

THE MYTHICAL INTRODUCTION OF 'LAW' TO THE WORORA ABORIGINES —PART TWO

In Part One of this article¹ there were set out the texts of four similar myths told by the Worora concerning the introduction of law to their tribe. The basic story in the myths concerns a primaeval man named Ngyarri who made the first sacred boards; these were stolen and taken to the thief's tribe which had up till then been living lawlessly; the presence of these boards led to the existence of law (in the sense of a corpus of social rules) in that tribe; Ngyarri pursued the thief but allowed the tribe to keep the stolen boards when he learned of the beneficial effect that they had had on the tribe.

The Sacred Boards and the Law (Cont.)

Before considering the relationship between the law and the sacred boards of the Worora one preliminary point should be made clear, namely that the boards in question have never had any inscription, writing or hieroglyph on them which has objectively symbolized any facts or information; the pre-contact Aboriginal tribes were pre-literate and the Worora were no exception. J R B Love described the sacred boards that the Worora tribe possessed when he first met them in 1914 as "bull-roarers" of a rather crude type, being of a long, narrow oval shape, decorated by painting, but not having any incised patterns,² and in his book on the Worora he wrote: '[The sacra] are wooden objects, mostly shaped in a long, flat oval, from six inches to three feet long, half an inch to four inches wide, and a quarter to half an inch thick. These wooden things are decorated with stripes and dots of white clay, red and yellow ochre, and black charcoal.'³ The

1 (1976) 12 UWAL Rev 350.

2 *Mythology, Totemism and Religion of the Worora Tribe of North-West Australia, Report of the Melbourne Meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science 1935*, 222, at p 228. The term 'bull-roarer' here is almost certainly not to be taken literally; see Part One of the present article, n 36.

3 *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY* (1936), p 212.

markings may well have fulfilled some mnemonic function⁴ though if they did the symbolism of the various lines and colours is no longer known. The markings on those Worora sacred objects which are now held by the Western Australian Museum are certainly quite unlike the general markings to be found on central, northern and western desert sacra and they are quite distinctive even among other Kimberley sacred objects. Whatever the significance of the markings on the Worora boards, it is clear that statements by informants to the effect that these objects are (in the words of Albert Barunga) 'book-like', 'like the Bible' and 'like the Ten Commandments' are clearly metaphorical, as also are references to 'reading' these and other Worora artefacts.⁵ The likening of the boards to the Ten Commandments or to Biblical scripture is probably intended simply to stress the sacred status of these objects in the eyes of the Worora.⁶

The myth which indicates the precise way in which the Worora believe law was introduced to themselves and the Aborigines, and the story which holds the key to the actual relationship between Worora law and the sacred boards, is the fourth. This is, indeed, the only account that concerns the particular way in which the boards were involved with the introduction of law. (The first and second stories simply indicate the fact of a connection between law and the boards but do not explain this connection any further; the third principally concerns the boards and the practice of exchange, a matter which is also involved in the second and fourth stories.) As was indicated in Part One of this article, the fourth myth is probably later in origin than the first two, but this is unimportant. The explanation that it presents concerning the relationship between law and the sacred boards applies very satisfactorily to the other stories and is in complete accord with impressions gained both from talking to the old Worora men about their boards and the law and from observing them in their dealings with sacred boards.

⁴ NB Wodoi and Jungun's appreciation of the markings in Myth II; see (1976) 12 UWAL Rev 350, at p 363. Quære, how original is this aspect of the myth?

⁵ On Worora message-sticks, which were also incapable of being read in any strict sense, see J R B Love, *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, at pp 189-90.

⁶ The analogies may also reflect the fact that since white contact sacred boards with incised markings have been introduced to the Worora from more distant parts of Australia; these markings have often had mnemonic functions and can thus be 'read' and in the sense of 'interpreted'. On the introduction of such boards to the Worora, see J R B Love, *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, loc cit. All the boards presently at Mowanjum have been introduced.

According to the fourth story, and also the two others which deal with this particular point, Aboriginal tribes were originally quite lawless. In an explanation of this matter Alan Mungulu, who recounted the fourth story, said in effect that the principal problems of that original period were first that there were no rules which were generally recognized as binding on the whole tribe, and second that no one had any greater—or lesser—right to punish wrongdoers than anyone else. The similarity between this state of existence and the states of nature hypothesised by the European 'social contract' theorists is remarkably strong.⁷ What is even more remarkable, however, is the similarity between the ways in which the principal disadvantages attaching to these original states of mankind were theoretically overcome. For the European philosophers the solution lay in the creation of a social contract whereby all individuals voluntarily joined together to form societies with certain of their number having authority to govern them.⁸ According to the fourth myth the principal disadvantages attaching to the original state of Aboriginal life were similarly overcome by the creation of a form of social contract, here one in which all the members of the primaeval tribe agreed to recognize certain social rules and in which they effected this agreement by (in the words of the story) putting these rules onto Ngyarri's boards.

The full significance of this performance by the tribesmen seems quite clear. Each person by putting particular rules onto the boards in effect undertook with the others to recognize and obey the rules in question. This feature comes out more clearly in an earlier account by Alan Mungulu when he said that the tribesmen put onto boards not just the rules but also their promises to obey these rules. The concerted action by the tribesman thus had the threefold effect of creating a common commitment by all the members of the tribe to obey certain rules, of binding those individuals into a cohesive tribal community, and of obligating each participant to the tribe as a whole. This last effect naturally meant that breach of the rules would constitute a wrong not just against the individual persons aggrieved but also against the tribe itself; and this consequently implied that the

⁷ See esp Thomas Hobbes, *LEVIATHAN* (1651), ch 13; see also John Locke, *TWO TREATISES OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT* (1690), Book 2, ch 2; Jeremy Bentham, *OF LAWS IN GENERAL* (ed H L A Hart) (1970), p 253. It is interesting to note that Bentham believed that the Australian Aborigines were still living in what was in effect a state of nature; see Jeremy Bentham, *ANARCHICAL FALLACIES*, in John Bowring (ed), *THE WORKS OF JEREMY BENTHAM* (1962 reprint), vol 2, p 500.

⁸ See Thomas Hobbes, *op cit*, ch 17; John Locke, *op cit*, Book 2, ch 8.

enforcement of these rules would become a matter of concern for the whole tribe as well as for those who were personally affected. The story fully recognizes this latter aspect for it indicates that arrangements were accordingly made for the regular punishment of those who might breach the rules of the tribe. This is the implication of the statement: 'When anyone breaks any rule that we have put on this board, something will happen to him and his family'. In other words strict action would henceforth be taken against wrongdoers and punishment would no longer be dependent simply upon personal inclination.

This explanation of the relationship between law and the sacred boards needs no amendment in order to apply to the other myths in question. Indeed, without this explanation it is difficult to see how the boards could come to have the rule-establishing effect that is central to all except the third myth, at least if supernatural forces are to be discounted. There would certainly appear to be no good reason for presuming the existence of supernatural forces in the myths—at least in connection with the introduction of law—for all the characters in the stories were ostensibly ordinary human beings and no actions or events occurred that can be explained only in terms of non-natural causes.⁹

On the basis of the explanation presented the sacred boards in the myths can be seen to serve as something akin to a repository both for the rules of the tribe and for the commitment of the ancestral tribesmen to those rules. This conclusion is supported by impressions gained from Worora informants concerning traditional attitudes to their sacred boards. Taking both the myths and these impressions together it would appear that the Worora regarded their boards as in effect the physical basis both of the rules of the tribe and of the original

⁹ The reverse characteristics relating to tracking mentioned in Myth II simply locate the story in the mythical world. The only possible supernatural element in the myths is the 'power' referred to in Myth III. However, from all accounts this element played no part in the introduction of law and so the question of whether it should properly be described as natural or supernatural is irrelevant for present purposes. Albert Barunga, who recounted the third story, asserts that all living things, whether animate or inanimate, have power emanating from them which Aborigines at least can naturally perceive. The power in the story may accordingly be power of this kind which remained (or perhaps even increased) in the wood after it had been carved, or it may instead be a characteristic deemed to exist in sacred boards as a token of their importance and significance to the tribal culture. For other accounts of the power of sacred boards, see J R B Love, *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, op cit, p 228; Andreas Lommel, *Modern Culture Influences on the Aborigines*, (1950) 21 Oceania 14, at p 22; and n 43 of Part One of this article.

undertakings which gave them efficacy and thereby brought the tribe into being as a cohesive entity. It would, indeed, appear that the Worora took the significance of their boards one step further and also regarded them as the physical focus of their own allegiance to the tribal law and by extension the focus of their allegiance to the tribe itself and to the tribal culture.

Although the Worora regard the myths on Ngyarri and his boards as primarily concerned with their own sacred boards and tribal law they nonetheless also look upon these stories as dealing with the introduction of sacred boards and the law to Aboriginal tribes generally. The precise significance of the myths in this respect depends on whether the Worora tribe or the whole Aboriginal race is regarded as the original lawless community. The Worora's own boards were left in their traditional sacred ground when the remaining members of the tribe left their native territory in 1950. Today the boards which the Worora have acquired from other sources, including those which are passed from tribe to tribe and which are temporarily in their possession, are regarded as having much the same significance as their own boards. The boards which are passed from tribe to tribe appear also to represent to the Worora the unity of the Aboriginal culture and the affinity of one tribe to another.

Regardless of the precise relationship between the sacred boards and the law in the myths, it is clear that the tribal law of the Worora was not deemed to be 'God given' as was the law of most Aboriginal tribes,¹⁰ and it is also clear that the introduction of the law was not associated in any way with the principal spirit-beings recognized by the Worora, namely the Wonjinas. According to legend, these were creatures who first came to the Kimberley region with the wind long before the present race of Aborigines existed and who finally went to earth beneath various caves and rock-shelters leaving their portraits on the shelter walls.¹¹ I M Crawford, who has made a study of the

¹⁰ NB Ronald M Berndt's proposition: 'The "Law" to [Aborigines] is "God given", including all things associated with the Dreaming era' (*Law and Order in Aboriginal Australia*, in Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H Berndt (eds), *ABORIGINAL MAN IN AUSTRALIA* (1965), at p 174).

¹¹ On the Wonjinas, see J R B Love, *Notes on the Worora Tribe of North-Western Australia* (1917) 41 *Transac and Proc Royal Soc S Aust* 21, at p 37; idem, *Rock Paintings of the Worrora and their Mythological Interpretation*, (1930) 16 *Jo Royal Soc W Aust* 1, at pp 2-6; idem, *Mythology, Totemism and Religion* . . . , op cit, pp 224-25; idem, *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, pp 21-22; I M Crawford, *THE ART OF THE WANDJINA* (1968), ch 4. See also A P Elkin, *Rock-Paintings of North-West Australia* (1930) 1 *Oceania* 257;

Wonjinās, states that 'the behaviour of the Wandjinās provide an example which the [Kimberley] Aborigines, on occasions, cited as the correct way to act',¹² and thus it would appear that these beings were deemed to have indicated by example particular social rules. And it is clear that in their subsequent spirit state they were regarded as playing a part in supporting tribal law.¹³ However, it is evident from all the Worora stories told on this matter that the Wonjinās played no part either in the introduction of the basic corpus of law to the Worora,¹⁴ or in the introduction of the sacred boards.

The myths indicate that the law was established by a deliberate and natural act of the primaevial tribesmen, namely that of making mutual promises. And they also indicate that the boards which prompted, or facilitated, this act were basically man-made artefacts¹⁵ which had no manifestly supernatural or otherwise abnormal effects, at least in relation to rules or the behaviour of men.¹⁶ The conclusion that the sacred boards were basically man-made artefacts thus raises the question of the relationship between these objects and religion for traditional anthropological thinking has tended to the conclusion that the relationship between Aboriginal sacred boards and religion is both intimate and profound. This must now be doubted, at least in relation to the Worora. Part of the problem here concerns what is meant by religion and on this matter opinions differ as widely as they do in respect of law. The characteristics that will be adopted here as the basic criteria of religion are those referred to by the Berndts in their

A Capell, *Mythology in Northern Kimberley, North-West Australia* (1939) Oceania 382, at pp 390-92.

¹² Op cit, at p 35.

¹³ See the statements made by Kimberley Aborigines when approaching the cave paintings of the Wonjinās as reported by I M Crawford, op cit, at pp 32, 37, 40.

¹⁴ Cf, however, the statement in the recent pamphlet, *Mowanjum Art and Craft*: 'The Wandjinās gave us our songs and dances, our stories and legends and our tribal laws'. This publication is, however, nothing more than a publicity pamphlet and the inaccuracies that it contains concerning other matters render this statement of dubious value. Note also in this connection n 31 and text, infra. *Quaere*, what is the significance of Albert Barunga's statements concerning the Wonjinās and tribal law, contained in M E Lofgren, *PATTERNS OF LIFE* (1975), at pp 4-5?

¹⁵ Cf, however, Love's statement: 'These sacred objects [viz the boards] are all supposed to be of supernatural origin' (*STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, p 213). It would be interesting to know his justification for this statement. He indicates elsewhere that members of the Worora tribe did actually make sacred boards from time to time; see *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, op cit, p 229. Cf, however, A Capell, op cit, p 395.

¹⁶ On the 'power' of the sacred boards, see n 9, supra.

consideration of religion in Aboriginal culture; 'Religion, in general terms', they say, 'has to do with such items as beliefs and practices relating to the supernatural, the meaning of life, and the possibility of survival for the human spirit after the death of the physical body'.¹⁷ This proposition seems to accord with the common notion of religion. The answer to the principal question thus depends on the extent to which the sacred boards of the Worora were concerned with the supernatural, life after death, or the meaning of life.

The traditional Worora culture, like all Aboriginal culture, was very much concerned with a belief in supernatural beings and supernatural activity. The most important of the supernatural beings were the Wonjinas who have already been referred to. According to the Kimberley Aborigines these were in fact their primaevial ancestors; they were believed to have created the physical features of the Kimberley area and to have engaged in numerous exploits before finally going to earth and becoming spirits. In their spirit state they were believed responsible for bringing rain, ensuring the continuance of food supplies, and controlling the distribution of spirits of children for conception.¹⁸ Other spirits that were recognized by the Worora include the Kaiara, who were similar to the Wonjinas,¹⁹ 'devils' (*agula*),²⁰ and the spirits of animals and reptiles.²¹ The Worora appear not to have believed in any god in the sense of a 'First Cause' or spirit who has always existed or who has control over human life and destiny; at most the Worora spirits were believed able to affect human life but not to control or influence it in any specific way. In his earliest article on the Worora, Love said that the tribe believed in 'an invisible, benevolent, and creating god',²² but this was doubtless a misapprehension on his part for he never made the same assertion again²³ even though he

¹⁷ Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H Berndt, *THE WORLD OF THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS* (1964), p 185.

¹⁸ See references cited in n 11, supra.

¹⁹ See I M Crawford, *op cit*, ch 9.

²⁰ See *op cit*, pp 91-92; A Capell, *op cit*, at p 287.

²¹ See J R B Love, *Rock Paintings . . .*, *op cit*, pp 3-4; *idem*, *Notes . . .*, *op cit*, p 36; A Capell, *op cit*, at pp 393-95; I M Crawford, *op cit*, chs 13-14.

²² *Notes . . .*, at p 37. An amateur anthropologist and friend of J R B Love, H R Balfour, who spent some time with the Worora said in a lecture to the Anthropological Society of Victoria in 1934: '[The Worora] believed in a supernatural being creator of men who came from the Glenelg River. . . . They also believed in a Supreme Being, the first of all, but seldom spoke of Him' (from unpublished script). Love's 1930 reassessment of this point, however, seems more reasonable; see reference in footnote following.

²³ See in this connection, J R B Love, *Rock Paintings . . .*, *op cit*, at p 9; A Capell, *op cit*, p 387.

often referred to the Worora religion and spirits in his later writings.

The Worora believed in the continued existence of the human spirit after death. The spirits of dead adults were believed to haunt the caves where their bones were deposited after the mortuary rites,²⁴ and the spirits of dead children were believed to return to their original spirit places (*wungurru*) for possible reincarnation. Some Worora informants today say that the spirits of their dead were believed eventually to live again in another world, but this may well be a modern idea that came only after the arrival of Christianity.²⁵

The accounts that we have of observances concerning the Wonjinias are scant but indicate that their primary function was to placate these spirits so that they would promote fertility and refrain from punishing or acting unfairly towards the tribe, for example by bringing cyclones, withholding rain, or striking people dead with lightning.²⁶ The Wonjina observances appear mostly to have been performed before the cave paintings of these beings though they were sometimes performed at other locations.²⁷ Significantly, however, they were never performed on the sacred ceremonial grounds (*kurangandum*) which were the only sites where the sacred boards could be exhibited and handled. It is not surprising therefore to find that the boards played no part in any of the known Wonjina observances. The only known instance of any connection between the Worora's sacred boards and the Wonjina paintings themselves is one reported by Love: 'At one [sacred] ceremony, that of showing the sacra to a number of visitors from neighbouring tribes, an interesting connexion was shown between the sacra and the totemic ancestral system. Two of the largest "bull-roarers" were placed separately and each painted with eyes, nose, and navel of a Wondjuna. One man, who was familiar with sailing luggers, explained that these were each inaiuri (great), the rest of the

²⁴ See J R B Love, *Rock Paintings . . .*, op cit, at p 6; idem, *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, op cit, pp 225, 229; I M Crawford, op cit, at pp 93-94.

²⁵ Cf, however, A Capell's assertion: 'Where the Wandjina cult is found, the afterworld lies on an island westward' (op cit, at p 392). This is at variance, however, with most other accounts of traditional Worora beliefs on this matter.

²⁶ See I M Crawford, op cit, pp 32-33, 37, 40. See also J R B Love, *Mythology and Totemism* (1935) 1 Mankind 270. For the text of a rain-making song, see J R B Love, *Rock Paintings . . .*, op cit, p 10. On the painting and repainting of images of Wonjinias, see J R B Love, *Rock Paintings . . .*, op cit, at 6-7; idem, *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .* op cit, at pp 224-25; idem, *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, at pp 22-25; A P Elkin, op cit, at pp 260-63, 275-77; I M Crawford, ch 3.

²⁷ See I M Crawford, op cit, p 37.

sacra being the "crew".²⁸ For reasons that will be presented below, however, this connection between the two sacred boards and the Wonjinas probably does not signify any intimate association between the Worora boards and religion.

An allied search for a connection between the Worora law and the Wonjinas or Wonjina observances is a little more fruitful than that pertaining to the boards and the Wonjinas. One obvious connection is the fact that rules of law prescribed the observances and procedures to be followed in respect of these particular spirits. This, however, was simply a formal relationship involving the natural use of the rules of a society to determine practices to be adopted by members of that society; as such this association was wholly unexceptional. A more interesting connection is the fact that the Worora believed that the Wonjinas might punish or treat unfavourably those who broke the tribal law. As a result of this belief, when men approached the cave paintings of these spirits or left offerings for them they observed certain protocol by calling out to the Wonjinas that they and their people had kept the law.²⁹ The Wonjinas, however, were never recognized specifically as the guardians of the law; at most they were regarded as beings who took an interest in the observance of the law and who were liable to act against transgressors if an opportunity arose. As has already been observed, the Wonjinas were certainly not regarded as *the* law-givers or as the beings primarily responsible for the introduction of law to the Worora.³⁰ The Worora did, however, regard certain mythical beings as responsible for the introduction of isolated tribal rules and these beings may well have included Wonjinas.³¹

There were apparently no ceremonies or observances of a ritual nature connected with any other spirits recognized by the Worora, though observances may perhaps have been conducted in respect of the Kaiara as for the Wonjinas. It would appear that there were no Worora ceremonies or ritual observances connected with the spirits of the dead.³²

²⁸ *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, op cit, at p 229.

²⁹ See I M Crawford, op cit, at pp 37, 40.

³⁰ See n 14 and text, supra.

³¹ For two accounts of the introduction of particular rules by mythical beings, see I M Crawford, op cit, at pp 107, 119-20 (the informants were members of the Ngarinyin and Worora tribes respectively). Note also in this connection n 12 and text, supra.

³² The nearest thing to such an observance was the deliberate 'nervous chattering, loud talking and forced laughing at very thin jokes' that took place whilst the body of a dead man was being placed onto the bleaching platform.

In sum, then, neither the sacred boards nor the law of the Worora had any significant connection with spirits or with ceremonies or observances connected with such beings. This accordingly precludes any connection being made between the boards and religion, or law and religion, on grounds relating specifically to the supernatural. The isolation of the Worora beliefs relating to the sacred boards from those relating to spirits, and the resulting non-involvement of the Worora spirits in the introduction of law to the Worora, is in fact easily explicable. Evidence suggests that the beliefs relating to these various matters came to the Kimberley tribes over the centuries as part of quite distinct cults. A Capell distinguishes three such cults; one (the earliest) concerns the *agula* (devil spirits), another (probably the second) concerns the Wonjinas, and yet another (which would appear to be the latest) involves the sacred boards.³³ All of these cults became part of the general corpus of beliefs of these tribes, but interestingly they never syncretised as usually happens when a new cult is adopted alongside an earlier one. The sole recorded instance of a joining of the Wonjina cult and that involving the boards—the account of the two sacred boards which bore a portrait of the Wonjinas³⁴—was probably either an isolated instance of syncretism or an indication that a late movement towards joining the two cults had in fact begun. It is clear, however, that for all practical purposes the various cults in question always remained quite distinct.

Love never made any comment concerning the relationship between Worora tribal law and religion. He did, however, make it quite clear in his writings that he perceived an intimate relationship between religion and the Worora sacred boards.³⁵ One reason for his discerning such a relationship obviously relates to the awe, solemnity and ritual that were characteristic of the occasions on which the boards were handled and used; another probably involves a combination of Love's own religious background and his admiration for Aboriginal culture, both of which doubtless pre-disposed him towards viewing all Aboriginal ritual as *prima facie* religious in the sense of pertaining, like

Love was told that this was done 'to frighten away the ghost of the dead man, lest he might come and take another of them away with him'; see *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, p 153.

³³ *Mythology in Northern Kimberley, North-West Australia* (1939) 9 Oceania 382.

³⁴ See n 28 and text, *supra*.

³⁵ See, eg J R B Love, *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, ch 25; *idem*, *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, *op cit*, pp 227-30.

Christianity, to God or at least the supernatural.³⁶ The awe, solemnity and ritual associated with the sacred boards are evident in the following account by Love of a Worora initiation ceremony:³⁷

At about nine o'clock in the morning the men prepared a bed of green leaves on the *kurangandum* [sacred] ground, about fifty feet in diameter. Several of the men went off to the cave and brought all the sacra, which were placed on this large bed of green leaves, and covered with leaves. On the opposite side of a big bottle tree, hidden from view of this bed of leaves, another large circle of leaves was prepared. When the leaves were ready, Tjangaloi, a tribal father of Barangga [the novice], whose real father is dead, went off to the creek and returned with Barangga and his guards. The men all took their stations round the second bed of leaves. The youth was passed into the centre of the circle and went round the circle of men, rubbing his abdomen against that of each man in turn, after which he was set on the bed of leaves. While some of the men surrounded him, and gave him instructions to keep his head bowed, others of the men went off to the covered heap of sacra and brought them, one by one, passed them over the young man's head from behind, and rubbed each one against his cheeks and shoulders, and then laid them sitting on the youth's thighs. He gazed at each one as it was laid on his thighs, quivering at the touch of each one as it was gently touched against his cheek or shoulders. Each man who brought an object shouted to young Barangga its history and told him to look carefully on it.

The general procedure and ritual just described were common to all the ceremonies involving the sacred boards.³⁸

The ritualistic nature of the ceremonies and observances involving the Worora boards is, however, quite explicable simply in humanistic terms without recourse to any supernatural significance. Given that the boards represented the social obligations to which the members of the tribe were subject, and given that by extension they also represented the end which fulfilment of those obligations was designed to achieve—viz. order, peace, and the continuation of the tribal life in its traditional manner—the ritual and solemnity associated with the use of the boards can be seen essentially as demonstrations of recognition of what the boards signified and as means of reinforcing respect for this significance. The high degree of solemnity and ritual surrounding the

³⁶ See in this respect *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, pp 219-20; and see also *Mythology, Totemism and Religion . . .*, op cit, p 229.

³⁷ *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, pp 213-14.

³⁸ See, eg, op cit, pp 217-18.

handling of the boards together with the use of such adjectives as 'sacred' or 'holy' ('*mama*' in Worora) in connection with these objects thus indicate how deep was the significance of the boards to the tribe.

Love himself appreciated something of the humanistic nature of the observances involving the boards for he said: 'The reverent handling of the sacra, and the secrecy surrounding their use and the meetings on sacred ground, all serve to impress upon the Worora man his dignity as a member of his tribe, his duties and privileges as a Worora man.'³⁹ But this statement does not go nearly far enough. The significance of the boards was such that it concerned in effect the whole tribal way of life including the ends and purpose of Worora life. In a word, it concerned the very meaning of life for a Worora tribesman, a meaning which looked not to the hereafter but simply to everyday existence within the pattern of traditional Worora culture. It is on account of this general significance, then, that the Worora boards may be described as 'religious' and the underlying system of principles and beliefs be characterized as the Worora religion. W E H Stanner has said: 'If the word "religion" means, as its probable etymology suggests, two dispositions in man—to ponder on the foundations of human life in history, and to unite or reconcile oneself with the design incorporated in those foundations—then the Aborigines were a very religious-minded people.'⁴⁰ On this definition the Worora would prove no exception to Stanner's general conclusion.

It is clear from what has already been said that the myths concerning Ngyarri and his boards fostered the belief that the Worora's sacred boards were intimately concerned with the tribal rules and obligations, and through them with the whole tribal way of life. But the myths would in fact appear to have done more than this; they seem also to have been instrumental in continuing that way of life unchanged. The immutable element of Aboriginal culture is well-

³⁹ *Mythology, Totemism and Religion* . . . , op cit, p 229. And nb, his subsequent statement: 'These ceremonies [involving the boards], with the privilege, restricted to fully initiated men, of partaking in them, are perhaps to be regarded as of moral, rather than religious significance, in so far as they emphasize the rights and privileges of a man as a member of his tribe' (loc cit). However, he then went on: 'But they have a religious aspect also, as shown by the connexion of the sacra with the mythological Wondjuna, and the custody of the maiangarinja by the hordes in rotation'. The connection referred to apparently concerns the boards with the Wondjuna paintings: see n 28 and text, supra.

⁴⁰ *Religion, Totemism, and Symbolism*, in Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H Berndt, *ABORIGINAL MAN IN AUSTRALIA*, p 215.

recognized. As Ronald M Berndt has said: 'Among others, there are two distinctive elements which characterize Aboriginal society [and] one is the emphasis on maintaining the *status quo*, looking to the past as a guide for action in the present and the immediate future'.⁴¹ (The other is the articulation of almost all social relationships in kin terms.) We know, of course, that Aboriginal culture did change through the ages,⁴² though it is nonetheless true that in general Aboriginal culture did remain constant for substantial periods of time.

The general pressures on Aborigines in pre-contact times to conform to existing traditions and patterns of behaviour are well-known. Prominent among these were the external pressures created by the environment and in particular by the often hostile climate, the harsh physical surroundings and the relative scarcity of natural resources. These not only presented little scope or opportunity for experiments into new ways of living but rendered experimentation with the delicate *status quo* dangerous to survival. For the Worora, however, there would also appear to have been an important internal pressure against social change which resulted from the myths. This was a product of the belief—or at least a strong suspicion—that any change in the traditional rules of the tribe would result in the complete collapse of order and that the tribe would thereupon return to the disordered life that had existed before the law was introduced.

In more formal terms the Worora way of thinking on this matter appears to have been as follows. Originally, according to the myths, there was a lack of order. Then the tribesmen put their promises and rules onto Nygarri's boards and thereby created the traditional social system of the Worora. This system did not, however, make any allowances for changing the rules and social order and thus any attempted change would (or could) upset the existing system and consequently bring a return of the disordered way of life that had existed before the introduction of the law. The Worora did not, of course, put their argument in precisely this way though the accounts given by Worora informants concerning traditional attitudes to the law and the sacred boards lead strongly to the conclusion that such was the theoretical basis for adherence by Worora natives to their traditional social rules and thus to their traditional pattern of living.

⁴¹ *Law and Order in Aboriginal Australia*, op cit, p 169.

⁴² On aspects of change in Aboriginal culture in the Kimberley region and the possible causes of such changes, see A Capell, op cit (concerning myths and cults), and I M Crawford, op cit (concerning art).

There is one final matter concerning the myths on the introduction of law which requires comment. Although the Worora regard the sacred boards as having been instrumental in the introduction of their traditional law generally, the myths indicate—and the Worora personally stress—one particular group of rules as being specially connected with the boards. These are the rules which established the *wunan*, or sharing system, that was a central feature of life among the Kimberley tribes. Some Worora informants also go on to stress the connection between the boards and their kinship system, but interestingly this always seems to come second in importance to the *wunan*, perhaps because the kinship rules are by themselves constitutive in nature and are thus purely descriptive here of an institution whereas the *wunan* rules are also normative and consequently concern the proper forms of behaviour to be followed by members of the tribe. The kinship system is anyway involved in the *wunan* and may thus be taken for granted by tribal informants when they refer to the latter phenomenon.

The *wunan* was so important and so central to the traditional Worora way of life that any discussion of Worora law with members of the tribe almost invariably involves reference to this other institution. An indicator of the close relationship between the tribal law and the *wunan* is the fact that the Worora tend to use both words interchangeably. They do not, though, use the word '*wunan*' to translate the word 'law'; they generally use the word '*mama*' ('sacred' or 'holy') to fulfil that function.⁴³ Another significant indicator of the close relationship is the fact that the myths told by the Worora on the introduction of both phenomena are basically the same. This can be seen by comparing the third of the stories set out in Part One of this article with the other three. This third story was told as the myth on the introduction of law though it in fact concerns just the boards and exchange and does not refer to law at all. The informant subsequently admitted that this myth principally concerns the *wunan* but added that it is also the myth on the introduction of law. On the other hand the first story does clearly concern the introduction of the whole corpus

⁴³ J R B Love gave the words '*wunindiru*' (lit a tradition held from the beginning of time) and '*ngala-ngala*' (lit word) as the Worora for 'law'; see his *English-Worora Vocabulary* (unpublished typescript), p 61. These words, however, are clearly no more than loose synonyms that may be used to connote 'law' in particular contexts. The Worora have never used these words as a translation for 'law' during the research from which this present article results.

of law to the tribe, and was indeed presented by the informant on this basis, though it in fact bears the title 'How Wunan was Formed'.⁴⁴

Much work has still to be done to discover the precise details of the *wunan*. Essentially, however, it appears to have been a system of inter-personal relationships through which mutual obligations were incurred, and thus social cohesion strengthened, by means of sharing and exchange.⁴⁵ Present information suggests that the *wunan* operated at three 'levels' among the Worora. The first concerned the Worora tribe *qua* a cluster of family groups. At this level goods were exchanged or shared either *between* families (more accurately between the heads of each family representing all their dependents), or *through* families thereby involving every member of each family group. It was at this first level that the *wunan* was involved with the social organization of the tribe. According to informants it was the position of each member of the tribe within the *wunan* at this level that formally determined that person's social rights and duties. The position of any person within the *wunan* might change naturally with that individual's personal circumstances, for example upon marriage or becoming a widow; it could, however, also change in certain other circumstances. Fathers, for example, could exchange their sons for training purposes with the result that the adopted child then assumed a position in the

⁴⁴ The written source from which Myth I was taken (see n 30 in Part One of this article) does, however, have added to the myth a short description of the *wunan* by way of an introduction and also a brief account of the initiation of young men by way of an ending. These are clearly not part of the myth itself. The text of the introduction is as follows:

Wunan is a sort of council formed by elders. Here each member take his part as a leader of each tribe. All people share with everything and care for the aged widows and the young people. This is how people lived in the past and still do today. If a kangaroo is killed then it is cut up and put into *wunan* and all have a fair share. Even if a stranger enters a tribe, also widows, these are brought to the *wunan* group. There the elders discuss as to who should take care of the visitors until they are ready to leave the tribe and the same happens to the widows and single men. Whenever a coroboree needs to be handed to another tribe it is handed over through the *wunan* and so are other arts and craft. The mother-of-pearl shell is an important object. It cannot be given away as a present to a friend but first must go through the *wunan*. It is known as the 'peace-maker' and it stands for peace. Way back in the dreamtime. . . .

⁴⁵ Published accounts of the *wunan* are rare; see, however, Phyllis M Kaberry, *ABORIGINAL WOMEN* (1939), at pp 166-74; see also Kim Akerman, *The Use of Traditional Social Structures in Kimberley Community Development Programmes* (unpublished paper), pp 4-5. Both of these accounts of the *wunan*, however, would appear to be too restrictive. On sharing and exchange among Aborigines in general, see Ronald M Berndt and Catherine H Berndt, *THE WORLD OF THE FIRST AUSTRALIANS*, pp 106-17.

wunan appropriate to a natural child of his adoptive father; this could in fact result in a child assuming a 'higher' position in the *wunan* order than that held by his natural father.

The most important item of practical importance that was shared through families at this first level was food, and the *wunan* rules ensured that every member of each horde shared in the food that was available even if this meant that everyone received only a minute portion.⁴⁶ The *wunan* was thus instrumental not only in increasing the social cohesion of the community by the sharing of vital goods but also in ensuring so far as possible the survival of the members of the horde, and thus the survival of the horde itself. The following account by Love is an indication of the lengths to which food sharing and exchange took place even in ordinary circumstances among the Worora: 'Malanali and his two little daughters [were] eating together. Ritjiwola broke off a piece of her bread and handed it to her father. He reached out his hand, took it without a word, and ate it, then went on eating his own. By and by he broke off a piece of his bread, reached out his hand and gave it to Ritjiwola, who gravely ate it. Then Rirngiwola, the baby, broke off a piece of hers and gave it to her father, to receive a piece from him later on'.⁴⁷

The items that were exchanged between the heads of families at the first level might be edible or of a practical nature but they were often of an ornamental or 'sacred' nature. Of particular note in this respect were mother-of-pearl shell (*chogula*) which were sometimes treated as ornaments and sometimes as sacred objects.

The second level at which the *wunan* operated concerned people not *qua* members of families but simply *qua* individuals. The sharing and exchange took place at this level principally between two individuals or two groups of individuals and might occur either simply as acts of friendship⁴⁸ or in accordance with formal requirements. Exchange of goods was formally required, for example, between the tribal brothers of a dead man and those who removed the dead man's bones from the bleaching platform,⁴⁹ and between *rambadba* (mutual avoidance) pairs. Love has said concerning exchange between the latter: 'The *rambadba* pairs have laid on them the duty of giving

⁴⁶ For Love's accounts of exchange of food among the Worora, see STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY, p 73; *Notes . . .*, pp 30, 32. And on manipulation of the food-sharing rules, see STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY, pp 86-87.

⁴⁷ STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY, p 92.

⁴⁸ See, eg, J R B Love, *op cit*, pp 9-10, 90-91.

⁴⁹ See *op cit*, p 159.

each other presents. . . . A mother-in-law will make her own hair into a string, and give it to her son-in-law. He will give her some of the kangaroo that he has killed, and so on'.⁵⁰

Besides purely voluntary exchange and exchange formally required by tribal custom it appears that there was also at this second level a middle category of what may be termed conventional exchange. This involved exchange of goods between pairs of more or less permanent partners.⁵¹ Almost every, if not every, member of the tribe had a partner with whom he or she exchanged goods; the various pairs of partners in effect formed a series of chains, the 'ends' of which joined up with members of other tribes. It would appear that almost any goods might be exchanged by these partners so long as the goods in question had some value. The recipient might keep what he was given (as would obviously happen in the case of food) or he might pass the exchanged object on to somebody else. Phyllis Kaberry, who examined conventional exchange through the *wunan* in some detail, stressed the economic function and value of this practice.⁵² Although this aspect was clearly important it nonetheless seems clear that the general function of this conventional exchange was substantially wider for it also fostered friendship and prompted social cohesion by the creation of mutual obligations.⁵³

The third level at which the *wunan* operated concerned the tribe as a body and involved, from the point of view of the Worora, exchange between the Worora and its neighbouring tribes. Love has listed as the kind of goods which changed hands at inter-tribal exchange ceremonies, spears, spear-throwers, belts, head-bands, and hair ornaments, with the Worroa men who lived near the Mission often giving for their part tobacco and flour.⁵⁴ The function of this exchange was similar to that of the intra-tribal exchange; it fostered solidarity, especially between otherwise hostile tribes, it promoted inter-tribal friendship, which was of particular importance in respect of wife-

⁵⁰ Op cit, p 129; and see also idem, pp 10, 129-30.

⁵¹ See Phyllis M Kaberry, loc cit.

⁵² See op cit, p 166; see also Kim Akerman, op cit, p 4.

⁵³ The *locus classicus* on non-economic functions of gift-giving is of course Marcel Mauss, *THE GIFT* (trans Ian Cunnison, intro E E Evans-Pritchard) (1954). For a recent consideration of this subject see Richard M Titmuss, *THE GIFT RELATIONSHIP* (1971) esp chs 5, 13.

⁵⁴ *STONE-AGE BUSHMEN OF TO-DAY*, p 192; and see pp 191-93 for a description of inter-tribal exchange. On inter-tribal exchange in the Kimberley region generally, see F D McCarthy, 'Trade' in *Aboriginal Australia, and 'Trade' Relationships with Torres Strait, New Guinea and Malaya*, (1939) 9 *Oceania* 405, at pp 435-36.

bestowal, and it facilitated the introduction of goods from other tribes some of which (eg, colouring materials) might not be available locally. The most important objects that were exchanged between tribes, however, were sacred boards and other sacred objects such as boomerangs (which were not otherwise used by the Worora) and mother-of-peal shells. Each tribe of course had its own sacred objects which were not moved from tribal lands. Other sacred objects, though, were passed from tribe to tribe along well-defined circuits some of which probably went right round western and central Australia.⁵⁵

It is at this third level of exchange that the myths (or at least all except the first of the myths⁵⁶) set out in Part One of this article are particularly significant. Ostensibly the relevant sections of these stories indicate simply the way in which the original possession of the sacred boards was either secured or legitimised, namely by an exchange of goods. But these sections were regarded by at least the Worora as going further than this. They were deemed to establish by example the general practice necessary for the proper transference of sacred boards from one tribe to another, and by analogy the correct response due from anyone who received a gift from another. The involvement of the *wunan* in the myths is not, however, merely incidental to the account of the introduction of law. On the contrary, it is shown as essential to that event for according to the myths the Worora legitimately had possession of the sacred boards, and therefore legitimately

⁵⁵ Kim Akerman has established two Kimberley circuits involving the Worora when they were still at Kunmunya. The inner circuit connected (clockwise and using modern place-names): Kunmunya, Kalumburu, Gibb River, Mount House, Derby, and then again Kunmunya. The outer circuit joined up: Kunmunya, Kalumburu, Forrest River, Wyndham, Kununurra (with an exit point for Port Keats), Hall's Creek (with an exit point for Balgo), Christmas Creek (with an exit point for Cherrabun and Broome), Gogo, Fitzroy Crossing, Noonkanbah, Liveringa, Derby, and again Kunmunya. The people at Mowanjum now come between Liveringa and either Derby or Kalumburu. *Quaere*, to what extent were these circuits in existence prior to white-contact? Cf J R B Love's comments in *Mythology, Totemism and Religion* . . . , at p 228, which suggest that the transmission of goods from outside the Kimberley area was of quite recent origin. Cf F D McCarthy, *loc cit*.

⁵⁶ The omission of particular matters in Myth I may simply be due to the lack of expertise of the informant in reducing oral stories to writing (see n 30 in Part One of this article). It is clear that the writer added glosses to the basic story (eg, the account of the marriage rules and of the fight between Wodoi and Jungun); the writer may conversely have left out particular matters—such as the giving of goods to Ngyarri in exchange for his boards—that would otherwise have been included had the story been recounted orally.

possessed the law, only by virtue of exchange, and thus in effect only by virtue of the *wunan*. For the Worora, then, the *wunan* was not just an important product of tribal law, it was also responsible for the tribe legitimately having the law in the first place.

The myths on Ngyarri and his boards thus indicate the theoretical relationship between three central features of traditional Worora culture—the sacred boards, the law, and the *wunan*. Further research is now needed to examine the social and functional relationships between these three phenomena and also to pursue other questions concerning the myths. Where did these stories come from and how widely were they adopted? What myths or beliefs did they replace concerning the introduction of law? And how do these myths compare with those on the introduction of law and sacred boards to be found in other tribes? The field for future study is wide open.

ANTHONY DICKEY*

* Senior Lecturer in Law, University of Western Australia.