

Typical for my personal intellectual starting point was the recognition that the situation was far from presenting a monolithic German-language tradition in anthropology. The situation that confronted me was one of a bewildering multi-vocality, not to say a cacophony, of theoretical and philosophical positions. This heterogeneity was my spiritual home, leading to a fundamental confusion to which Herder had substantially contributed—a confusion that for a time I sought to mitigate with critical theory of the Frankfurt school kind, together with a good dose of Kantian

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8   PhD students at Vienna University had to take courses in philosophy and pass exams as a precondition for gaining a philosophical doctorate. Most of the courses I chose were on Kant or in the neo-Kantian tradition—all, of course, in the broad tradition of German-language Enlightenment, which presupposes a kind of universalism adverse to relativism. I agree with Gingrich's (2005: 64) opinion when he rejects Norbert Elias's assessment that Enlightenment was carried mainly by French and Scottish philosophy and only in a minor and romantic-tainted way by German-language philosophy.

rationalism, before ruefully shifting back to Max Weber as the refuge for my theoretical inspiration. In all of this, overall, I regarded Herder as a distant figure, fairly much outside my magic henge of ancestor worship. I felt more fealty to Weber's brand of idealism through which he could argue that the rise of a religious belief—Protestantism of the Calvinistic kind—could bring about a socioeconomic revolution of a magnitude that would come to dominate the world today. It is possible, of course, that Weber's thinking was also guided by Herder's legacy, but I cannot recall that Weber explicitly acknowledges this. In any case, it was on a conscious level that Weber's capitalism argument led me into mentalist and ideological perspectives about Aboriginal socioculture. I augmented the potpourri with a precarious balancing act between Karl Popper's evolutionary philosophy of knowledge and my fascination with the Marxism-inspired sociology of knowledge represented by Karl Mannheim, Jürgen Habermas and others. Again, I linked my understanding of knowledge with Weber's idea of social and intellectual rationalisation and a slight modification of Popper's view by stressing a functional distinction between religious and scientific thought, whereby only the latter, on a rational-empiricist basis, is subject to evolutionary advance. This eclectic amalgam I brought to bear on my Aboriginal research.

Neighbourly relations with Helmut Petri and others

When I realised that my imminent career was to be centred on Aboriginal studies, and on the Kimberley in particular, the work and publications of Helmut Petri—who was based at Cologne University—became of great interest to me. (I knew Petri already from visiting seminars and lectures he had given at the Viennese department when I was a student.) Together with Andreas Lommel, Petri had undertaken fieldwork in the northern Kimberley (among Ngarinyin and to some extent Nyigena, while Unambal and Worora were more or less Lommel's domain) before World War II in the Frobenius Expedition. More recently, Petri was working in the Eighty Mile Beach area (in Anna Plains and especially on the Catholic mission station of La Grange, now called Bidyadanga) among mainly Nyangomada, but also desert people from the south and east (so-called Yulbaridja). Most of his publications were very ethnographically descriptively, empirically orientated with little theoretical

underlay, although it can be argued that cryptically they contained the distant legacy of Herder and the concept of '*Kultur*' he had spawned. (The *Kulturmorphologie* Petri was trained in certainly took its cues from a humanist, culturist, relativist and historical perspective.) His publications and also those of his wife and research partner, Gisela Petri-Odermann, showed a fascination with the *geistige Kultur* ('mental culture'), the ethos and the political and religious culture of the people they studied. Their lively, descriptive ethnographic style made for interesting reading without making theoretical or philosophical demands. To my relief, there was nothing in their work of the boring kinship studies that seemed to dominate other ethnographies.
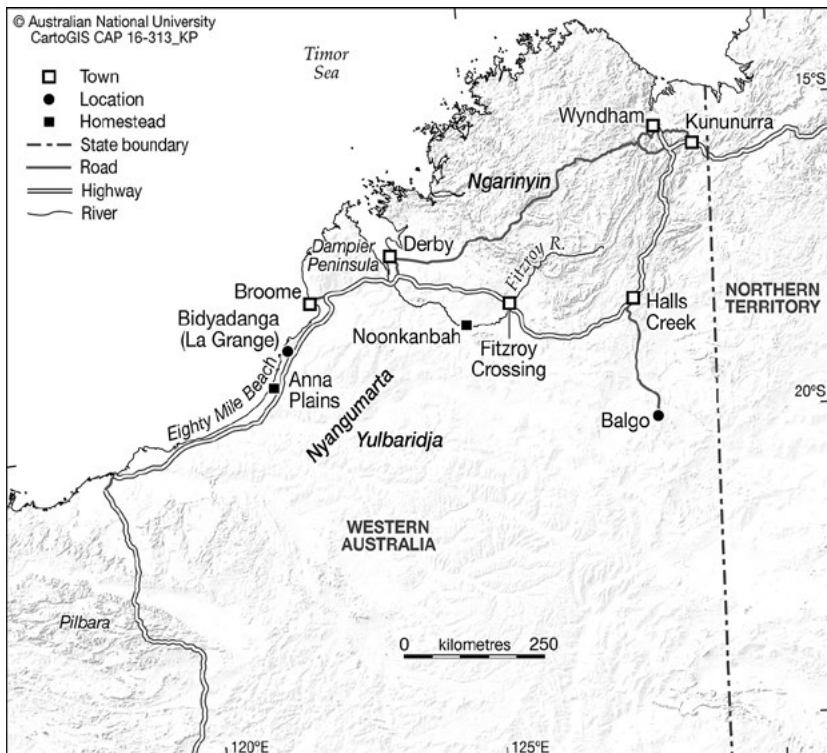
Map 15.1 Kimberley locations mentioned in the text.

Source: CartoGIS, The Australian National University.

The Petris' style of ethnography was often personalising and individualising their observations—in some cases, even mentioning the names of the people described or who were giving information. This closely descriptive style not only made for attractive reading, it also humanised Aborigines.[9] I am not sure if this style can be called proto-hermeneutic, but one of its strengths is that people are not subsumed under social functions, they do not become just anonymous agents exemplifying kinship systems or abstract cultural principles and as such are implied only in the narrative texture in sublimated form. They are identifiably individual actors with specific and quite different intentions and knowledge, day-to-day partisan political agendas and religious strategies—in short: possessing their own distinct personality.

The Petris' style of personalising and individualising their observations managed largely to avoid essentialisation, which today is so vehemently denigrated by positivist anthropologists. This descriptive, close-to-empirical-reality ethnography is absorbing to read but harbours a hidden difficulty. Referring to the personal views, thoughts and intentions of informants by name, even if it is done with the best and morally pure scientific intention and with the ideal of objectivity and emotional detachment in mind, may still invite protest, denial and even litigation by people so revealed, on grounds of defamation, false representation, insult or a number of other reasons. It can also have an unwanted side effect by creating internal conflict within the community. The German language protected the authors from such difficulties. The language barrier also allowed the Petris some liberties in another sense. It made it easier to set aside rules of religious secrecy and the gender barrier that applies in religious knowledge.

The linguistic discreteness of Petri's publications—from an Australian viewpoint—meant that preserving the secrecy of esoteric information to which he was privy was less of a problem, and other culturally based restrictions also could be circumvented with relative ease. That Petri-Odermann after Helmut's death was grappling with this is evidenced by an interview she gave (Beer 2007: 160) in which she muses over ethics concerning preserving the gender division in trying to publish her

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9   In a review of Monteath (2011), Oliver Haag (2012: 134) remarks on the 'human twist in portraying Aboriginal people in German documents' referred to in this book. Haag notes that despite the inescapably racist perspective of these documents, they are inspired by the 'noble savage' trope rather than by the derogatory insinuations usual in English-language documents.

husband's religious material. On the other hand, she observes that much esoteric knowledge is lost to the younger generations and, if she does not publish it, it is in danger of being lost forever.[10]

As it turned out, in a substantive sense, culturally and religiously there was an important connection between Petri and Petri-Odermann's research area and mine.[11] This area was not only contiguous in a geographic sense with my research area in Fitzroy Crossing and the southern Kimberley in general, but also culturally closely related. Ron Berndt's strategic thinking was very much aware of these circumstances and placed me in the southern Kimberley to act as a kind of link or intermediary in a geographic and linguistic sense. (I seem to remember that in a conversation we had about my placement, Ron admitted as much. I believe the term 'spying' was also dropped in this context—though not by Ron or myself—which hinted at possibly another, deeper motivation.) Geographically, my position in the Fitzroy area was relevant in the sense that important cultural impulses moved from Central Australia across the southern Kimberley (especially Balgo, where the Berndts worked) to the Kimberley coast (where the Petris worked) via the cattle stations south of Fitzroy Crossing, and vice versa in the opposite direction.

Where Petri's work was of much value to me was the religious and cultural mobility among Aborigines of this region. The people the Petris were studying were culturally and linguistically closely related to the ones with whom I was dealing and these, in turn, shared cultural relations with the Balgo people. Myth, ritual and sacred objects were traded and handed on among desert and desert fringe groups in a sweeping movement spanning an enormous distance from the country's geographic centre to the Indian Ocean, where Petri and Petri-Odermann described them in tantalising glimpses.[12] In the process, of course, these religious elements underwent some change, which my research was able to highlight. Linguistically speaking, Petri's, and also Petri-Odermann's, publications were, with few exceptions, in the German language and therefore inaccessible to most Australian anthropologists at that time. In this sense, I presume I was meant to mediate between Petri's work and that of Australian anthropologists.

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10   I recall that T. G. H. Strehlow made similar observations and claimed a similar defence.
11   See, for instance, Petri (1966, 1967), but also several other publications.
12   The phenomenon of *Wanderkulte* ('wandering or mobile cults') exerted some fascination at that time, harbouring shades of a modest form of diffusionism (see e.g. Kurangara described and analysed in several publications by various authors).

(Later, I translated one of Petri's key publications into English—Petri and Petri-Odermann (1988)—and, of course, in my publications I often referred to Petri's work.)[13]

Father Ernest A. Worms's work also provided valuable insights for me—especially his work on Kurangara (or Goranara, as he wrote) (Worms 1942; Worms and Petri 1968), which complemented Petri's and Lommel's work. But with Worms's work it was different insofar as most of it was centred on the Dampier Peninsula area (where he had several postings as a Pallottine missionary) and was not directly linked culturally with my fieldwork area, the southern Kimberley. Moreover, much of his oeuvre is published in the English language and is therefore better known to Australian anthropologists and less of an unknown cipher to the anthropological mainstream.

Herder's legacy and Carl von Brandenstein

Johann Gottfried Herder is widely acclaimed as the father of German—or better, German-language—anthropology by having set in motion an enduring tradition in perspective and focus. I believe he became the founding father more indirectly, in a very broad sense through his influence on scholars who came much later and paved the way for the formation of academic anthropology: from Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schlegel to Wilhelm Wundt, Franz Boas and even Bronislaw Malinowski, to name only a few. The presumption sometimes seems to be that Herder's philosophy had a pervasive and lasting formative influence on German-language anthropology and that it can be expected that this influence made itself felt in the work of German-speaking researchers working in Aboriginal anthropology. This may be true only in a very generalised sense, as Herder's brushstroke was too sweeping and coarse to formulate a concise perspective on the human condition. His influence is more of a scattergun type, sparking major intellectual impulses in all directions.

His notion of *Volk* and his implicit idealist, romantic *über* value of the Germanic people foreshadowed, albeit in a much gentler way, later nationalist and even fascist ideological developments. This is so despite

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13   One other paper appeared in English translation as 'Stability and change' (Petri and Petri-Odermann 1970). Petri's major work, *Sterbende Welt in Nordwest Australien* (1954), was translated only in 2011, as *The Dying World in Northwest Australia*.

the features in his work that clearly support the idea of democracy as the perfect political condition in which to unfold individuality and personal freedom, which he seemed to value highly. (This led him, for instance, to appreciate the French Revolution, which did not endear him to the aristocracy and the political elite of his time.) His emphasis on the concept of *Volk*—an entity characterised by a particular and unique configuration of language, religion, values, culture, ideals, oral traditions and so on— was counterbalanced and even contradicted by his emphasis on the unity of the human species, the assumption of a species-typical basis on which we can understand often seemingly radically different ethnic and cultural Otherness. (This seems to have had at least some influence on Husserl's phenomenology, on Bastian's *Elementargedanken* and on hermeneutics, but features of it can also be found in Jung's psychology, perhaps even in Freud's and other empathetically based theories and methods.) It is important to note that Herder's *Einheit in der Vielfalt* ('unity in diversity') prevented giving credit to the notion of 'race'—that is, to hold race responsible for the level of civilisation and for cultural achievement or 'failure'. Thus, blame for supremacist race theories that arose later in the German-speaking area—and not only there—cannot be put directly on his doorstep.

There is a basic irreconcilability between the traces of universalism in his work (though not in the Kantian sense) and his cultural relativism and ideas of a plurality of truths, the latter feeding into modern hermeneutics and postmodern thought. His hypothesis that language is not only important but also determines thought not only inspired Wittgenstein, but also eventually culminated in the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis—which, however, is far from being universally embraced. There are also traces of an incipient nature versus nurture debate in his work.

Like a Christmas sparkler, Herder's work not only shone brightly, it also spun off into many different directions, all carrying some of the original light. Herder's philological strand of thought, for instance, was carried forth into Aboriginal anthropology and linguistics by Carl Georg von Brandenstein.[14] His 'mercurial' work links language very much with culture, mentality, Aboriginal philosophy and world view, ritual and

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myth. I am unable to judge what impact his linguistic work had overall on Aboriginal linguistics, but I am on safer ground with regard to his totemism studies, above all: von Brandenstein's articles on the Pilbara section system and its classificatory meaning (1972, 1974, 1977, 1978) and his book (1982) extending his notion into the subsection system. Some of his totemic work may be flawed in linguistic detail (as linguists are quick to point out), but the overall idea reflects Herder's anthropological humanism and its romantic legacy—apart from showing Lévi-Strauss's large footprint. Attributing to Aborigines a quality of philosophical thought comparable with that of classical Greece brushes both cultures with the same optimistic quality of genius. It is not to be mistaken as an argument in the vein of diffusionism, but as a signal of convergence through all humankind's cognitive tendency to order and systematise its comprehension of the world. Some cultures—such as Aboriginal cultures—come up with systematisations and an aesthetic sense of symmetry of a higher order and greater sophistication than others.

I built on this contention in a later small work in which I suggested that totemic systems and their inherent systemisation effort produced structures of power (Kolig 1988a). That is, I argued that the systematisation of world comprehension as espoused in the Aboriginal totemic systems represents the same idea of encapsulating and facilitating the empowerment of the cognoscenti as is the case with alchemy, for instance.[15] Perhaps unsurprisingly, this cognition-based interpretation of systematic totemism found no echo in Australian anthropology after decades of looking for explanations in another direction.

Von Brandenstein's linguistic diffusionist interests engaged in a major way with the hypothesis about an early Portuguese presence in Western Australia before Dutch, French and British mariners arrived on the scene. Apart from his earlier argument about the presence of traces of the Portuguese language in the Pilbara coastal area, in his last (unpublished) papers, he presented his views on a supposedly early Portuguese colonisation in the Fitzroy River Basin, my research area. Just to cite one example: the philological origin of the name of the well-known pastoral station Noonkanbah—or, as it is usually pronounced, 'Nukenbah'—is somewhat of a mystery. Aborigines call it a 'whitefella name', while 'whites' regard it as an Aboriginal word. Von Brandenstein traces it back to the Portuguese language and links it with navigation on the Fitzroy River. Unfortunately,

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15   In this regard, I also owe a debt of gratitude to Lévi-Strauss, as did von Brandenstein.

for his argument, to date no supportive, hard, unambiguous archaeological evidence has been unearthed. The latest chapter in this saga is the discovery of an old Portuguese manuscript,[16] the text of which is adorned with a curious image of an animal with a short, slender, slightly pointed snout. Standing upright on its hind legs and clutching a leafy branch in its front paws, its posture suggests a herbivore. It has been argued that the image depicts a wallaby, while others pronounced it an aardvark or a deer. This, of course, is crucial: if the image depicts a wallaby, it would add some weight to the argument that early Portuguese explorers had visited Australia, while an aardvark could have been observed by them in South Africa, where the Portuguese presence at that time is well known and documented. But this is, of course, the subject of another debate.

As a sweeping generalisation on another level, it may be said that Herder's example of historical particularism led to an anthropological perception that acknowledged every culture as the heir of a distinct development. It needs to be carefully studied and should be entitled to intellectual respect—in contrast to another major inclination in anthropology that considers other cultures in terms of arrested developments along a pan-human sociocultural evolution. While the former viewpoint inclines to the notion that otherness possesses an inherent right to exist and to self-determination, the latter lends itself more readily to the subliminal notion of failure, which should be corrected by guided and goal-directed intervention motivated by varying degrees of benevolence. The discussions and conversations I had with Carl von Brandenstein over several years clearly showed his abiding respect—bordering on romantic admiration—for Aboriginal culture, although I do not know whether he had read Herder's works. In his linguistic work pointing to Portuguese influences, he seemed to emphasise the intelligent openness of Aboriginal culture to foreign influence and rejuvenation, even though in matters of technology and economy Aboriginal society remained staunchly conservative. In his book *Taruru*, he celebrated the epic eloquence and poetry of Pilbara Aborigines—in doing so, approaching T. G. H. Strehlow's classical study of Aranda traditions. Inspired by Lévi-Strauss's oeuvre, he also saw Aboriginal intellect as 'scientific', striving through classification and methodical ordering to a better understanding of the world couched in the mysterious paraphrases of totemism.

16   The manuscript held by the Les Enluminures gallery is dated between 1580 and 1620. For interpretations, see, for instance, Pridmore (2014).

Herder's influence worked itself out in unexpected major political orientations, even in very recent years—for instance, the Dutch multicultural policy of *Versuiling* and, much less commendably and paradoxically, in apartheid. Both pivot around the notion that exotic cultures need to be given the space to allow them to lead their distinctly separate existence. *Versuiling*, a species of multiculturalism, evinces the kind of respect for the cultural 'other' that concedes to it the right to unfold in a pluralist situation so as to maintain its essential integrity. Even in apartheid one can detect an ingredient of this kind, which shuns enforced assimilation, even though its reality had little of the intended benevolence of modern pluralism. I recall that erstwhile South African president Hendrik Verwoerd, one of the major architects of the policy of apartheid, once phrased it thus: whites and blacks should be living separately like the elephant and the lion. By this graphic reference, he rationalised his policy of 'separateness' as an ostensibly 'benevolent' approach to cultural incompatibility.[17] Modern pluralism seems to take important cues from Herder's legacy but arguably is more deeply grounded in up-to-date notions of human rights than any particular classical philosophy.

Diachronicity and its forward-looking implications

If there is a dominant topos in the 'German tradition of anthropology' then perhaps it is the conviction that a true understanding of cultural otherness comes through the study of world views, religion, beliefs, myths and oral traditions, values and ritual—things broadly called 'culture'. In contrast—at least in my subjective view—the mainstay of British-influenced Australian anthropology at the time appeared to be observable kinship and social structure and their workings as the key to understanding a society or an ethnicity. It seemed to me that in Australian anthropology at the time the legacy of Radcliffe-Browne and Malinowski reigned supreme, loyally carried forth by A. P. Elkin and others. What I call the 'culturist' approach seemed to be boutique anthropology, if not considered altogether eccentric. However, it had a strong supporter in Ron Berndt, who, by the way, is regarded by some as also standing in the 'German tradition'.[18] This is actually puzzling as he trained under

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17   Gingrich (2005: 143) also refers to the role of anthropology in the formation of apartheid.
18   T. G. H. Strehlow sporadically also showed inclinations to move along similar lines.

A. P. Elkin in Sydney and, although of German ancestry, to my knowledge, he did not read German. If he read Herder and other salient German scholars in translation I do not know. That there was something in his Germanic background that inclined him to such a perspective may pander to a mystical viewpoint, but is certainly an 'unscientific' explanation.

There was also another distinction that seemed to separate Petri's and my approach (and also Lommel's) from the Australian mainstream. The synchronous, historically flattened perspective exercised a heavy dominance over diachronically intentioned studies. Diachronicity was used only for reconstructive purposes. It seemed to me that, in line with a cryptically underlying evolutionary predilection, the emphasis in Aboriginal anthropology lay heavily on reconstructing the pre-contact situation and bringing it into a framework of Eurocentric comprehension. Rather than analysing and comprehending current, contemporary processes and phenomena in the Aboriginal condition and projecting these forward into the future, the emphasis lay on reconstructing a supposedly unchanging past through the social detritus observable in the present. W. E. H. Stanner in *After the Dreaming* (1969: 14) also mentions that at that time there was little interest in 'actual life conditions' as 'living actuality', as he calls it, focused firmly on a reconstructive type of anthropology. Observations relating to sociocultural change and the fascinating phenomena it produced were subject to much neglect. This perspective was supported, it seemed to me, by a culture of pessimistic belief, unspoken but assuming the imminent demise of, given its fragility, traditional Aboriginal culture. The puzzle of how an Aboriginal form of sociocultural existence of such characteristic design unparalleled anywhere in the world could have emerged—and be preserved for such a long time before it was fatefully impacted and destroyed by colonialism—seemed to exercise paramount fascination for a majority of Australian anthropologists. The contemporary processes of change, their direction and their ideological and sociopolitical consequences seemed, by comparison, of minor interest, being regarded as a short flutter before extinction. In other words, it seemed to be largely a backward-looking anthropology burdened with a heavy reconstructive bias, rather than showing a contemporary and future-directed orientation based on a belief in the persisting robustness of Aboriginal cultural traditions; or, phrased differently, the imperative was overlooked to study how Aboriginal culture suspended between a lost past and a gleaming future was mustering its creativity to propel itself forward.

That this underlying pessimistic assumption was based on a misperception seemed plain to me. In my mind, it was obvious that Aboriginal culture and religion were not simply vanishing, incrementally disintegrating and crumbling under the onslaught of colonisation—which necessitated, of course, hurriedly collecting the few surviving sociocultural remains to facilitate an understanding of the past—but rather that the Aboriginal condition was actively and purposely changing and adapting. Not only that, in some cultural areas it put up an active, creative resistance rather than meekly succumbing (see Kolig 1981a, 1989a). Aboriginal communities constructively engaging with new realities seemed to me to be readily observable. The mythico-ritual field of Aboriginal culture, for instance, for decades already had shown attempts to bring modernity into its intellectual grasp, and perhaps harness it for tangible benefits, apart from making good use of modern organisational and technical opportunities to refresh and revitalise religious activity. This made it imperative to study and analyse what I could observe and witness with a view of how this fitted into the present, how it was influenced by the present and what it meant for the future. As an anthropologist with the West Australian Aboriginal Affairs Planning Authority (AAPA), I had the opportunity to point to a general cultural revivalism—a renaissance that at the time I called nativism (Kolig 1973–74a, 1973–74b, 1973–74c), a misnomer I owe to Ralph Linton (see also Akerman 1979).[19] I became aware of a strengthening of cultural Aboriginality with important political consequences—for example, the incipient, at the time emergent, land rights movement in the Kimberley, the formation of a pan-Aboriginal identity, the beginnings of politically effective organisation and active resistance to industrial interventionism (described by me, for instance, in *The Noonkanbah Story*, Kolig 1989b).

I believe at that time Petri was thinking in similar terms. He had changed his perspective since the Frobenius Expedition, when he had envisioned— just as Lommel had—the demise of Aboriginal culture in the Kimberley and Aboriginal culture as a whole. I believe that in his postwar studies he came to realise the dynamics of cultural change essentially were not to be interpreted as destructive, the last bizarre gasps of a dying culture, but that they signalled a victory over stagnation and heralded a cultural renaissance that represented continuity as well as a new beginning.

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19   I pointed it out, for instance, to a royal commission into Aboriginal affairs in 1973 without stirring much interest.

He came to realise that syncretism and the *Heilserwartungsbewegungen* ('salvationist movements') he liked to study (Petri 1968) were not a dead end but a nascent future.

Like Petri, I was fascinated by the roots of this development in traditional myth and ritual and the adaptation of traditional thinking contained in them to contemporary opportunities and new formative conditions (e.g. Kolig 1973–74a, 1973–74b, 1974, 1990). Intertribalism (or the erosion of 'tribal' boundaries), the formation of heterogeneous local communities, the redefinition of traditional land rights (Kolig 1973), land entitlement and land inheritance, the gradual emergence of a more inclusive Aboriginal identity (Kolig 1972, 1977) at the expense of a language-based or 'tribally' based identity and the emergence of a more modern world awareness were all aspects of this development. I was also fascinated by what I believed were millenarian phenomena of the kind observed in other societies, which were rapidly changing under the impact of colonialism and Western cultural influence. While Petri in his writings seemed unconcerned about his intellectual borrowings, I used Weber's notion of increasing intellectual and social rationalisation to explain the processual, incremental shift from magical-mythical thinking to rationally based politics and organisation—a process I attempted to describe in *Dreamtime Politics* (Kolig 1989a).

Even seemingly traditional mythico-ritual cycles—such as *wandji*,[20] *woagaia* (see Kolig 1981b) and *ngamandji-mandji*—were used to construct wider intertribal identities commensurate with modern realities and superseding traditional forms of co-residence, reflecting the ever-widening intellectual and geographic horizon on which political aspirations could flourish. Identity changed from clannish and tribal to communal, societal and pluralistic. Exclusivist participation in myth and ritual changed to more open forms and from magical duty to identity generator. Within a very few years, a noticeable shift occurred from a plan to send sacred objects to 'Canberra' to stimulate the flow of goods (Kolig 1973) to engaging in political, rationally articulated dialogue. To me, this showed a rapid transition from a world view inspired by magical expectations and the need to appeal to and appease magical causalities to the domain of modern politics. Myth and ritual diminished as magical-

20 Described by Petri in great detail (1966, 1967).

religious instruments and were now meant to facilitate the construction of a collective identity commensurate with a modern reality, from which a modern political awareness could grow.

Of course, emphasising—or, as some would have it, overemphasising—change, be it creative, adjustive or disintegrative, as a logical consequence begs questions of cultural continuity, authenticity and the persistence of cultural identity. In fact, the relevance of this question of the sustainability of traditional cultural identity throughout—in many respects, profound—post-contact change was destined to become an important issue in native title claims, given the wording of the *Native Title Act 1993*. Native title legislation demanded the rigorous examination of whether claims were based on traditional legal and cultural criteria to determine validity. This meant—somewhat unrealistically—that this validity was either deemed extinct through profound change or presumed almost immutably preserved since pre-contact times. (This notion seems to have been based on the erroneous assumption that a culture left undisturbed would remain totally inert and unchanging.) But, admittedly, how else could one distinguish 'genuine' from 'fraudulent' claims in a Western court of law? This legal baseline leaves one question glaringly unanswered: how much of the cultural substance can change before it becomes innovation and invention and thus loses continuity with the past?[21] The requirements of the Act place this in the very centre of deliberation—yet without clarification.

The relevance of this question about the sustainability of traditional cultural identity throughout post-contact change had become apparent to me some time before the tidal wave of claims under the Act arose. A competently compiled summary of traditional Aboriginal culture in the Kimberley, written by a mining executive for 'industry–internal' use, forcefully brought that home to me.[22] It clearly advocated a mining industry agenda but was written in a spirit of firm belief in the truth of its assertions. It questioned the validity of traditional knowledge claimed by Aboriginal custodians of sacred sites in their strategy of achieving protection of such places and blocking mining. Referring mainly to Petri's and my publications, the report averred that the religious and cognitive background of Aborigines had shifted to the extent that the knowledge

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21   I did not succeed in solving this conundrum in the Rubibi land claim. See Burke (2011) and Kolig (2003). I was also struggling with it in Kolig (2005).
22   I am withholding identification of this paper since it was not intended for public use.

relating to the sanctity of the land held out by them as traditional went far beyond embellishment and could at best be innovations accrued in post-contact time and, at worst, blatant, opportunistic misrepresentations for the sake of political and economic leverage.[23] After all, their relationship with the land had changed, traditional beliefs in the sacrosanctity of places had given way to more rationalist views, the original landowning groups had been replaced and supplanted with new 'immigrants' and—as Petri and I had written about the belief in Noah's Ark and the Christian eschatology associated with it—Aborigines had accepted Christianity. Cargo cults (*Wanderkulte*) and religious imports had replaced traditional beliefs and recognising this should now obviously engender acute scepticism in the mining industry vis-à-vis Aboriginal claims. That clearly was a consequence of Petri's and my writings that was totally unintended by me—and probably also by Petri, although I cannot be sure. As a guest at La Grange, he was somewhat constrained by the views of the Pallottine order's hierarchy, which was not entirely favourable to traditional Aboriginal relationships with the land.

There is another example of what seems to be the instrumentalisation of the German tradition in the fight over sacred sites and the beginning of the battle for land rights. At the height of the Noonkanbah controversy, a perceptive reviewer of the situation wondered why it was that three anthropologists with obviously Germanic names could admit what others steadfastly denied—namely, that the culture of Noonkanbah Aborigines had changed and thus their insistence that it had not was unmasked as just a ruse.[24] The three were Petri, myself and, characteristically so 'distinguished', Kim Akerman—probably because of his name as much as his publications.

The puzzle of nativism, millenarianism and Nazism

Early in my research among Aborigines and reading beyond the confines of Aboriginal anthropology, I had become fascinated by the topos of millenarianism (chiliasm, salvationism, revitalisation) as an expression of political thought and as the spectacular intellectual catharsis

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23   This is not a verbatim quote, but is my inference of the clearly implied meaning.
24   I am relying on my memory here. Unfortunately, attempts to trace this newspaper column back about 30 years were unsuccessful.

of cataclysmic sociocultural change. Also, Weber's approach of paying careful attention to the role of charisma in fomenting ideological and social change intrigued me. (This interest led me a few years later to the New Hebrides—now Vanuatu—to study the Nagriamel movement on the island of Espiritu Santo and the Jon Frum movement on Tana.) As a student, I had avoided reading Wilhelm Mühlmann's famous study *Chiliasmus und Nativismus* (1964) because of his reputation as an opportunist ex-Nazi. I had few expectations that, as such, he would be able to treat this ideological-political subject matter with a modern, objective analytical viewpoint. But now I have to admit that I am consonant with his universalist argument about the 'normalcy' of millenarian movements in situations of sociocultural crisis and stress[25]—despite the suspicion that Mühlmann used this perspective to exonerate Nazism.[26] (Of course, causally contextualising the chiliastic phenomenon introduced a sizeable note of synchronicity into an approach that was otherwise heavily based on a diachronic foundation.)[27]

It is certainly true that there was a large body of literature at the time: Linton's and Mooney's nativism concept, Wallace's revitalisation and the many cargo cult studies from the Pacific area that were in vogue at that time—all dealing with the wide range of millenarian phenomena observed in the Third World, groaning under the impact of the colonising Euro-American culture.[28] Aboriginal Australia stuck out globally by the apparent absence of such ideological phenomena. Kenelm Burridge, in *Encountering Aborigines* (1973), tried to gloss over it with his assertion that Aborigines had skipped the magical-mystical phase of development and moved straight on to modern politics. I was not convinced and it seems neither was Petri.

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25 My interest in the events around al Dawla al Islamiya fil Iraq wa'al Sham (Islamic State, IS, or Da'ish) may be related to this.

26 See also Gingrich (2005: 143–5). It is a sad reminder that it is all too easy to instrumentalise anthropology for partisan viewpoints (epitomised in recent years in the emergence of advocate anthropology in the age of postmodernism and the rising belief in the plurality of truth).

27 Max Weber's concept of *Realinteressen* also plays a role in this explanatory perspective, which combines idealism with materialism and diachronicity with synchronicity.

28 Vittorio Lanternari's *Religion of the Oppressed* (1963), Guglielmo Guariglia's *Prophetismus und Heilserwartungsbewegungen als völkerkundliches und religionsgeschichtliches Problem*, Peter Worsley's *The Trumpet Shall Sound*, Peter Lawrence's *Road Belong Cargo*, Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium* and Bryan Wilson's *Magic and the Millennium* were the 'classics' among the publications dealing with the efflorescence of cargo and millennial movements after World War II. Relative deprivation, cognitive dissonance, stress theory and so on supplied the theoretical instruments to try to understand the multi-causality of these phenomena. These theories have largely fallen into disuse in anthropology.

I was intrigued by the question of why Australian anthropology had apparently failed to notice anything ideologically millenarian in character, be it violently utopian, militaristic, apocalyptic, thaumaturgic or of a more dreamy, salvation-inspired nature, perhaps even derivatives of Christianity. Aboriginal Australia seemed remarkably devoid of charismatic, messianic or prophetic features—until I scanned Siebert's notes on the Diyari and read between the lines in Spencer and Gillen's voluminous tomes and, above all, Lommel's and Petri's works on the Kurangara. There was, of course, Ron Berndt's (1962) important study of the 'Adjustment' movement in Arnhem Land and Fredrik Rose's (1965) discovery of a 'cargo cult climate' in northern Australia. Petri's work led me to extend this into an investigation of Christian belief elements that had found their way into Aboriginal myth-ritual—for example, in the shape of the belief in Noah's Ark as an end-time vessel insinuating itself into Aboriginal political thought (Kolig 1980, see also 1988b), a mythico-political phenomenon Petri also noticed in the Eighty Mile Beach area. The myth of Captain Cook (Kolig 1979a) clearly was an attempt to fuse the European-dominated political reality with a more traditional comprehension of the world and its causalities. The earlier description of the Kurangara cult kindled my interest in the cult of Djuluru (Kolig 1979b), which I found drew in a very striking manner on modern images of war and, in so doing, utilised such names as 'Hitler' and 'German', while drawing on traditional concepts of empowerment through ritual and symbolism to bring these images into a useful ambience.

Petri's and Lommel's work—especially on the Kurangara mythico-ritual tradition (Lommel 1950, 1952; Petri 1950a, 1950b, 1950c, 1954) and its dynamic, which spread across the Kimberley—had laid a foundation on which Aboriginal contemporary ideology could be understood. Carl Strehlow's (1907–1910), E. A. Worms's (1930s–1960s) and Otto Siebert's (1910) works also made a contribution in this regard. Kurangara, Worgaia (Woagaia; Kolig 1981b), Molongo, Djuluru (Kolig 1979b), the Jinimin cult and so on were mythico-ritual traditions of pre-contact roots but with modern overtones that represented the shift from a pre-contact world awareness to contemporary cognitive comprehension, via redemptive aspirations, which eventually flowed into rational politics. Although Petri and Petri-Odermann (1988: 394) denied that the Kurangara he and Lommel had observed in the 1930s had any nativist or millenarian-prophetic undertones, the ceremony is open to being interpreted as an autochthonous tradition with soteriological expectations that had

in various ways been adjusted to contemporary conditions. Rather than purely nostalgic, it was, in my mind, meant to be creative and effective in modern circumstances. Petri continued studying related traditions and their influence on cultural renewal, in the process changing his culturally pessimistic outlook—expressed in his original monograph *Sterbende Welt in Nordwest Australien* (1954; translated as *The Dying World in Northwest Australia*, 2011)—to a more positive, if implied, stance. Lommel, who did not renew his acquaintance with the Kimberley, extrapolated the opposite viewpoint from his original observations, clearly still under the impression of his earlier negative judgement. He saw by projection what he had witnessed as the cul-de-sac taken by an ultimately doomed culture. This led to his book with the telling title *Fortschritt ins Nichts* (Lommel 1969; translated literally meaning 'progress into nothingness'). From a brief exchange of communications, I infer that in later years he did not change his mind.

It should be mentioned that other anthropologists shared the view that incremental cultural change was worth studying, but few saw it in terms of its creative potential and perhaps not solely as a 'last gasp' phenomenon. Howitt, Siebert, Calley, Rose, Berndt and others included in their ethnographies the observation of new cultural phenomena.[29] Spencer and Gillen's hefty publications were an enormously important source of information, which, cryptically, also hinted at new developments. Some of their observations from earlier years afforded me a basis of understanding of several ritual and mythical traditions I was privileged to experience in and around Fitzroy Crossing. Petri must have felt the same way and indeed he implies that in his 'Nachwort' (1968). The cultural elements recorded by Spencer and Gillen derived from Central Australia, but, in renovated and revamped form, they crossed the southern Kimberley on their way to the western coast, representing new ideas and grasping at new opportunities. In this regard, the works of Petri, Lommel and the missionary Siebert, writing about his experience among the Diyari, turned out to be of great value to me.[30] They had all observed cultural change and attendant revivalist and even chiliastic, religious-political phenomena, by carefully screening religious and ritual features and analysing the underlying subtle shift in values and world perception.

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29   For references, see Kolig (1987, 1988c).
30   There are several more ethnographers who had something to contribute—for example: Roth on the Molongo cult (see Kolig 1988c).

There was an interesting interpretation of this focus on cultural change and its ideological implications. In a review of my book *The Silent Revolution*, Kenneth Maddock (1984) mentioned what he saw as a similarity in approach and focus in the work of Petri, Lommel and myself.[31] For Maddock, there was a paradigmatic similitude between Petri's, Lommel's and my work, which was eloquent testimony to the national history of our respective countries. By our focus on cultural, religious and ideological change, and by our intense interest in the profound shift in *Weltanschauung* in Aboriginal culture, we showed that we were attuned to ideological volatility and attributed key significance to it. This sensitivity, he believed, had been engendered by the background of the political past in Germany and Austria where, from democratic roots, but under conditions of enormous social crisis and stress, a fascist fermentation with salvationist, millenarian overtones had rapidly grown and taken hold of society. The rapid transition from a relatively placid ideological situation devoid of flamboyant political utterances to the murderous antics of Nazism and its world-spanning dystopian aspirations had sensitised us to the significance of ideological transformation. It had created in us a heightened sensibility to, and curiosity in, the subtle nuances and subliminal currents of rapidly shifting perceptions, aspirations and myth-dreams—and the role charismatic leadership can play. Our relative proximity to a certain kind of collective political conscience, Maddock seemed to argue, had fostered our fascination with the intellectual and symbolic culture that is capable of leading to spectacular ideological eruptions, as our history had shown. Despite our generational and national differences, we lived in that no-man's land between guilt and victimhood, which had generated an awareness others did not have at that time.

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31   This was later confirmed and elaborated on in a personal communication.

32   The publications listed here under Kolig do not represent a complete list of my publications on Australian Aborigines. The same goes for Petri. A more extensive, although not complete, list of Petri's publications can be found in Craig (1968).

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