

# EXCHANGE IN SOUTH EASTERN AUSTRALIA: AN ETHNOHISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Systems of simple barter between tribes have been reported from many parts of Australia, but they have been inadequately studied. The primitive economics of the Aborigine have been so imperfectly recorded as a whole that complex institutions of the *merbok* type may well exist over a much wider area. The fact that they are not recorded and not reported proves very little. For the *merbok* does not obtrude itself upon the attention of the alien in the same way as the Melanesian *kula* which it in so many ways resembles.

W.E.H. Stanner.<sup>1</sup>

Most general accounts of Aboriginal society of the late nineteenth century refer to 'barter', 'trade' or 'commercial transactions'. The discussion however, is not elaborate and is couched in terms that seem to us deliberately quaint. They reflect current perceptions of nomadic hunting society and assumptions about the level of economic, commercial organisation considered appropriate to its social status as exemplar of early primitive social organisation. So the accounts of the late nineteenth century contrast transactions appropriate to the savage with those of civilised society.

Unlike the civilised and partially civilised people of the earth, the natives of Australia have not current tokens or representatives of value, exchangeable for other commodities, whereby commerce is facilitated, and settlements of accounts are made easy. They traffic only by exchanging one article for another. They barter with their neighbours; and it would seem that as regards the articles in which they deal, barter is as satisfactory to them as sale would be. They are astute in dealing with the whites, and it may be supposed they exercise reasonable forethought and care when bargaining with their neighbours. The natives of some parts, however appear to be reckless traders.<sup>2</sup>

The literature of this synthesising period (for example the works of Dawson, Howitt, Mathews and Smyth)<sup>3</sup> establishes clearly the existence of exchange between

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation comes from Stanner's paper on the Merbok, 1933-4: 157. I am grateful to Diane Barwick, John Bradley (A.S.S.A. Darwin), Bob Tonkinson, James Urry and Isabel White for discussions on the themes of this paper, and to Joan Goodrum who redrew the maps for publication. Special thanks to Mr Bradley of Costerfield for permission to quote from William A. Bradley's *Daily Journals* 1838-1868.

<sup>2</sup> Smyth 1878, 1: 180. cf. Wheeler 1910: 93.

<sup>3</sup> Dawson 1881; Howitt 1904; Mathews 1897; Smyth 1878. Aspects of their evidence have been surveyed on a continent-wide basis by McCarthy (1939) and later Mulvaney (1976).

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individuals and between groups. It emphasises certain aspects:

1. That the goods 'traded' are those distinct to particular 'countries', that is, they assume tacitly a certain necessity in the transaction related to resources or economic needs, also that it is inter-tribal in character.
2. that exchange takes place at large gatherings, inter-group meetings, especially those at which initiation ceremonies are performed. Classic examples are Howitt's accounts of the Yuin barter in south-eastern New South Wales, and of the Wotjobaluk meetings in north-western Victoria, also Dawson's descriptions of the meetings at Mirraewae and Mt Noorat in the Western District of Victoria.<sup>4</sup>

The vocabulary used to describe the transactions derives from Victorian merchant economics. Does it act as a distorting lens through which we view events and activities that were short-lived? Were the perceptions of the recorders distorted, or did they merely lack the vocabulary to describe the complex transactions and relationships they observed? For example, Beveridge, discussing the people of the Murray, refers to '... their tribal and commercial communications (even the Australian tribes have commercial relations with each other ...'.<sup>5</sup> He continues:

The articles of commerce which the aborigines exchange with each other consist of reeds for spears, red ochre and chalk for painting purposes, stone for tomahawks, fibre for nets and cord, opossum cloaks, wood for weapons etc. Some of these articles are peddled backwards and forwards, even as far as the Tropic of Capricorn, each tribe gladly exchanging its local productions — of which it has abundance — for such commodities as are the produce of other tribal territories, and in which their own locality is altogether lacking. At first, this doubtless seems a very primitive kind of commerce, but really, it was ample for all the simple requirements of these savage tribes, the advent of the civilised race gave to them tastes and wants which, until then, were altogether foreign to their nature.<sup>6</sup>

Isaac Batey, another Victorian pioneer, was told in 1862 by an Aboriginal stockman from the Lachlan that stone for hatchet heads came 'from a hill down in the Melbourne country'. He learnt 'our aborigines went inland carrying stone implements with other things. What they brought was exchanged with remote tribes for what they produced, hence it appears that ... [they] ... have what I shall call the commercial instinct'.<sup>7</sup> So Smyth's summary need not surprise us, nor the assumption by other writers that the items exchanged are those particular to each group's country. The ecology and resources of different regions are seen as major factors determining the nature of exchange and the goods exchanged.<sup>8</sup>

These accounts were put together towards the end of the century. Aboriginal societies had already suffered tragic transformations; few writers obtained their information from those who had experienced pre-contact situations except as children or

<sup>4</sup> Howitt 1904: 718-9; Dawson 1881: 78.

<sup>5</sup> Beveridge 1883: 19.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*: 20.

<sup>7</sup> Batey n.d.: 129-30.

<sup>8</sup> Curr 1883: 273; Dawson 1881: 78; Kreffft 1866: 366-7; Mathews 1897: 150-151; Stanbridge 1861: 296; Taplin in Woods 1879: 40.

very young adults. So we might ask whether the same emphasis appears in the accounts dating to the immediate contact period? The records of the classic ethnographers may reflect adaptation by Aboriginal societies to European settlement with its restrictions on their activities, economic regimes and freedom of movement. They may also reflect preconceptions held by the writers themselves concerning the nature of 'primitive society', as well as on the nature of 'trade' in such societies. Such filters may well leave us a version lacking both complexity and diversity, removing the small scale pervasive processes in favour of the large scale, isolated, dramatic event. Stanner's comment that Aboriginal exchange 'does not obtrude itself upon the attention of the alien'<sup>9</sup> could well be relevant. It comes from his study of *Merbok* exchange in the 1930s; he felt then that Aboriginal exchange was as yet incompletely recorded and understood.<sup>10</sup>

Exchange itself encompasses a diversity of activities and processes. In this paper the term is used in an entirely open sense as 'reciprocal traffic, exchange, movement of materials or goods through peaceful human agency' (Renfrew 1979: 24). Goods also must be defined loosely for they include both the tangible and the intangible — services, knowledge, even rituals as well as material items, consumable or durable.

From the ethnographic research of Stanner, Thomson and Berndt,<sup>11</sup> in northern Australia, observing exchange in action, one may derive a model of Aboriginal exchange in that part of the continent. Its major components are:

1. small scale individual or group transactions in diverse situations rather than large scale commercial transactions of a market kind. Trading centres as such do not feature. However transactions may become aggregated, for they often take place in areas of dense population or in the context of inter-group meetings or large gatherings held at traditionally sanctioned locations, particularly meetings for ceremonies;
2. the direction of exchange may be determined by the social affiliations of the individuals or groups involved. So, over time (if these change relatively little) consistent patterning may emerge to be reflected in the archaeological record. Direction may also be determined by conventions on the directions in which certain goods should flow;
3. goods may travel great distances, but this results from an agglomeration of short distance transactions rather than bulk movement of goods to distant market centres along established trade routes;
4. the determinants of exchange may be as much social and ceremonial as economic or ecological. Exchange may serve purposes beyond compensation for inequalities in the local resource-base or the drive for economic gain. Beyond the 'ostensible lack of real gain' in the transaction may lie important returns in prestige, status, security and influence valuable to individuals and to their society as a whole.

In this survey of the ethnohistorical evidence for exchange in south-eastern Australia I have two aims:

1. to examine the processes involved in the transfer of goods, to establish what items

<sup>9</sup> 1933-4: 157.

<sup>10</sup> 1933-4: 157.

<sup>11</sup> See Stanner 1933-4; Thomson 1949; and Berndt 1951. For the situation a generation later in an area of Arnhem Land see Altman 1982.

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- are exchanged and under what circumstances, and to explore the significance of such transactions in the life of Aboriginal societies in the south-east;
2. to apply the model derived from recent ethnographic work among Aboriginal societies of the north to the historical evidence from the regions of the temperate south-east. Will application of the model provide greater understanding of this fragmentary evidence, enable certain apparent anomalies to be explained?

To test the proposition that exchange conducted by societies in the south-east may have been characterised by the same complexity and diversity as that recorded for those of the north and north-west of the continent, I have paid particular attention to evidence from the immediate contact period, especially that of the late 1830s and 1840s. This evidence includes the records left by early settlers, by George Augustus Robinson and his Assistant Protectors and by William Buckley. Buckley was scorned by the gentry of Port Phillip, but at least spoke from the knowledge and experience of thirty years spent living with the people of that district. These early observers, for example Robinson and Thomas, presented accounts little illuminated by theory, and certainly not dominated by preconceptions about Aboriginal society as a type of primitive social order. They recount the activities and events of their daily contact with Aboriginal groups from direct participation and observation. So their evidence has particular value, the more so as it records transactions without attempting to interpret these in terms of trade, barter or primitive commerce.

### *ITEMS FOR EXCHANGE*

What goods move in inter-group exchange? Our synthesisers stress material goods, especially those products distinct to particular group territories. There is implicit a sense of exchange as an adaptive mechanism, compensating for ecological inequalities between such 'countries'. The goods include raw materials and finished products, e.g. stone, stone hatchets, cord or net bags, bundles of reeds or spears.<sup>12</sup> Surveying the literature a wide range emerges. It includes consumables (food), tangible goods and intangible items such as songs, dances, names or services, as well as the living (women in marriage exchange). Marriage is regarded as an exchange; its arrangement also involves forms of transfer of goods and gift-giving between the families concerned. William Thomas specifically mentions 'purchase of a wife' and lists the bride price.<sup>13</sup> Among material goods European items such as clothing, handkerchiefs, tomahawks, twine, sugar, flour, and rice early join the hatchet heads, spears, opossum rugs, nets and mats that feature in the records of exchange.

Given the range of goods and local products is there evidence for specific production for exchange? Do those preparing for an inter-tribal meeting work to ensure that they have an adequate stock of goods to meet likely obligations? Comments by Howitt and Stanbridge as well as Kreffit's descriptions of the feverish craft activity preceding the meeting at Yelta in July 1857 suggest that this is so.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Curr 1883: 273; Kreffit 1866: 366-7; Mathews 1894: 303 and 1897: 150-1; Stanbridge 1861: 296; Taplin in Woods 1879: 40. See Figure 1 summarising visually ethnohistorical information on exchange of goods.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas in Bride 1898: 67.

<sup>14</sup> Stanbridge 1861: 295; Kreffit 1866: 386.



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However, this drive need not be directed to economic gain from the transaction. Similarly the records of the 'ownership' of certain resources and the strict control of their use need not imply protection of their commercial potential as such. One of the best examples of such control and restriction is provided by the conventions pertaining at the Mt William stone quarry (see Howitt's account of this).<sup>15</sup> Resources important for subsistence were also often regarded as 'owned' by specific local groups, e.g. fishing rights on certain stretches of the Hopkins River near Hexham in the Western District of Victoria. Members of other groups could only catch fish or eels with permission.<sup>16</sup>

In the literature movement of goods is documented but no information given on whether conventions controlled its direction. Such conventions are stressed in the accounts of exchange in north Australia by Stanner and Thomson.<sup>17</sup> In Stanner's account of the *Merbok* a relentless imperative seems at work; nothing is more offensive than a pile of foreign goods with nowhere to go.<sup>18</sup> Do we therefore assume that no such conventions prevailed in the south-east or that this aspect was unobtrusive to the alien observer and so escaped the record? The archaeological distributions of greenstone artefacts from the Mt William quarry certainly show clear directional trends.<sup>19</sup> However these may reflect other factors, embedded in the social controls of exchange such as group relationships, marriage rules, associations for ceremonies and other alliances. Knowledge of the direction from which long-travelled goods came certainly existed. For example, Isaac Batey's Aboriginal informant of c1860 on the Lachlan knew that hatchet heads came 'from the Melbourne country' as did the people of Guichen Bay in South Australia far to the west.<sup>20</sup>

Do conventions also control who exchanges with whom? In other parts of Australia they do; a formalised relationship is involved as in *Merbok*.<sup>21</sup> Our sources for the south-east, both those from the immediate contact period and later, are silent on this. Yet some incidents they record could be so interpreted. The only recorded formal relationship of this kind is that noted for the Narrinyeri. Two boys from different groups are designated partners as tiny infants. Later, as adults, they are 'agents', promoting and organising inter-group exchange.<sup>22</sup>

### THE CONTEXTS OF EXCHANGE

What are the occasions for exchange – or, how are goods acquired? Examination of this question may provide insight into the roles of exchange, whether economic or

<sup>15</sup> Howitt 1904: 340-341 and Notes on the Kulin in the Howitt papers; McBryde 1984.

<sup>16</sup> Dawson 1881: 94-5.

<sup>17</sup> Stanner 1933-4: 162, 168; Thomson 1949: 61-81.

<sup>18</sup> Stanner 1933-4: 170.

<sup>19</sup> McBryde 1978 and 1984. Figure 1 shows the importance in certain regions of exchange linkages and their comparative absence from others.

<sup>20</sup> Batey n.d.: 129-40; *The Star* 22 September, 1855. cf. Wheeler 1910: 95; Tindale 1974, 1: 80-81.

<sup>21</sup> Stanner 1933-4: 157-8, 164-7.

<sup>22</sup> Taplin in Woods 1879: 32-34 and in Howitt Papers Box 9 Folder 2 Paper 2; Smyth 1878, I: 181-2, cf. Wheeler 1910: 95; Tindale 1974, I: 80-81.

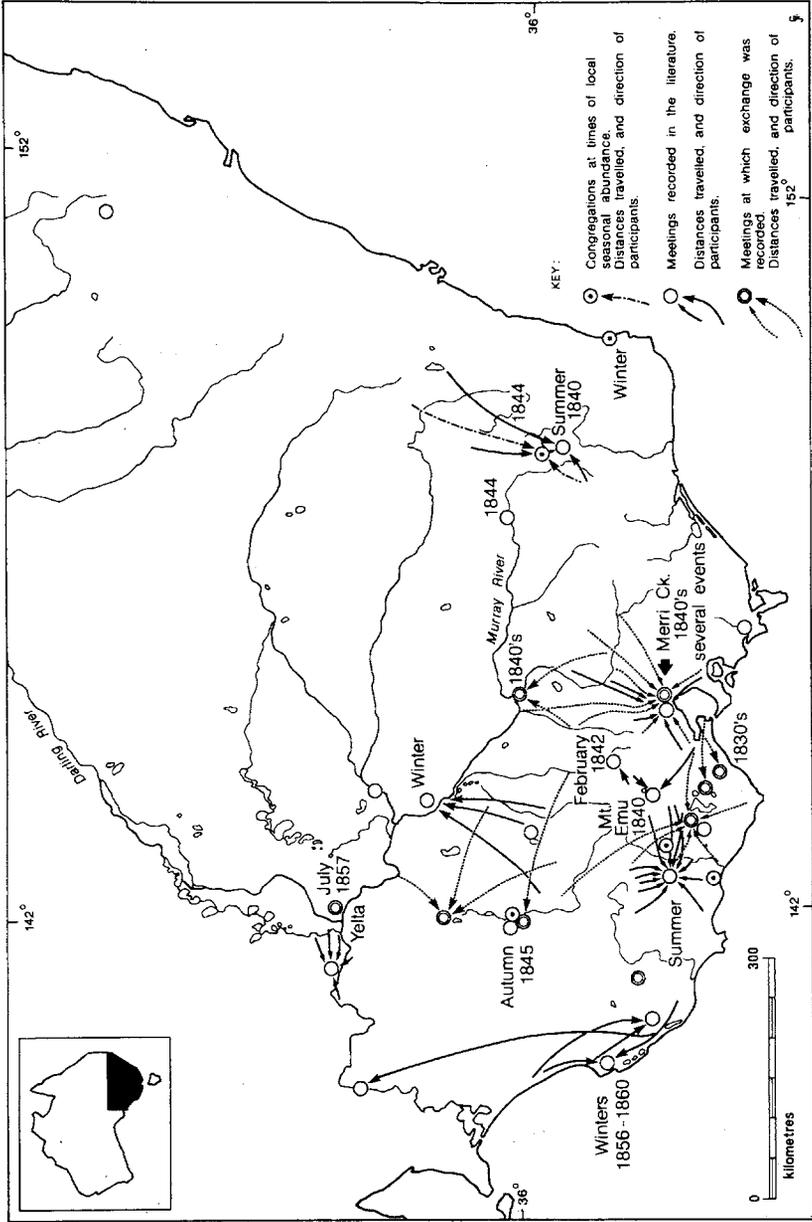


Figure 2 — Summary of the major ethnohistorical information on location of organised meetings or large gatherings and the documented movements of people to attend these.

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social. Goods may be acquired by exchange, by gift, or as the result of special expeditions to the source, where negotiation with its owners may be involved. Large inter-group gatherings seem to have been a prominent feature of the life of societies in the south-east. These meetings were carefully organised, scheduled to coincide with times of abundance in local food resources; participants were invited by messengers who travelled from group to group. The messengers became men of importance.<sup>23</sup>

At certain seasons of the year, usually in the spring or summer when food is most abundant, several tribes meet together in each other's territory for the purpose of festivity or war, or to barter and exchange such food, clothing, implements, weapons, or other commodities as they respectively possess; or to assist in the initiatory ceremonies . . .<sup>24</sup>

Eyre witnessed such meetings between the Moorunde groups and people from Lake Bonney and district. Seasonal abundance of fish and eels at Lake Bolac and the seasonal 'treats' such as the exudate from eucalypts in the Wimmera/Mallee, called La'ap, or the Bogong Moth in the southern uplands also provided foci for such meetings.<sup>25</sup> 'The festival of the La'ap is an occasion of great interest to the natives when they assemble in large numbers to settle their disputes, and adjust other matters' (Robinson referring to the country near Lake Hindmarsh in 1845).<sup>26</sup> Robinson particularly comments on the social and political importance of these gatherings.

These masses are a collection of representative tribes and the eeling and whaling seasons are wisely taken advantage of by them for holding their great social and political meetings. Of all the places I saw, Lake Boloke was the most interesting. This spot, celebrated for its eels and its central situation, appears to have been fixed upon by general consent for the great annual meeting of the tribes of the interior, and it is for the same reason the sections in and near the coast assemble at Tare-er during the whaling season.<sup>27</sup>

Of Lake Keilambete he said the 'tribes met here to settle their disputes and transact other business connected with their political relations'.<sup>28</sup>

Thomas reported eight hundred people from seven clans of the Woiwurrung, Taung-erung, and Bunerung of central Victoria congregating near Melbourne. This was 'to witness the judicial proceedings' against two men accused of murder.<sup>29</sup>

So, though later writers stress the ceremonial occasion for inter-group meetings, those of the immediate contact period emphasise their social, judicial, and political

<sup>23</sup> Beveridge 1883: 19; Curr 1883: 281-2; Dawson 1881: 74-5; Eyre 1845, II: 219-220; Fison and Howitt 1880: 193; Howitt - Papers Box 7, Folder 2, Paper 2 and Notes on the Kulin p. 56; Morgan 1852 (1980); Robinson Journals 11 May 1841 in Presland 1980: 92; Smyth 1878, I: 181; Thomas in Bride 1898: 94. See Figure 2 for the locations of recorded meeting places and the documented movements of people to attend gatherings.

<sup>24</sup> Eyre 1845, II: 218-9.

<sup>25</sup> Robinson 1841 in Kenyon 1927-8: 146; Robinson 1844 in Mackanass 1942: 328.

<sup>26</sup> 1845: 307.

<sup>27</sup> Robinson April 1841 in Kenyon 1927-8: 146.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*: 143 dated to 1841. Cf. Parker 1839-1840 in Morrison n.d.: 14.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas in Bride 1898: 96.

functions. Meetings held primarily for exchange seem to be rare and fall into one or other of the following categories:

1. those concerned with fulfilling marriage arrangements, the occasions on which girls betrothed in infancy joined their husbands. Curr described such a meeting held near Tongala in the 1840s. Other items might be exchanged at such meetings also, as Curr records,<sup>30</sup>
2. those for exchange of food, such as the meetings Buckley attended.<sup>31</sup>

Otherwise exchange was subsidiary to social or ceremonial activities, carried on 'in the shadow of more impressive events' as Stanner says of *Merbok* exchanges.<sup>32</sup>

Some aspects of these meetings have given the locales chosen the status of 'trading centres' in the literature. For example:

1. the extent of exchange recorded, for example at the meetings held at Mt Noorat in the Western District or by the Wotjobaluk near Lake Hindmarsh in the Wimmera/Mallee.<sup>33</sup>
2. the great numbers attending such meetings from widely separated localities, such as the impressive list of groups who came to Mirraewuae near Caramut.<sup>34</sup>

Certainly such centres act as nodes in distribution networks. Yet this need not imply that their primary function was as market, nor that the routes travelled by participants should appropriately be seen as 'trade routes' (see Figure 2).

Exchange of goods often concluded such meetings, to confirm or cement 'friendships', as our sources (both early and late) recount. Whether those involved stood in any special relationship to one another is not recorded. Howitt gives the following account of the conclusion of the Bunan ceremony held by coastal groups in southern New South Wales.<sup>35</sup>

At the end of the Bunan, when the boys have gone off by themselves and before the different lots of peoples return to their own localities, a kind of market was held, in some clear space near the camp where the people laid out the things they had brought with them. A man would say 'I have such and such things', another would bargain for them. A complete set of one *ngulia* (belt of possum fur cord), four *Burrian* (kilt), one *gumbun* and one complete set of *Kul butgun*, that is corroboree things. It was the rule that complete sets of things went together, weapons might be given in exchange. A complete set of weapons was ten fighting boomerangs (straight going ones) warangun, ten grass tree and jagged wood pointed spears (gumma), one of each shield – for stopping spears (bembaia) – for club fighting (Millidu), one Knib dub (*gug-ju-rung*) or (Bundi) and one spear thrower (wommera). The women also engaged in this trade exchanging possum rugs, bags – yamsticks (tuali).

<sup>30</sup> Curr 1883: 128-134.

<sup>31</sup> Morgan 1852 (1980): 56-59; Howitt – Notes on the Kulin, Howitt Papers pp. 59-60.

<sup>32</sup> Stanner 1933-4: 160. Cf. Berndt and Berndt 1964: 41, 114-17.

<sup>33</sup> For Mt Noorat see Dawson 1881: 72-78, for Lake Hindmarsh, Howitt 1904: 717-718, and Papers, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.

<sup>34</sup> Dawson 1881: 3.

<sup>35</sup> Howitt Papers Box 8, Folder 5, Paper 12. Cf. Howitt 1887: 47.

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Similar exchanges also marked the end of meetings of the Wotjobaluk, the Jupagalk and members of the Kulin group of tribes, Howitt's 'Kulin nation'. On such occasions, as well as exchanging goods of various kinds, participants made gifts to visitors. In the words of Barak, Howitt's informant, this was designed 'to make friends'.<sup>36</sup> Does this practice differ from Robinson's experiences in the Western District in 1841? On leaving a camp shared with local Aborigines for some time the two groups exchanged gifts. 'This is their custom', commented Robinson, noting that 'much feeling was exhibited on this occasion'.<sup>37</sup>

Howitt, the synthesiser, stresses the 'auction'/'market' aspects of such an event rather than its social/bonding qualities which were emphasised by Robinson, the direct observer. We have few other observers or recorders. Mathews attended initiation ceremonies in various parts of New South Wales. He gives no detailed description of exchange at their conclusion, but does make general reference to this context for exchange.<sup>38</sup> The ceremonies he observed were held in the 1890s; so this may not fully reflect the associated activities of earlier times, nor earlier social and economic milieux. One aspect he does record which eludes other late observers is the formal exchange of gifts between the initiates' families and sponsors. These, he describes for both Wiradjuri and South Australian groups,<sup>39</sup> for whom tooth evulsion was an important part of initiation ritual.

After a time, which may be only a few months duration, or it may be a much longer period, the headman who took the tooth away sends messengers to the tribe to which the owner of the tooth belongs, stating that it will be brought back at such a time. On receipt of this message, preparations are made to meet the strange people at the time appointed. On these occasions it is the custom for each tribe to make presents to each other, which takes the form of exchange or barter. Supposing, for example, that there is plenty of suitable stone for making hatchets and whetstones in the country belonging to one tribe, they will exchange these commodities with the men of another tribe, in whose country there may be suitable wood for making spears and other weapons. People who have coloured clays will exchange them for skins of animals not plentiful in their own country. Others will have string made of the bark of certain trees, richly coloured feathers of rare birds, reeds for making light spears, and so on, which they exchange for other articles. It may be that some of the men and women exchange exactly similar articles with the people of another tribe merely as mementos of their meeting.

At these gatherings, the hosts arrange themselves in a line, with their presents and other commodities lying on the ground near them. The visitors advance and form into a row opposite the hosts, and display their presents in a similar manner. The headman who has brought back the tooth returns it to the boy's father, who subse-

<sup>36</sup> Howitt 1904: 717-718.

<sup>37</sup> Robinson Journal for 12 May 1841 - Presland 1980: 93. Cf. entry for 2 April 1841 - Presland 1980: 18.

<sup>38</sup> Mathews 1894: 303.

<sup>39</sup> Mathews 1897: 150-151 and Notes in Mss Folder C. Cf. Notebook No. I pp.67-71, referring to the Wongumuk ceremony of Darling River groups.

quently hands it over to his son. After some time it is buried in the ground.<sup>40</sup>

One of the earliest records of an inter-group meeting at which goods were exchanged comes from the journal of William Bradley, who settled near Tinpot Creek in the Costerfield district, Victoria, and established good relations with the local Aboriginal groups. On 12th November 1838 he recorded:

Today two groups of blacks met at the encampment by the deep hole in the creek, they at first appeared to act as strangers but it soon became apparent that there were indeed individuals in either group who were familiar with each other. Both groups it would appear were happy to see each other. The stranger group as I will call them had travelled from the south and they had carried with them a number [of] . . . stone hatchets . . . . Some of these hatchets were polished while others were still quite rough and I imagine still require further work. The group of blacks who are camped on the creek were eager to obtain these hatchets and in return for one polished axe they gave two of their opossum skin covers. For a hatchet still in a roughened state they gave in return a number of their light bamboo spears. This bartering as I shall call it went on for some time, but only amongst the menfolk, the women and children stayed behind the men with only some of the older women having anything to say.

(William A. Bradley – Daily Journals 1838-1868)

In the entry for 14th November Bradley noted that the encampment had broken up – only the old men with the women and children remained. The others, he was told, had gone into the hills to the north ‘for the young men.’ This comment may indicate that the meeting was associated with certain stages of initiation rituals. Bradley’s description is of particular interest not only for its early date. It is a rare direct account of exchange within the context of a small inter-group meeting and cites the exchange value of hatchet heads (both complete ground examples and pre-forms) at some distance from the likely source quarry (cf. p. 148 for Barak’s memories of exchange value for Mt William artifacts at source). That the hatchets came from ‘near Lancefield’ (i.e. the Mt William quarry) Bradley learnt later (entry for 5th May 1862). ‘Bamboo spears’ are presumably the reed spears from the wetlands of the Murray and its tributaries (See Figure 1).

Obviously inter-group meetings, which may or may not involve ceremonial, are important occasions for exchanges of many kinds. They provide the context for exchange, even if exchange is not a primary purpose for the gatherings. There are parallels here with the exchange Stanner observed in the Daly River region, an important activity, yet performed ‘in the shadow of more impressive events’. Such meetings provided foci for the dissemination of ideas, of new materials and new items of material culture. So information on which groups meet for these occasions, and the locations to and from which they travel are significant for interpreting the diffusion of cultural traits, as well as the social and political relationships between societies. They also suggest potential routes by which goods move across a landscape.

<sup>40</sup> Mathews 1897: 150-151.

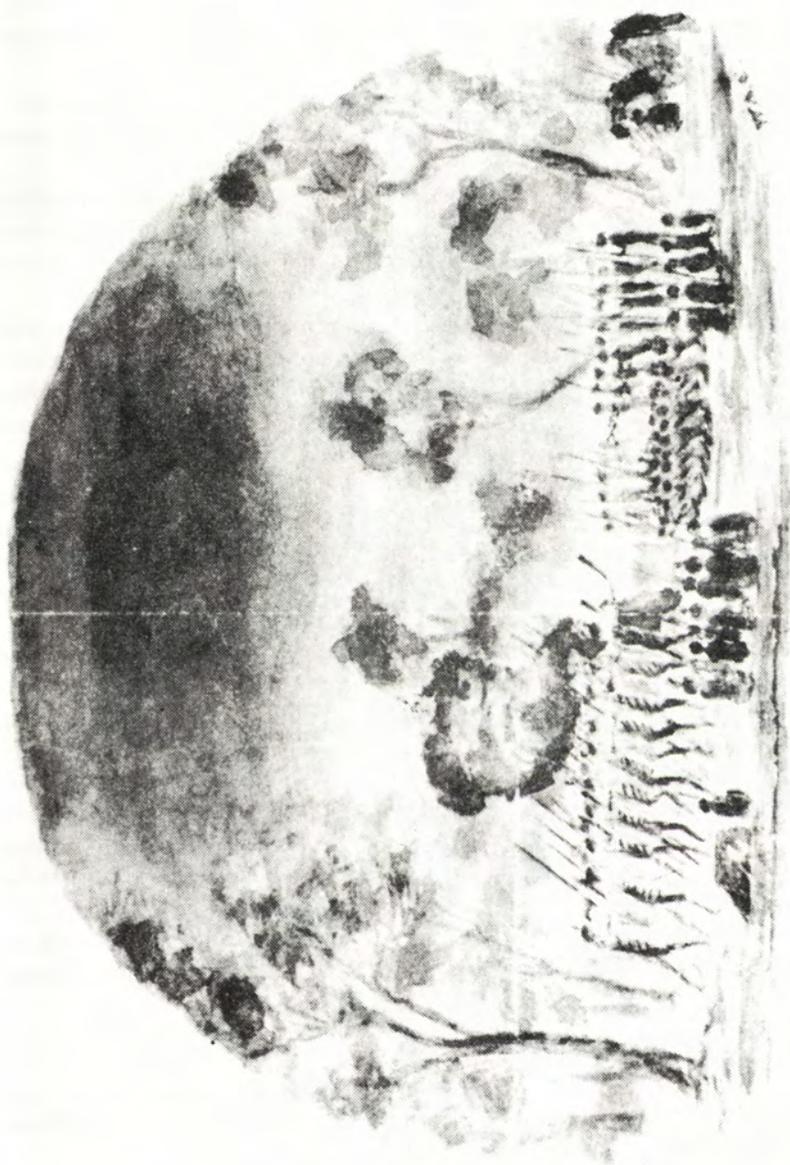


Plate 1 - W.A. Cawthorne's depiction of corroboree, the dancing and singing performances that were features of inter-group meetings. Reproduced by courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

*GIFTS*

Goods also change hands as direct gifts. In the literature of the late nineteenth century prestation receives scant attention compared with that given the direct and immediate reciprocity of barter, though recorded observations of the 1840s give it prominence. Reciprocity however may not be entirely absent. Such gifts could represent delayed reciprocity or exchange of goods for services, even knowledge. The recorder may not have observed, understood or perceived the transaction in its entirety. Gifts seem to have been of importance; they involve prestige or valued goods such as opossum rugs, hatchets, hatchet stone, or the rare 'Bundit' spears from the Otway forests. This type of spear was considered:

so valuable that it is never used in fighting or hunting, but only as an ornament. It is given as a present in token of friendship or exchanged for fancy maleen spears from the interior.<sup>41</sup>

Gift-giving marked or formalised particular occasions such as the arrival or departure of a visiting group. It is described for the contact period by Batman, Buckley, Robinson, Sievwright and Thomas.<sup>42</sup> In illustration one could cite a few examples from Robinson's journals and reports for his 1841 travels in the Western District:<sup>43</sup>

1. I explained the object of my visit and deputed them to deliver my message to their tribe and my wish to meet the Boolucburrers [people of Lake Buloke] at Kilambete. I gave them some trifles I had in my valise and eels and native weapons were given to me. The strangers and my natives exchanged raiment, a custom prevalent among the Aboriginal tribes.
2. Preparing to depart. The shirts I had given to my natives they gave to those strangers and received spears or other trifles in return, as I remember. This is their custom and it matters little to me as all the natives were under my protection and guardianship. Some gave their blankets and a few gave away trousers and other articles they had obtained. Much feeling was exhibited on this occasion.
3. I desired . . . alias Tom Brown to give the big man his blanket and in return the one gave me a large jagged spear. The woman gave us three eels and Brown exchanged his shirt for a kangaroo skin mantle. We then parted with the best possible feeling and with an understanding that we were to meet the following day.

The practice was not confined to the groups of the Western District met by Robinson. Batman had distributed presents before the formal meeting he held in June 1835 with leaders of the Kulin clans living near the site of modern Melbourne to discuss purchasing a tract of their country. On the day following the formal discussions he recorded in his journal:

Just before leaving, the two principal chiefs came and brought their two cloaks, or royal mantles, and laid them at my feet, wishing me to accept the same. On my

<sup>41</sup> Dawson 1881: 88.

<sup>42</sup> Bonwick ed. Sayers 1973: 99; Morgan 1852 (1980): 92; Robinson in Kenyon 1927-8: 143; Sievwright 1840-5-6; Thomas in Bride 1989: 97-98. For later instances see Curr 1883:268 and Stanbridge 1861: 296.

<sup>43</sup> April 1841 in Kenyon 1927-8: 141; 12 May 1841 — Presland 1980: 93: 2 April 1841 — Presland 1980: 18.

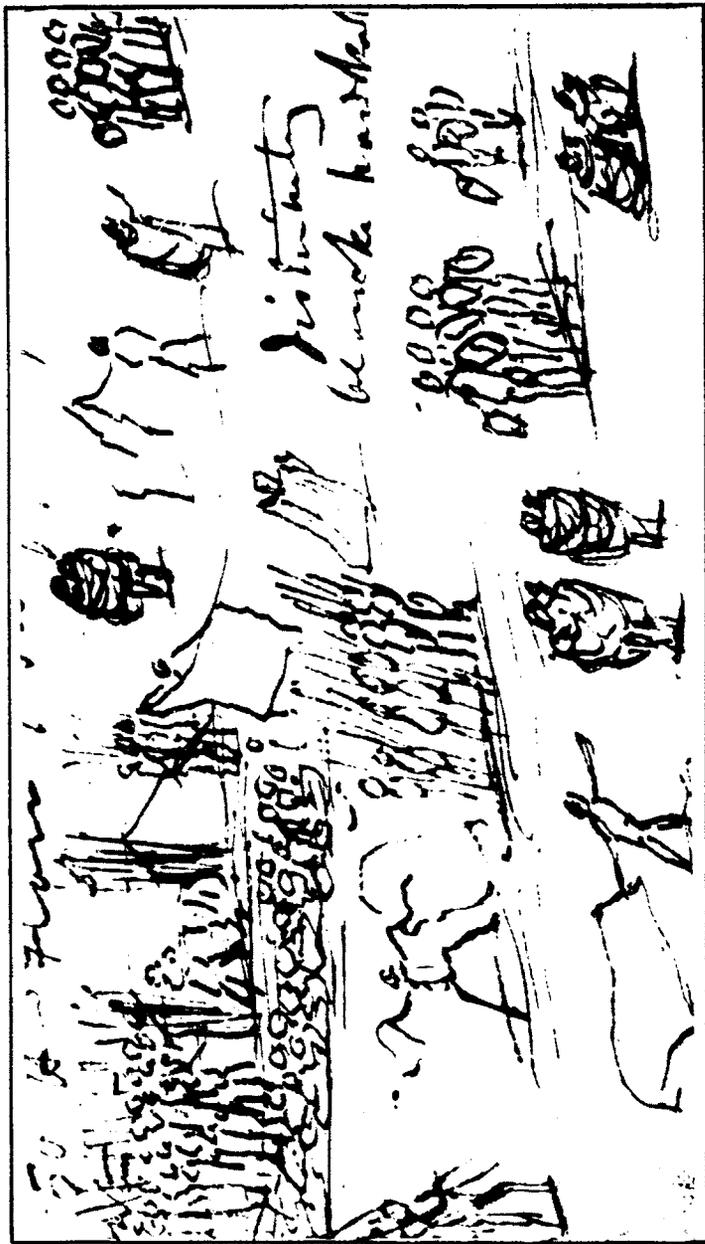


Plate 2 — George Augustus Robinson describes a number of meetings both between Aboriginal groups and between Aborigines and his party. Here he illustrates his journal entry on the distribution of blankets and handkerchiefs, as gifts to leaders ('chiefs and delegates') of Western District groups in August 1841. Reproduced by courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

consenting to take them, they placed them round my neck and over my shoulders and seemed quite pleased to see me walk about with them on.

This exchange of gifts is also recounted in Batman's report of 25th June completed on return to Hobart. He says:

the chiefs, to manifest their friendly feeling towards me, insisted upon my receiving from them two native cloaks and several baskets made by the women, and also some of the implements of defence . . .<sup>44</sup>

Such exchanges are very formal. Thomas describes what he calls 'a ceremony of mutual friendship' between groups from the Devil's River (a clan of the Taungerong) and from the Yarra (a clan of the Woiwurrung) at his camp just outside Melbourne in 1847:

. . . some Devil's River blacks arrive . . . Sunday March 21, 1847. Early proceed to enct [encampment] which I find much excited. One Bunhile (Davy's son) had lost his lubra who had eloped. Am much affected by a ceremony of mutual friendship. The Devil's River gave the Yarras 7 koogra [possum skin cloaks] and a number of spears. The Yarra blacks give 5 splendid koogra and bundles of pocket handkerchiefs and European articles (all new) given by Old Borinuptune, brother to the late chief [Billibellary].<sup>45</sup>

Gifts may also be given to 'create friendship' in the terms of the late nineteenth century writers.<sup>46</sup> Yet, complex personal relationships may be involved, including the acquisition of clients or of influence. Men of power receive many gifts, but in turn often redistribute them.<sup>47</sup> Those who act to settle disputes are loaded with gifts (or perhaps payment for services rendered?). Stahle, a Moravian missionary with long experience of work with Aboriginal societies, said of such a senior man in south-western Victoria:

The men of the tribe were under an obligation to provide him with food, and to make all kinds of presents to him, such as kangaroo and opossum rugs, stone tomahawks, spears, flint knives etc.<sup>48</sup>

Similarly those who exercised power through magic and ritual received gifts — either in payment, in anticipation of assistance or in anxious propitiation, — from both, 'those who benefitted and those who feared' as Howitt put it.<sup>49</sup> Dawson refers to a leader of the Spring Creek group of Mara-speakers, who arbitrated in disputes: 'In reward for his services he returned home laden with presents of opossum rugs, weapons and ornaments'.<sup>50</sup> Gifts may repay obligations, as well as promote social or political influence. Buckley perceived this aspect of Aboriginal social relations among the Wathawurung.

<sup>44</sup> Journal entry for Sunday 7 June 1835, quoted by Bonwick (ed. Sayers 1973: 99). Report of 25 June quoted in Billot 1979: 118. Perceptions of the purpose and results of the meeting may of course have been different for the two parties involved in the discussions. See Diane Barwick's discussion in this volume (pp. 107 and 122).

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Journal for 1847, March 20-21.

<sup>46</sup> For example see Howitt — Papers Box 8, Folder 6, Paper 1. Cf. Curr 1883: 268.

<sup>47</sup> Howitt — Notes on the Kulin. p. 50A in Diane Barwick's transcript.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Fison and Howitt 1880: 277.

<sup>49</sup> 1887: 47. See also Dawson 1881: 59.

<sup>50</sup> 1881: 75.

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On finding a cask washed up on shore he removed the iron hoops which he 'knew were valuable to the natives':

Having broken up the iron hoops into pieces, I some days after divided them amongst those who were most kind to me, and by these presents added greatly to the influence I had already acquired over them.<sup>51</sup>

Gifts were usually made to those who sponsored young men in initiation, or so we may infer from several references which relate to widely separated areas. Howitt records that Barak presented Billibellary with an opossum rug following his investiture 'with the insignia of manhood'. Mathews notes formal but delayed exchanges between sponsors and the families of initiates after the Wiradjuri Burbung and after the Kannetch ceremony in South Australia.<sup>52</sup>

Marriage arrangements also involved much giving of gifts between the families as well as the individuals involved.<sup>53</sup> The arrangement itself was a form of exchange, whose agreement was binding. There is the record by Thomas of a 'bride price' (Thomas in *Bride* 1898:67). In most instances however, the reciprocity was not an immediate but a continuing obligation.<sup>54</sup> Sometimes the return was in kind, another marriage arrangement. Customs such as the *Kue* of the Daly River people are not recorded by our sources, but food is often mentioned among the gifts listed on these occasions. An event unobtrusive to the alien? The importance of gifts and exchanges of this kind seems universal throughout the south-east, with the possible exception of the Kurmai.<sup>55</sup>

Both exchange and gift-giving involve obligation. To fail in this was a serious offence, and a cause of disputes. Sievwright comments on a fight — 'this dispute was owing to the latter tribe having neglected to furnish the accustomed presents on the preceding night'.<sup>56</sup> We are reminded of Stanner's report that non-fulfilment of *Merbok* obligations bore serious consequences, ranging from loss of status and humiliation to death. For Arnhem Land Thomson recorded the same inner compulsion to meet exchange obligations and the shame that followed failure to do so.<sup>57</sup>

One of the incidents which triggered the Rufus Creek massacre in south-western New South Wales seems to have been the failure of European shepherds to keep a promise to supply certain goods in return for the services of Aboriginal women. Clearly they had been expected to conform to the rules governing such exchanges.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Morgan 1852 (1980): 113-4.

<sup>52</sup> Howitt — Notes on the Kulin, p. 8; Mathews 1897: 150-151 and Ms Notebooks.

<sup>53</sup> Wedge 1836 in Morgan 1852 (1980): 165-171. See also Buckley's evidence on p. 95.

<sup>54</sup> Thomas in *Bride* 1898: 67-8; Beveridge 1861-65: 17 and 1883: 23-25; Smith 1880: 3; Smyth 1878, I: 76-77, 79; Morgan 1852 (1980): 58, 83; Curr 1883: 248. Cf. 128-9; Howitt *Papers*, Notes on the Kulin, p. 34B.

<sup>55</sup> Dawson 1881: 28; Howitt, *Papers* Notes on the Kulin, p. 34B; Wedge 1836 in Morgan 1852 (1980): 167, 177; Sievwright 1842; Smyth 1880: 3.

<sup>56</sup> Sievwright. Entry for April 14, 1841.

<sup>57</sup> Stanner 1933-4: 161, 167, 170-2; Thomson 1949: 4, 35-6, 38-9.

<sup>58</sup> Moorehouse 1841 quoted in Massola 1969: 119.

*SPECIAL EXPEDITIONS*

This survey has concentrated on the acquisition of goods by exchange and prestation, usually in the context of an inter-tribal or inter-group meeting. Goods were also obtained by making special expeditions to their source, often in alien, if allied, territories. These were usually to acquire items important for subsistence or technology, especially raw materials not available locally such as fine grained hard greenstone for hatchet heads like that quarried from the outcrops on Mt William, or reed stems for spear shafts.<sup>59</sup> However, these expeditions do not seem comparable in significance to those made by the Dieri and Yantruwunta of Eastern Central Australia, who travelled hundreds of miles beyond their country to collect red ochre, sandstone slabs or the narcotic pituri.<sup>60</sup> Nor of course do they involve such long and hazardous journeys, Buckley's description of the trip to the tomahawk stone quarry notwithstanding. In many instances these expeditions also involve exchange, for goods must be bartered to acquire the commodity from its owners. For example, at the Mt William stone quarry strangers were not permitted to work the outcrops, but must negotiate a price for their needs with those who had the right to do so. Reed spears from the Goulburn reed beds and opossum rugs are recorded exchanges for Mt William stone.<sup>62</sup> The opossum rug was the value at source of three pieces of Mt William stone. At times a messenger was sent to acquaint the owners of rare and valued resources that such needs existed. Arrangements could then be made to meet them.

*DETERMINANTS OF EXCHANGE*

It is only this last aspect (the acquiring of goods by specific journeys to the source) which seems to be dominated by the demands of subsistence or technology, and so divorced from 'the shadow of more impressive events' or from social imperatives. From the fragmentary ethnohistorical evidence can we make any statements about the factors determining the form of exchange and the commodities exchanged? Is the economic motive reflected? Are the needs for access to rare resources as strong as the general statements and the implicit arguments of the late nineteenth century commentators suggest? If we seek examples of exchange involving items that may be scarce or totally absent from the receiving areas we do not scan a wide field. Quartz and fine-grained siliceous rock are not found in the country of the Murray people but are acquired through barter; the Wongul twine made from typha root fibres is an important product gained by those who exchange with the groups of the Murray/Darling junction; reeds for spears are prized items acquired from people living near the reed beds of the Goulburn and Murray; hard rock for hatchet heads so rare in the riverine

<sup>59</sup> Howitt *Papers* – Notes on the Kulin; Morgan 1852 (1980): 23-4, 79-80; Clow in *Bride* 1898: 109; Parker in Morrison n.d. (1972?): 22 and in Smyth 1878, II: 154; Kreffit 1866: 366.

<sup>60</sup> Howitt 1904: 710-713.

<sup>61</sup> Morgan 1852 (1980): 79-80.

<sup>62</sup> Howitt 1904: 311-12, 340-1, 689-690, 718; and *Papers* – Notes on the Kulin; Smyth 1878, I: 161 and II: 298-9.

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plains is obtained by exchange. Similarly the Murray people acquired the special wood needed for fire drills from those of the Yarra (Corranderrk).<sup>63</sup>

The list, although neither impressive nor long, yet demonstrates that ecological determinants cannot be dismissed. However, the situation is more complex. Why should Bundit spears, so highly regarded, be exchanged for maleen spears, also highly regarded?<sup>64</sup> Why should the archaeological distribution of greenstone artefacts from Mt William and Mt Camel show concentrations in areas where not only is high quality basalt abundant, but greenstone itself is available?<sup>65</sup> Why are the artefacts made of Central Belt greenstones found in such numbers in the Western District of Victoria? Why did Geelong people travel to the Mt William quarry to acquire hatchet stone when their own territory held greenstone quarries as well as basalt sources? Mathews noted and was puzzled by the exchange of like for like in southern New South Wales.<sup>66</sup>

The unimpressive list of rare commodities, plus the enigmas listed above raise questions concerning the social and symbolic value of the act of exchange or of particular goods involved. Certain items seem to have special value, or so we may infer from the context, especially descriptions of the giving of gifts on formal occasions. These are hatchet stone, rugs, and spears. Craftsmanship as well as the prestige of the source may impart value. Elsewhere I have argued from the archaeological evidence that the Central Belt greenstones acquired such status outside Kulin territories.<sup>67</sup> This survey of the historical evidence does not discount the hypothesis. One may well consider that the 'axes' Dawson tells us the Geelong people brought to Mt Noorat to exchange were not made from Geelong greenstone (metagabbro) but from Mt William greenstone (amphibole hornfels). They could have been acquired on one of those special expeditions so that a valued item could be offered in exchange at important meetings, or used in individual situations where such a gift was necessary to create or repay some social or ceremonial obligation. Among such important occasions were initiation ceremonies and the fulfilment of marriage arrangements. It is not then unexpected that the densest areas of distribution for artefacts made from Mt William greenstone coincide with the territories of groups who intermarried with the Kulin people who owned or had rights in that quarry.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> For quartz and other stone see Curr 1883: 273 and Stone 1911: 460; for Wongal twine Krefft 1866: 360-1; for reed shafts Curr 1883: 273; Smyth 1878, II: 295-9; for hard rock Curr 1883: 273; for wood to make fire drills Hercus 1969, II: 367.

<sup>64</sup> Dawson 1881: 88.

<sup>65</sup> McBryde and Harrison 1981.

<sup>66</sup> 1897: 150-151.

<sup>67</sup> McBryde and Harrison 1981.

<sup>68</sup> McBryde 1984.

*COMMENTS ON THE MODEL AND ROLES OF EXCHANGE*

Let us return to the aims outlined earlier. The model of Aboriginal exchange in northern Australia has tested well against the ethnohistorical evidence from the southeast in spite of its derivation from situations distant in time and space. It seems both appropriate and applicable. The components are all represented in the exchange transactions recorded for the societies of the south-east. To look to the ethnography from which the model derives we may feel that the studies of exchange in action given by Stanner, Berndt and Thomson provide insight into the processes involved and so widen the range of interpretive hypotheses to set against our elusive evidence. This has proved a rewarding exercise, especially in relation to the first aim of this study, the exploration of the processes involved in the transfer of goods. These are far more complex and diverse than would be anticipated from the discussions in the literature of the late nineteenth century, especially if one reads carefully the accounts of the early period of contact. Several aspects documented in the writings of this period emerge as significant, particularly gift-giving. It is a major, previously unexamined, element in this reconstruction. Diversity characterises not only the range of commodities exchanged, but also the ways in which these change hands, and the uses to which they are put. Material goods serve social and symbolic functions as well as the technological and economic. However, though exchange involves primarily material items, it is clear that women, services, songs, names, and dances also change ownership. The evidence for the south-east offers fewer instances of songs, dances and corroborees changing ownership than does that for Central Australia. Whether this is a function of the nature of our evidence and its collection or of the societies concerned remains to be determined. Even when material goods change hands the significance of the act may not be so tangible. The gains go beyond the economic and technological towards social commitment and prestige.<sup>69</sup> Exchange may also provide a medium for settling disputes, between individuals or between groups. Such transactions may go on 'in the shadow of more impressive events';<sup>70</sup> they may not constitute the 'trade' conceived in the economic model of the late nineteenth century synthesisers. Yet exchange in south-eastern Australia, as Stanner recognised in the *Merbok* at Daly River, becomes a vital part of the life of both individuals and the society. It is at once more complex and diverse, indeed more pervasive, than the models of the classic ethnographers for the region allow.

This diverse and complex pattern of exchange and the production of goods it stimulates is an essential component of the social networks and political hierarchies of the

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Stanner 1933-4: 169, 170.

<sup>70</sup> Stanner 1933-4: 159.

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societies of south-eastern Australia. Lourandos has linked this social complexity and its alliance networks with economic intensification which he considers emerged in the more recent periods of Holocene prehistory.<sup>71</sup> To document changes in such social complexity over time, and changes in alliance networks is a challenge to the prehistorian. Much of Lourandos' argument derives from essentially ethnohistorical evidence. The ethnohistorian documents such aspects from their images in the literature of historical contact between cultures, so the record may belong to the period of contact alone. However, it does provide a base-line for further investigation. Given that the distribution of greenstone artefacts from the Mt William quarry (last used in the 1830s) matches with the historically documented alliance and exchange relationships of the Kulin peoples<sup>72</sup> perhaps there will emerge an archaeological answer to the problems of change in these over time and their first development. In mapping changes in the distribution arrays of hatchet stone from the various major quarries we may therefore be mapping changes in the social relationships these distributions reflect. Yet much archaeological field research must precede this answer, for it depends on the existence of many dated assemblages containing these artefacts.

Diversity and pervasiveness characterise exchange in the life of Aboriginal societies of south-eastern Australia as revealed in the historical records of contact. These are also features of exchange in northern Australia. The model of exchange derived from the ethnography of this region was found applicable to the south-east, in spite of disparities in time and space. Does this raise questions about the regional diversity of Australian culture, the uniqueness of developments in certain areas (such as the south-east) and the nature of exchange in Australian, or in hunter-gatherer societies in general? My own approaches to Australian prehistory have always been based on assumptions of regional diversity and a wariness of the pan-Australian generalisations that pervade much of the literature. So I found the applicability of a northern ethnographic model to the evidence from the south-east disturbing. The parallels between the practices and values recorded for north and south could call into question some of those assumptions. They demand further investigation. There are indications that similar parallels exist between the south-east and other areas, such as the Lake Eyre/Cooper basin where exchange networks extended north to the Gulf of Carpentaria and south to the Flinders Ranges. Further, the exchanges recorded by Daisy Bates in the south-west of Western Australia show remarkable similarities to those of the south-east. There are parallels in the range of goods involved, the distances over which they travel, the contexts in which exchange takes place, its association with ceremonial events and inter-group meetings and in the importance of gift-giving. There was also local group control

<sup>71</sup> Lourandos 1983.

<sup>72</sup> McBryde 1984.

over certain resources and strict conventions on access to them, such as those regulating the rights to fish caught in the weirs at Mandura.<sup>73</sup> Many questions of importance for our understanding of the socio-cultural forms of Australian societies and the interaction between Australian societies arise and remain to be investigated. Exchange seems to be a vital component of both. Though it may not 'obtrude itself upon the attention of the alien' it may yet hold significant clues to their interpretation.

<sup>73</sup> The situation at Mandura exactly parallels that on the Hopkins River near Hexham described by Dawson (1881: 94-5). The Daisy Bates Papers are held in the National Library of Australia. They have recently been edited for publication by Isobel White. She most kindly directed me to Daisy Bates' important evidence on exchange and allowed me to consult the relevant chapters of her edition. This publication is in press and should be released by the National Library in 1985.

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