

A CHANGE IN STATUS FOR ABORIGINAL WOMEN? ABORIGINAL WOMEN IN THE AUSTRALIAN WORKFORCE

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European Ideology and Aboriginal Women.

In studying the history of relations between Aboriginal people and European Australians, it is apparent that the mid-1960s marked something of a watershed in the official interest in Australia's 'race relations'.¹ Following the Social Sciences Research Council's 'Aborigines' Project', the publication of Rowley's major trilogy in 1970-71² did much to highlight the destruction of traditional Aboriginal society and the plight of Aborigines in contemporary Australia.

Certain analyses of 'race relations' at that time led to studies of biological differences, based on a concept of race, and subsequent research attempted to establish differences in intelligence quotients.³ More recently, the academic emphasis has shifted to a concept of 'ethnicity' which focuses on cultural rather than biological differences between groups.

This approach tends to explain the subordination of minority groups in terms of culture in one of two ways, neither of which are mutually opposed. The first is the 'culture of poverty' thesis,⁴ positing a cycle of deprivation that breeds distinctive cultural traits, such as immediate gratification of needs and lack of motivation, which are inexorably at odds with the spirit of the Western work ethic. It has been used to explain the position of the poor in

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- 1 Official documentation throughout the period of European settlement reports on separate incidents involving Aborigines and Europeans. But little analysis was made and little action was taken other than punitive measures against the offenders – usually found to be the Aborigines. Many of these accounts, together with parliamentary reports, are published in one volume by Stone (1974). Among anthropologists, A.P. Elkin was notable for being among the first to document the effects of the invasion of European settlers on Aboriginal society.
- 2 Charles Rowley was appointed the Director of the SSRC's Aborigines Project, 1964-1967. The resulting series *Aborigines in Australian society* contained the trilogy which examined the position of Aborigines throughout what he called 'settled' and 'colonial' Australia.
- 3 See for example the work of psychologists A.R. Jensen (1969, 1975) and Hans Eysenk (1971).
- 4 Lewis 1966.

Mexico, blacks in the United States, Irish gypsies⁵ and Australian Aborigines. An analysis of this type comes dangerously close to blaming the poor for being poor.⁶ The second cultural explanation revolves around the concept of 'racial prejudice' which the ethnicity argument posits as a misplaced hostility based on ignorance and inadequate appreciation of differences in culture.⁷

But cultural differences do not *per se* explain why Europeans are dominant. Racial prejudice, although it may describe a mechanism for maintaining and reinforcing European domination, does not explain why this occurs in the first place. Essentially, European domination of Aboriginal people in Australia is based on the key issue of ownership. Ownership and control of the three basic economic resources — land, labour and capital — ultimately result in economic and political power and hence control in the cultural, social, and ideological spheres. Where there is European control, there is racist ideology.

The ideology of European superiority has been — and still is — used as a justification for the appropriation of land and subordination of indigenous people. In Australia it has been used to justify both the disinheritance of Aboriginal people from their land and their enforced change of lifestyle from nomadism to settlement.⁸

The seizure of Aboriginal land was justified simply by the view it was not being put to 'proper' use in the Lockean sense. It was argued that as the 'natives' were so primitive they had not developed any form of agricultural system, the land was being wasted, and hence Europeans had every right to take and 'develop' it. The ideology of European supremacy was implicit in the view of one West Australian politician who argued: 'I think it will be a happy day for Western Australia, and for Australia at large when the natives and the kangaroo disappear'.⁹

Overtones of the European cultural superiority theory are so widespread and so entrenched in Australian society that they even extend to staunch supporters of Aboriginal rights. Advocating citizenship for Aborigines in 1944 Elkin considered that assimilation of Aborigines into European Australian society would represent (for Aborigines, not Europeans) a 'cultural advance'. A firm believer in government assimilation policies, which were first mooted during the 1930s, Elkin regretted the problems faced by the 'incurably nomadic full-bloods'.¹⁰ The underlying sentiment is that the traditional Aboriginal way of life is pathological but unfortunately untreatable.

If European settlement in Australia has radically transformed the lives of all Aborigines, it

⁵ Schaffer 1985.

⁶ Kathleen F. Hill's research report for the Australian Commission of Inquiry into Poverty (1985) remarks on the 'lack of Aboriginal motivation' and the development of a hand-out mentality. The report dismisses the idea that special programs should be developed for Aborigines.

⁷ A recent critique of ethnicity (together with now discredited socio-biological analyses) for continuing to reify 'race' and for ignoring the particular ways that racial boundaries are created, is given by Gillian Cowlishaw (1986).

⁸ For an historical account of how Western racism developed from a need to rationalise the dispossession and the exploitation of non-European peoples, see Mervyn Hartwig 1972.

⁹ Debate on Settlers' Protection, 14 January 1892. Western Australia Parliamentary Papers, Perth, vol.2, 1892.

¹⁰ Elkin 1944.

is the women who have faced the most severe changes. Aboriginal women have been ensnared in a double bind of European ideology: they are considered inferior because they are Aborigines and they are considered inferior because they are women.

The role of ideology in the subordination of women has been more than adequately covered elsewhere.¹¹ However it is important to recognise that the notion of male superiority, and with it an acceptance by both men and women of the 'naturalness' of women's inferior position in society, was introduced with European settlement. Subject to a two-pronged attack by the use of racist and sexist ideology, Aboriginal women have been systematically debased by European Australia.¹²

Changes in Employment in the Northern Territory since the 1960s.

Training schemes.

From the end of the Second World War until the beginning of the 1960s assimilation policies intensified efforts to encourage Aborigines onto settlements within the Northern Territory. Some analysts believe that the primary motive among government circles was simply to keep Aborigines out of towns like Alice Springs and Darwin.¹³ However, it is fair to say that, from the mid-1960s onwards, settlements came to be regarded as transitional, to teach Aborigines European ways and turn them into 'useful' members of Australian society.

But it seems that this training did not include the European notion of a fair wage for a fair day's work. Cash wages were not paid to any Aborigines working on government settlements. Free accommodation and rations were offered, together with a small amount of pocket money. This amounted to \$7.20 a week in the Northern Territory in 1969.

In the rest of Australia, until the late 1960s, legislation relating to Aborigines was the responsibility of each state. Accordingly, the restrictions and constraints placed upon Aboriginal people varied considerably from one state to another. However, one feature that all Aborigines of full descent held in common was that they were not included in the national census count. As members of the Australian population, one could say that officially they simply did not exist. During the 'period of reconsideration' the 1967 referendum showed overwhelming electoral support for the rights of all Aborigines to be included in the census, and for the Federal Government to assume responsibility for legislation relating to all Australian Aborigines.

In 1969 the Training Allowance Scheme was introduced into the Northern Territory by the Federal Government. As no unemployment benefits were available to those living on missions or settlements, the training allowance payable under the scheme meant some

11 One of the most influential contemporary accounts, which uses the Althusserian concept of ideology in the subordination of women in Western society, is Juliet Mitchell's essay 'The Longest Revolution', first published in *New Left Review* in 1966. See also Mitchell 1984.

12 The rape of Aboriginal women and the resultant spread of venereal disease among Aboriginal communities is discussed by Bobbi Sykes (1985). In Elkin's early work on Aboriginal-European relations and the growing dependency of the Aboriginal people on European society, attention is drawn to the demands for sexual services made upon Aboriginal women.

13 Altman 1980.

alleviation of hardship for many. Considerable numbers of Aboriginal men and women drifted into the settlements from cattle stations, towns and bush communities, and by 1973 over 4000 Aborigines in the Northern Territory were employed under the scheme.

However, if the object of the scheme was to provide training in useful skills and thus enable Aboriginal people to enter the labour force provided by the European economy, it was a failure. Few vocational training facilities had been provided, and there was a lack of properly skilled staff to carry out the training. The training allowance became a euphemism for low pay for low status work. At rates well below award wages, the scheme was later to be condemned as a 'disguised form of handout' by a Senate Standing Committee in 1975. The Training Allowance Scheme was terminated by Australia's Labor Government in December 1973.

In 1972 the Labor Government established a Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs and a National Economic Strategy for Aborigines (NESA) was introduced. Recognising the high unemployment levels among Aborigines and the poor socio-economic conditions under which many lived, the strategy focused on the need to improve Aboriginal standards of living by making opportunities available for them to enter the paid workforce.

Several government agencies have been involved in employment and training programs introduced under NESA. The Department of Aboriginal Affairs, the Aboriginal Development Commission, the Commonwealth Department of Education and the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations each have areas of specific responsibility. The many programs devised include grants and loans for the establishment of Aboriginal enterprises, for land and property purchase, provision for special works, study away from home, and subsidies for employers to provide on-the-job training and work experience under the Training for Aborigines Program.

Government employment.

When the Northern Territory achieved self-government in 1977, a major expansion of the public service took place and it is now a major employer in the Territory. Departments of both the Commonwealth and Territory governments operate in areas which bring them into contact with many Aborigines, and both areas of the public service recognise that they have a particular need to employ staff who communicate well with Aboriginal people. Accordingly some public-sector jobs have been identified as requiring the ability to communicate effectively with Aborigines and a knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal culture.

This 'identification' of particular posts has established opportunities for 'Aboriginal experts'. Indeed whole career structures have been created within the public service which call for expertise in Aboriginal affairs. Recently the public service has begun to recognise that Aboriginal people themselves are experts in their own culture. Consequently some Aborigines are being recruited to fill vacancies for 'identified' jobs especially those positions which provide an interface between government departments and their Aboriginal clients.

The effects of policy changes on Aboriginal women.

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s much has been done to improve health and education in rural Aboriginal communities. Health clinics and schools have been and continue to be run by European specialists. However, growing recognition that involvement is desirable has created employment opportunities and the chance of greater economic status for Aboriginal women in rural communities.

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The introduction of bilingual education in the Northern Territory has gone some way to returning to Aboriginal women their traditional role as educators. The recognition that women as parents play an important part in the development of their children's education is resulting in Aboriginal women now being successfully employed as teachers and teachers' aides, educating the children in their own language and giving them an education and pride in their traditional values and skills.

The Aboriginal Health Worker Program introduced in the early 1970s provides training through an apprenticeship system of teaching, with trainees receiving practical instruction working alongside nursing sisters and also attending short courses at centralised training centres. Many Aboriginal women have successfully trained as health workers.

By combining the traditional and Western medical systems for the benefit of their people,¹⁴ women in the Northern Territory have achieved a high degree of success in this field. Many are becoming highly skilled clinical workers, in some cases running their own health centres, which may be seen as an indication of their improved status in the rural communities.¹⁵

Women are increasingly voicing their opinions on community decisions that affect family life and their role as educators of young children. Although they face an uphill struggle against entrenched male attitudes, they are taking more responsibility in areas of community life which European ideology has posited as male domains.¹⁶

But if rural Aboriginal women have made some gains in the last decade or so, perhaps it is in the cities that more gains have been made. Although the position of women in the work-force has been well researched over the last decade, little attention has been given to Aboriginal women as workers other than in the rural areas and in communities. Research by the author in 1984-85 on Aboriginal employment in Darwin has highlighted the position of Aboriginal women in the urban workforce. The 1981 census shows the total working population of Darwin at 29,897. The sixty-three organisations interviewed employed a total of 13,200 people. Of a total of over 3500 workers employed in the private sector organisations interviewed, 1400 were women. But the number of Aboriginal women employed in business firms is negligible, amounting to 0.35 per cent of the private-sector work-force.

One might infer from this very small number employed that Darwin's private employers (who are overwhelmingly European and overwhelmingly men) are racially prejudiced and discriminate against Aboriginal women. Perhaps they do, but the issue is more complex than a simple matter of racially discriminatory recruitment. Many of Darwin's private employers say they do not employ Aboriginal workers because Aboriginal people rarely apply to them for jobs.

Why should this be? Perhaps the answer lies in the work experiences of Aboriginal men and women. The 1984-85 survey discovered that of over two hundred Aboriginal people interviewed in Darwin,¹⁷ most had had their first jobs in European-run firms and many had

¹⁴ Tynan 1983.

¹⁵ Hargrave 1982.

¹⁶ Moeckel 1983.

¹⁷ 208 Aborigines were interviewed, of whom 87 per cent currently held jobs. The numbers of women and men were broadly equal. Ages ranged from teenagers to people in their sixties, but most were in their twenties and thirties, with 11 per cent in their forties and just over 6 per cent in their fifties.

subsequent experience of working in the private sector. Many said they had disliked the work, the pay and employment conditions, and their bosses. Indeed when asked what sort of organisation they would prefer to work for, very few (less than 2 per cent) said they thought a non-Aboriginal business firm was best. In view of the unpleasant experiences of so many Aboriginal workers in private companies, perhaps it is not surprising that they avoid them when looking for a job.

Yet in Darwin's public sector positive recruitment policies have led to a dramatic increase in the opportunities available. Changes in official attitudes in the public service mean that Aboriginal women have succeeded in being recruited for 'identified' jobs. Exact numbers of Aboriginal women employed in the Northern Territory Public Service are not easily assessed,¹⁸ but in areas such as social security, education, health and employment and of course the Commonwealth Department of Aboriginal Affairs, there are Aboriginal women working in administrative and liaison jobs, making a contribution to the provision of services to the Aboriginal community.

Over the last ten to fifteen years an increasing number of Aboriginal-run organisations have been established. They vary in objectives and in size from small co-operatives involved in the production of arts and crafts, or the provision of specialised services for a local community, to nation-wide organisations such as those providing accommodation or legal aid to Aborigines. Although in Darwin the numbers employed are small, jobs have been created for Aboriginal people and some women hold responsible jobs within the Aboriginal-run organisations.

The research highlighted that Aboriginal women workers had stayed on at school longer than men, and attained a higher level of schooling.¹⁹ They were also far more likely to continue their formal education after leaving school – mainly in clerical training. Not surprisingly, office work figures highly among the occupations of Aboriginal women, where most Aboriginal men in both the public and private sectors are unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers.

Despite the high levels of Aboriginal unemployment, currently running at over 40 per cent, these workers are committed to the idea of working for their living and, in common with most Australians, see unemployment as highly undesirable. The strong views held towards sexual equality in the workforce are particularly noticeable. While recognising that Australian society exercises constraints on men and women by restricting training and employment opportunities available, most Aboriginal people of both sexes feel that in principle there are no jobs that either sex cannot perform equally well.

There can be little doubt that this positive action in recruitment and training within the public service has created a space for some Aboriginal women to enter the employment market. The continuing campaign for equal employment opportunities over the last decade

¹⁸ The problems of identifying Aboriginal employees proved difficult in the two largest departments interviewed in the Northern Territory Public Service. Figures have been published by the Public Service Commissioner's office on the numbers of Aborigines the NTPS employs, but given the difficulty encountered by some departments in identifying their Aboriginal workers, there would seem to be room for concern about the validity of the official figures.

¹⁹ Similarities in different levels of schooling also occur outside urban areas. For example Elspeth Young's study (1985) of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory notes that young women in rural communities are more likely to continue post-primary classes than young men, who may have to spend considerable time away from home undergoing training for their initiation.

has resulted in more jobs being made available for Aboriginal women, some of whom have good jobs and economic independence. However, there is evidence to suggest that such a dramatic change in the status of Aboriginal women in such a relatively short period is not unprecedented.

A Historical Comparison.

Diane Barwick documented a rapid increase in the status of Aboriginal women in Victoria between 1860 and 1886.²⁰ Barwick's line of argument is that this increase was a consequence — although an unintended one — of the European administration's decision to settle the tribes in mission and government stations.

Barwick notes that early histories of Aboriginal society gave very little information about the traditional roles of women, although she does point to Howitt's recognition that older women exercised considerable political influence among the Victorian Gippsland linguistic groups. However, by and large the evidence available pointed to a traditionally patriarchal society and, despite Howitt's case, Barwick leans towards this view.

The decision to settle the semi-nomadic tribes and train them in agricultural practices was based on the administration's belief that this would turn them into self-sufficient peasant farmers. But Aboriginal social relations and political practices were not taken into consideration by the European station managers. As a result, the mission station life severely disrupted not only the semi-nomadic life-style but also traditional inter-personal relations. By failing to take these into account, Barwick argues, station life totally undermined the men's economic and political authority. On settlement the men 'suddenly and voluntarily abandoned certain rights and powers, allowed and encouraged new economic and religious roles for women, and invited their political participation'.²¹

Meanwhile, the women were encouraged by the missionaries to take up suitable occupations, working in their gardens and selling their arts and craftwork. Sewing, embroidery, and lace-making were also encouraged, and the degree of success was so high that one Aboriginal woman received a letter of thanks from Queen Victoria for a lace collar she had made and sent as a gift. If the men were dismal failures as small landholders and horticulturalists, the women achieved economic importance. Moreover, by conforming to the expectations of the mission station, they found a niche for themselves within the church and respectability as homemakers. The 'lubras', it was said, were ladies now.

But what did it mean to be a lady in the Victoria of the 1880s? Under the law it certainly did not mean having achieved 'personhood'. For, as in Britain during this period, a woman's identity was conflated with or under the direction of a father or a husband. A married woman as a separate entity was non-existent as far as legal rights were concerned. As one feminist writer succinctly stated 'her body, earnings, children and domestic services belonged to her husband'.²²

What is particularly interesting about Barwick's analysis, is the parallels that can be drawn between those Aboriginal women on the Victorian mission station and Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society. In recent years Aboriginal women have gained through

²⁰ Barwick 1970.

²¹ Barwick 1970:31.

²² Oakley 1981:2.

taking advantage of the education and training and jobs provided by European society. Many have the status of holding clerical and administrative or semi-professional jobs.

The similarity between these contemporary Aboriginal women and Barwick's 'ladies' of the 1880s is striking. Today's women have gained some degree of economic independence, and some hold positions with a degree of respectability and prestige. As with the women of the Victorian missions, they have taken advantage of the provision of schooling and training in order to do so. As with the women of the Victorian missions, their improved status has occurred within a period of two decades or so. And as with the women of the Victorian missions, their success has been due to the fact that they have conformed to the expectations of European society.

But there is a point at which the parallels between the position of Barwick's mission station Aborigines and contemporary Aborigines diverge. Today's Aboriginal women have been channelled into roles deemed appropriate for women, in the same way as Barwick's 'ladies' were. Some have made considerable achievements in their chosen field. But the similarity between their situation and those of the Victorian mission diverges if we consider the relative position of Aboriginal men. We should be aware of the danger of assuming that because Aboriginal women have office jobs they have succeeded where the men have failed.

Unemployment figures show a higher level for Aboriginal men than for women. In the Northern Territory registered unemployment among Aboriginal men is about three times higher than that of Aboriginal women.²³ But we cannot interpret this as indicating that Aboriginal women are better off than their men. Research into the provision of services to Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory suggests that many women may not claim unemployment benefit because they either do not know they are eligible, or they lack the confidence to make their claim.²⁴ Regulations do not permit married women to receive unemployment benefit in their own right, as official policy is governed by the European model of men as heads of the nuclear family and responsible for the economic maintenance of their dependent wives. But for Aboriginal people this model may not hold. The traditional role of Aboriginal men was never that of the European-style breadwinner. A man's kinship obligations may take priority over financial support for wives and children, and the failure of administrations to acknowledge this has led to much economic hardship for women. This is particularly so in Aboriginal communities where jobs are scarce.²⁵

Where Aboriginal women and men have succeeded in entering the work-force it is likely that the men have jobs as manual workers, but we should not conclude that women office workers are faring better economically than their menfolk. The research in Darwin, for example, showed that for the same length of working week, women's wages were well below that of men, with average wages of \$253 a week compared to the men's weekly average of \$300. Although there were very few Aborigines in the top income brackets of more than \$674 a week, none of the women in the survey earned more than \$577 a week.²⁶

Historically, clerical work has been considered more prestigious than unskilled or semi-

²³ Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, Darwin, unemployment figures, March 1985.

²⁴ Wade-Marshall 1982.

²⁵ For a discussion of the economic hardship facing women in Aboriginal communities, see Young 1983.

²⁶ These figures are taken from the author's research of 1985.

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skilled manual work. Initially a male domain, over the last fifty years or so office work has become defined as a female occupation. The introduction of new technology within the last ten years has revolutionised office procedures and has reduced the level of skill necessary in today's offices to low-level routine work. This has in effect devalued a major area of women's work. What was once a relatively high-status occupation has been reduced to a level of semi-skilled repetitive routine.²⁷

It remains true that the promotion of the ideals of equal employment opportunities in both the Northern Territory and the Australian public services and the 'identification' of certain jobs has created a space for Aborigines. However, a closer examination of the facts reveals that in practice Aboriginal men have a better deal.

The few senior-level 'identified' posts within the public service are not evenly distributed among men and women; most of them are held by men. Indeed, the higher up the hierarchical public service ladder the 'identified' job, the more likely it is to be filled by a man. And of the small number of Aborigines in the Northern Territory who have received university, professional or management training, most of whom are employed in the public service, less than 3 per cent are women. This is ironic, given that education and training plays such a significant part in Aboriginal women's lives.

The same point of course applies to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women in Australia. The key to equality in the workforce is not merely a question of the time spent on education and training, nor on the qualifications gained as a result. Equality in the workforce depends rather on a critical examination of the areas of work which are available to women, and the lifting of restrictions on those areas of work denied to them.

Despite the liberal ideals of Australian society, the fact remains that power and authority remain in the hands of European men. And women, particularly Aboriginal women, continue to suffer the politics of exclusion. Where opportunities exist for Aborigines, it is largely the select few Aboriginal men who have been groomed for the senior positions.

Aboriginal Women in their own Milieu.

The focus so far in this paper has been the position of Aboriginal women in the context of the broad Australian society. At this point it may be worthwhile to relate this to the position of women in Aboriginal society.

Until comparatively recently, most serious writing on Aboriginal culture has been remarkably blind to the question of gender. The focus has centred on the recording of what remained of 'contemporary stone-age man' before 'he' and 'his' culture disappeared completely. A notable early exception was the anthropologist Phyllis Kaberry, who was better able to grasp an understanding of gender relationships than most in her profession, and argued that there was equality among the sexes in Aboriginal society.²⁸

By pointing to this glaring omission, recent writings have redressed the imbalance by establishing that women played a significant part in traditional Aboriginal economic, religious and political culture. This is not to argue that Aboriginal society held no divisions of labour

²⁷ Crompton, Jones and Reid 1982.

²⁸ Kaberry 1939.

based on gender.²⁹ But as independent producers and as distributors of food, as the decision-makers in deciding where to camp and when to move on, women exercised considerable power within Aboriginal culture at large. As partakers in their own rituals and ceremonies, exercising their rights and responsibilities for their own sites, women held power and autonomy from men.³⁰ As women from Borrooloola have explained: 'We talk for our hunting business, ceremony business. We used to go hunting . . . and feed the men too . . . And we having other ceremony, our own with the woman herself, that important, nobody see . . . Men never used to boss over the woman. We are bosses ourselves . . .'³¹

I argued earlier in this paper that a double-pronged attack, using racist and sexist ideology as its justification, has systematically subordinated Aboriginal women within European Australian society. But there has been a third prong in the attack, one that has affected Aboriginal women in their own milieu. For the change from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to one on a European-run settlement itself had a negative impact on the position of women within traditional Aboriginal society.

The mass migration of European settlers and in particular the spread of pastoral stations was accompanied by the settlement of Aborigines. Ever-diminishing traditional hunting grounds were increasingly taken over as grazing ground by pastoralists. Encouraged, or in some cases forced, to settle in specific areas by government administrations, the Aborigines' ability to hunt and gather even their most basic foods was increasingly restricted. Once their role as chief suppliers of food was taken over by European suppliers, either through the cash economy or the distribution of rations, women no longer held such a crucial position. White settlement in Australia in effect meant that as vital producers within the traditional economy women were simply made redundant.

In the first instance, this analysis seems to contradict Barwick's argument that women's status in traditional society was low, and that it was as a consequence of settlement — and one might add, assimilation — that the women's status increased. But perhaps an explanation for this apparent contradiction is that it is perfectly feasible, indeed highly likely, that by the 1860s Aboriginal women's status had already been undermined by contact with European settlers. The protection afforded by the stations, not least from marauding European males, the development of a camaraderie among black and European women and, I would suggest, their enhanced economic value, would have helped to re-establish Aboriginal women's self-confidence and esteem. If Aboriginal women did not gain a *new* position of prestige, but rather *re-gained* some of their traditional status, this would go some way to explaining why it was that Aboriginal men appeared to relinquish political power to their women.

²⁹ Comparative work on hunter-gatherer societies by Hiatt (1970) shows that where gatherable foods occur in abundance, women are more important than men as food providers. The same point is taken up by Bell and Ditton (1980), who conclude that as Aboriginal desert women produced up to 80 per cent of the diet, they were critical to the survival of the group. In these areas, as hunters of small game and as gatherers of plants, it was the women who provided the mainstay of the Aboriginal economy.

³⁰ Bell (1983).

³¹ 'Borrooloola women speak', in Gale 1983:70, 71.

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Summary.

I have argued that recent work has established that traditionally men and women occupied separate spaces in pre-contact Aboriginal society, which gave a symmetrical relationship to the sexes. Women held autonomy in their religious sphere, they held autonomy over their land, they held autonomy in their economy. Certainly they occupied a distinct place within their society but above all the evidence shows that, unlike in Western society, Aboriginal women were not *inferior* to men.

Today there can be no doubt that the position of Aboriginal women in contemporary Australian society has changed dramatically since the mid-1960s. And the changes have been for the better. In Darwin, certainly, Aboriginal women are literate, better educated than the men, socially aware, and committed to their work. Some of them have good jobs and many are ambitious for their future.

The emergence of Aboriginal-run organisations has allowed men and women to arrange some aspects of their own lives and has created the space for women to share responsibility and work in parallel with men. By recruiting Aborigines to act as 'brokers' between the departments and their Aboriginal clients, the public sector has provided openings for women. This is particularly true within the health service, where Aboriginal women are highly successful as health workers.

And yet an overall view of the public service shows that, despite some degree of success, Aboriginal women are most frequently found as 'assistants' to European qualified staff, or working in routine clerical jobs. The very few senior-level 'identified' jobs reserved for experts in Aboriginal affairs, that are not filled by European men, are more likely to be filled by an Aboriginal man than an Aboriginal woman. And in order to satisfy bureaucratic criteria, in particular to qualify for government grants, Aboriginal organisations are required to run very much along European-imposed lines. With their hierarchical structures and the gender-based division of labour some, though not all, Aboriginal organisations can appear remarkably similar to European ones.

Despite their ambitions and their commitment to work, Aboriginal women find themselves constrained by the restrictions placed on them by European patriarchal ideology. Despite their belief in the value of equality at work highlighted by research in Darwin, they nonetheless have had to conform to the sex-roles imposed on women at work in Australia. And despite their former independence, where they are not in positions of paid employment they have been designated as dependent on men.

This leaves Aboriginal women with a double challenge. For, notwithstanding equal employment campaigns, Aborigines have yet to be recognised by many non-Aboriginal employers as being as capable of doing a good job as European workers. And Aboriginal women, in common with all women, have yet to be recognised as being as capable of doing as good a job as men. The racist and sexist ideology in early-settler Australian society which ensnared Aboriginal women in a position of subordination remains alive and well in contemporary Australian society.

Yet I have maintained that their position has improved dramatically since the changes brought about by the 'period of reconsideration'. And so it has. But compared to what? Compared to the position of European women? Compared to the position of Aboriginal men? Compared to the position of European men? Or perhaps compared only to the position of Aboriginal women before the mid-1960s.

Perhaps the less restrictive government approach in the last twenty years has meant that

Aboriginal women have been merely regaining some of their lost ground. Perhaps the day is dawning when they will be able to re-establish the position they previously held in traditional Aboriginal society. What is certain is that all people in Australia who are concerned with the ideals of equality have something in common with Aboriginal women. They may even have something to offer them. And more than that, they have something to learn from them too.

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