

THE PLACE OF THE COMMUNITY IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS:  
TWO ABORIGINAL SETTLEMENTS IN CAPE YORK

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*Mr. von Sturmer, an anthropologist who has studied Aboriginal communities in Cape York, offers some very stimulating and challenging thoughts for teachers.*

This paper treats two analytically separable but interwoven themes: Firstly, the role of the community in the educational process, and secondly, the effects of the community situation on the classroom situation, and *vice versa*. A major point of departure in the argument is the *view that* Aboriginal communities, defined here as *Aboriginal settlements under special governmental administration*, can be seen as educational agencies or institutions in a process of Westernization. At least this is how statements relating to policy and community planning can usefully be interpreted.

The approach employed is essentially anthropological. This means among other things that I shall not be attempting to see the failure of the educational process in these communities in terms of the failure of individual Aboriginal children to make the grade. In fact I would hope to be able to avoid talking about failure or achievement or progress at all. What I am effectively concerned with is more the structural implications of one sector of community life for another, or for other sectors. And if I do posit reasons for the failure of the educational system, I hope they will be regarded as extremely tentative and in the form of working hypotheses only. More importantly, the term *failure* will take on meaning only so far as it relates to a *failure* of policy; and finally, the reasons put forward will be couched in terms of structural implications alluded to above.

To conclude the preamble, a few remarks are necessary by way of background to the communities, Edward River and Aurukun, to which for obvious reasons my discussion is limited. I have conducted fieldwork in both; they are neighbours on the Western coast of Cape York Peninsula; there are strong linguistic and

other cultural ties between the two; social ties are strong, and there is constant intercommunity visiting. They are of great interest for comparative purposes, for despite their proximity and their obvious similarities, they have had different histories; Aurukun was started as early as 1904 and is still run by the Presbyterian Church; Edward River was commenced in the late 1930's by the Anglican Church and was transferred to the Department of Native Affairs in 1967. Perhaps the most striking difference, for the purpose of this paper, is that Aurukun undoubtedly has one of the highest educational standards of any of the Peninsular settlements, while Edward River has almost certainly the lowest. Hopefully, and despite the fact that I confine attention to these two communities, the remarks made will have some general applicability. For though the content varies from community to community, I would be prepared to argue that there is a basic underlying uniformity.

#### A. THE COMMUNITY AS AN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTION

The change in government policy-making for the Australian Aboriginals coincided with a change in attitude from the old belief that Aboriginals were ineducable, hopelessly primitive and on the verge of extinction, to a belief that Aboriginals were after all not so different from you and me, and consequently were *capable of progress* through education. It would not be too much a distortion of the facts to say that government policy, even now, is primarily aimed at *educating Aboriginals to take their place as full and useful members of Australian Society*. It is basically a policy of Westernization, or modernization. Cultural pluralism is now also coming to be accepted as a principle. But it would be wrong to think that this represented a radical departure from the old policy or was contradictory to it, for the emphasis is very much on the *cultural*. I mean that traditional culture is encouraged - or more accurately, that a start has been made in this direction - but only in things such as dancing, singing and painting. It is cultural on this strictly superficial level. There has been no encouragement of traditional social institutions or social forms.

Probably the most important single change in the process of Westernization was the bringing of Aboriginals together into village-style communities, and the taking of them off the land. The ramifications are limitless; many have been stated and re-stated to the point of banality, and the actual forms they have taken have varied considerably from place to place. However, there are several broad themes which can be brought out and I propose discussing them under two headings: (1) inter-group

relations; (2) decision-making.

1. *Inter-Group Relations.* When Aboriginals are moved from the bush into the settlement, social horizons are immediately narrowed in spatial terms, but widened in social terms. Traditional enemies are brought together and forced to interact at a relatively harmonious, or ostensibly harmonious, face to face level. Traditional patterns of inter-group relations become upset or confused, or are expressed under new guises. Complicating the issue is the fact that a settlement is rarely established at a single point in time. Aurukun is a good case in point, where the Aboriginals in the immediate vicinity of the mission site and to the north came in from the inception, the southerners arriving in dribs and drabs, many as recently as 10 years ago. Present living arrangements reflect in large degree the history of settlement, with the more recent immigrants living on the edges, in fairly tightly-knit groups, often in the direction from which they came. The great multiplicity of groups and the re-housing program presently underway disturb the basic pattern, which, nevertheless, has a strong operational value in explaining disputes; it is used for this purpose by both Aboriginals and white staff. At Edward River the pattern is even more distinctive, with two broad and separable groupings, one living to the north and the other to the south of the administrative complex which includes the school. The names, Thaayorr-side and Mungkan-side, refer to the languages which are spoken by the respective groups. The Thaayorr group regards itself as a cut above the Mungkans; they are more achievement oriented; they see themselves as more responsible; and their view of their rival group is shared by the white staff. There is a simple hierarchy operating: white staff - Thaayorr-side - Mungkan-side (descending order)<sup>1\*</sup>.

At Aurukun, the system of stratification is much more complex. Determinants are: proximity of clan land to mission site, traditional language (Wik Mungkan is the *lingua franca*), length of residence in the mission, and familiarity with English.

The closer one's traditional land to the mission, the *truer* one's speech of Wik Mungkan and of English (reflecting higher schooling), and the longer one's family residence in the settlement, the higher one's social status; on this has depended, in large measure, one's chances of cornering the prestigious jobs (remember-

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\*See footnotes at end of article.

ing the consequences in terms of wages, dress, housing), the siting of one's place of residence (as already indicated), and one's degree of familiarity with the white staff. Further it is clearly reflected in church membership, community politics, and the degree of traditional orientation.

The resultant hierarchy can perhaps be expressed simply as follows (in descending order):

- white staff;
- mission *elite* (commonly referred to by the white staff as the *status quo*);
- middle-range group - north of Kendall River but well to the south of Archer River;
- the *bushies* - south of Kendall River.

There is a high degree of interaction between contiguous rungs in the hierarchy, and little between non-contiguous rungs. At the moment the hierarchy is starting to break down. A change in mission policy has meant that the *mission elite* is becoming increasingly peripheral; and the *bushies* from the south, because of higher traditionalism, numerical strength, and success in employment and education, are becoming increasingly powerful.

The point that I wish to make is this : inter-group relations are largely as they were before settlement, at a structural level, though the context of the relations has often changed drastically. This is not to say that there has not been some structural adaptation, where groups have a tendency to align themselves on what they would themselves describe now as a *tribal* basis, which represents a radical departure from the greater segmentation of traditional times. Further, these groups are stratified according to certain criteria, by both the white staff and the Aboriginals themselves. The stratification is important in that it regulates inter-group and inter-personal behaviour. Moreover, it carries over into every facet of social life, including the school.

2. *Decision-making.* Community life has also meant that Aboriginals have forfeited individual decision-making powers, especially in the economic sphere and in the sphere of law and order. We could also include residence and living arrangements, education, health, and so on. These powers, once personal, have been handed over to the white staff (and so depersonalized). Put in other terms, it means that the structure of life is imposed

from outside; social changes have been implemented, suddenly, from outside, with no reference to the Aboriginals living in the communities and often poorly understood by them. There is little continuity between the forms with which the Aboriginals are familiar, and the forms in terms of which they are now obliged to live. The staff are the directors and the controllers; the Aboriginals are the directed and controlled. Certainly this is how they perceive their position. The staff and everything associated with them - the Church, the Office, the Mission House, the Store, the Clinic and the School - represent authority. We can insert here too the Aboriginal Council and the Aboriginal Police, for they are seen as extensions of this authority. It is no accident that in surprisingly many cases - though not all - the councillors and the police are somewhat peripheral to the village-community.

And it is more than simply a matter of authority. It is a question of life style. The staff have had the best houses; they get the best wages; they have electricity and running water; they get food parcels in on the planes; they wear better clothes; they talk a language which is at times understandable, and when it suits them, a language they can rapidly render incomprehensible. It is a private society which looks outwards rather than into the community. All this may be unavoidable; and as things in themselves, none of the items listed is probably all that important.

Where they do assume importance is when we consider what policy is about - *to educate Aboriginals to take their place as full and useful members in Australian society.* Extending further: policy in Queensland seems to be that these communities should be permanent and economically viable, under the control of their Aboriginal members, run along the lines of a normal country town. Administrators see the community itself as an educational device: for example, the store teaches people to handle a Western cash economy and to learn family budgeting; housing of an increasingly better type (that is, more closely approximating the Western ideal) is provided so that the Aboriginals will learn to live in houses and to look after them; Western-style employment is provided for learning skills and for learning how a Western economic structure, based on permanent specialized employment and wages, operates. (In days not so long past work was compulsory so that a work ethic would be instilled.) We could run through the whole range of activities offering and see the same basic rationale at work.

If we consider the aims of the community and examine the level of success achieved we would be forced to conclude that, like education for Aborigines, the policy is somehow breaking down. And if we accept this conclusion we might further infer that, both of them being conceived as part of a general educational scheme, the community and the school are failing for basically similar reasons. From what has been said several reasons might already be suggested:

1. To the Aborigines on the settlement, the pressures of inter-group relations are of more significance than attempts to adjust to the white society. The look is inward, not outward.
2. There is a lack of continuity between the village experience and Western social life; for the purposes of our analysis here, Western social life is represented in the community by the white staff and the whole Western apparatus of store, clinic, office and school; (that is, between the *staff* and the *village*; the *whites* and the *people*).
3. Related to this, education, taken in the broad sense used so far, is directed not towards the community or to its actual needs, but towards an idealized state, that is, the community as a potential microcosm of Western society. Here the discontinuity is between the community as it is and the community as it is planned.

If these reasons have any validity it is clear that education in the schools should not be considered by itself, as a category *sui generis*, but as only part of a total issue, that of community development.

What concrete evidence can be given in support of these views? I shall now go on to discuss the school situation in some detail. In this discussion the views I have put forward will only hold if instead of this field I might be discussing the employment situation or some other aspect of community life.

## B. THE SCHOOL

1. *Composition of school, syllabus.* The normal Queensland primary school syllabus is followed at both Edward River and Aurukun. Children attend school until the compulsory leaving age (at 15 years).

At Aurukun in 1971\* there are over 200 students, between 5 and 15 years, representing 30% of the total Aboriginal population of about 675. The normal grade reached is Grade 7; promising students are sent to boarding schools in Charters Towers, where their results are almost invariably disappointing, and frequently represent, it has been remarked, standards lower than those the same students had reached in the Mission School. At any one time Aurukun has five or more trained white teachers, and three part-trained Aboriginal teachers. In addition there is a homecraft teacher and a trade-school teacher. Outside the homecraft and trade schools there is no vocational training.

At Edward River, the highest grade reached in 1969 was Grade 4. At that time there was one white teacher, one part-trained Islander and one local Aboriginal assistant. In 1970 the school was taken over by the State Education Department. There is now a headmaster with two other white teachers. Grade 6 was taught in 1971. There is no vocational training.

\*In both communities teaching is conducted entirely in English and the speaking of indigenous languages tends to be actively discouraged in the classroom, though it has never been discussed in my presence by teachers or others as a policy matter.

2. *The classroom situation.* One of the greatest hindrances to an anthropological study of the educational process is the researcher's inability to get inside the classroom. Anthropology depends heavily on the participant-observation technique. In February 1971, I spent three weeks as Acting Headmaster of the Aurukun School, at the request of the Manager. Not being a school-teacher, the experience was in some ways traumatic. This was probably in large part because I knew most of the school children on fairly intimate terms outside the classroom, and consequently was not prepared for *the wall of silence* which somehow was erected inside the classroom. I am bound to the view that this *wall of silence* had little to do with me and that it was a function of a total structural situation for, once outside, relationships continued along their old normal way, and if anything became even friendlier than before. Further, information was given to me in the classroom which I doubt would

\*Data were gathered in 1971.       \*\*\*\*\*

\*\*Editor: In 1973, Aurukun school has begun a bilingual program, involving the use of Wik Mungkan and English.



have been given to a normal member of the staff. Finally, I did not encounter any of the major problems of discipline - outside the last five minutes of the first day - of which the staff had complained. Perhaps my *kinsfolk* inside the classroom knew that matters would continue on into the village if anything untoward occurred at the school.

Undoubtedly two of the greatest teaching problems in the school, particularly with the older students, are, firstly, a strong unwillingness to respond verbally, and secondly, an almost undetectable *underworld* life activating the class through the entire school day. The two are closely linked.

The classroom situation can easily be seen as a condensed version of the total community, where the teacher represents the white staff, the courses being taught represent the outside Western world, and the students represent the village. As such, it can be analysed in terms of the categories established earlier: viz.

- the pressure built into Aboriginal inter-group relations;
- the lack of continuity between the Aboriginals and the Western world as represented in the community by the white staff and by the administrative and economic structure which is imposed on it;
- the lack of continuity between the sort of knowledge operating in the community as it is, and the sort of knowledge the community should have as projected by policy-makers.

### C. ANALYSIS

1. The class *underworld* consists of a non-ending communication system of whispers in *language* (that is, Wik Mungkan), signs, notes, and physical activity. This communication system carries the life of the village into the classroom, and because the activity is largely covert, the information being conveyed is of a particular type. It represents almost always a form of attack - the calling of *nicknames*, *swearing* people, and other attempts to belittle and deride. Inter-group and inter-personal tensions outside the classroom are brought inside the classroom.

Nowhere is this more obvious, in a sense, than in the pre-school classes. Here there are children, often extremely aggressive and uninhibited in their actions in the village (because



of a highly permissive upbringing), becoming extremely reticent and shy in the class. One suspects that this is not so much because they are having English in large doses for the first time, or because they are faced with a white teacher (though these are not negligible factors) but because they have come into contact, for the first time in their lives, with children who live in areas of the village their mothers have forbidden them to visit.

Adaptation within the classroom in this form is a clear example of adaptation to the total community. A behaviour pattern characterized by anxiety, caution, timidity and non-commitment is early established, to be reinforced in each progressive stage, and especially in early adolescence when the community calls upon the children to leave their childish ways and to take on certain adult responsibilities. It is a difficult period when these 13 or 14 year-olds are given partial access to the adult-world (for example, they now play cards, and can use rifles), but are still clearly excluded from it. Traditionalism imposes its own authority which joins now with that represented by the school. In the village they keep themselves separate, indulge in frequent fighting, especially within family groups, and become surly and uncommunicative.

In the classroom one manifestation of this pattern is that, unless convinced they are correct, students will not commit themselves to an answer; or, if obliged to respond, will answer in a whisper which will either convince the teacher he should ask elsewhere, or conceal the student's possible incorrectness from the rest of the class.

In the general anxiety, kinship affiliations may also play a part. Furthermore the refinements of spacing behaviour, important in avoidance relationships between actual or potential affines, for instance, or with certain key kinsmen, are rendered unworkable. The degree to which the breakdown of these and other customary practices has an inhibitory effect on student participation in classwork is difficult to assess.

How much stress can be placed on any of these factors is yet to be determined. Certainly detailed observation and analysis of classroom behaviour are essential. Initial indications suggest that the task will pose difficulties, especially of interpretation, without a detailed knowledge of the total community. Perhaps the following example will indicate something of this.

As it was not in my interests to maintain the division of my class into Grades 6 and 7 the students were permitted to arrange their desks and seats anyway they wished. Arrangements varied from day to day. However, one feature stood out, besides a simple division on the basis of sex. This was the somewhat surprising fact that the grades clearly maintained their separateness. Less conspicuously and less surprisingly, perhaps, the high degree of segmentation which characterized the initial arrangements gave way to a gradual group coalition, especially as additional members joined the class.

It had been anticipated that groups would have formed on the basis of community affiliations and peer group membership. Experiences at Edward River suggested this belief. There teams selected on the school sports' afternoons *unfailingly* replicated the village division into Thaayorr-side and Mungkan-side. According to the head-teacher this division could be observed in all phases of school life. Certainly something similar had been expected at Aurukun; perhaps there the community divisions were too massively complex to exhibit themselves in the classroom. Once hazarded, however, this interpretation must immediately be refuted, for with any activity which took us out of the classroom, for sport or for collecting plants and so on, the divisions became undeniably visible.

More importantly, once outside the classroom, the students reverted dramatically to their general village patterns of behaviour. The uniformity of the classroom reaction (largely undifferentiated) was replaced by the wide range of individual behaviours (highly differentiated) one normally expects. It is clear that the more *natural* groupings found in school activities conducted outdoors are accompanied by a more *natural* behavioural expression; it would appear that this is not merely coincidental, and that we are being told something significant about the actual classroom situation.

2. Schoolteachers have little chance of developing what I shall call for the moment a *community personality*. They are members of the white staff, but unlike the rest of the staff, they deal only with the children. Sometimes they make little effort to participate in the full community life and are inclined to form a closed enclave. Even when aware of this, they may find it hard to establish any close liaison with the villagers. Parents may view them suspiciously. Perhaps more than anyone else on the staff the teacher symbolizes the strangeness and remoteness of Western knowledge. Some teachers are perhaps

too eager to make sweeping generalizations on what is right or wrong with the Aboriginals, because they are forced into the position of having to explain to themselves why the techniques that they employed so successfully, outside, with white children, so obviously fail with their Aboriginal classes.

The position of the schoolteacher is a difficult one. Aboriginals in their day-to-day living are not called upon to depersonalize their relations. The *role* of the teacher in our society is largely depersonalized. Students in our society are accustomed to seeing teachers become human again after the school bell rings at the end of the day. To the Aboriginal students, unhabituated to making distinctions of this sort, the schoolteacher is just another figure in the white authority structure; a person who is not a kinsman but is in a position to punish; a person who can get a policeman to drag one to school if one <sup>2</sup> plays truant. The school is just another branch of the law.

Mechanisms for dealing with these situations are well-established in the community at large. They are acted on even by the very young. In short, the reaction of children to their teacher differs little from the reaction of extreme diffidence and timidity exhibited by their parents when summoned to the office, or to the Flying Doctor. It is a reaction, too, which most staff have learned to expect; and anyone who deviates from it is likely to earn, at one end of the range, the epithet of *bush-lawyer* or *smart-alecky* or *cheeky*, or at the other end, *surlly* or *difficult*.

3. So far we have discussed the relations of the school-children to each other inside the class, and the relation operating between the class and the schoolteacher. We have yet to discuss the relation between the class and what is being taught. This is perhaps the most obvious point, and it is here that most research concentrates. I am not going to refer to differences in cognitive styles, or anything of the sort, though I recognize their importance. Instead I shall simply state that the sort of knowledge being taught in the school has little to do with the sort of knowledge required by the society in which the school is placed. One does not need to read and write to ride a horse. This statement is not quite as gross as it sounds, for cattle work not only provides the major source of employment, but it enjoys high prestige.<sup>3</sup> It relates to a whole cowboy cult, the *style*, expressed in dress, film preferences, music, speech and mannerisms. "*Trumby*", Slim Dusty's immensely popular song about "*a ringer... (who) couldn't read n' write*",

takes on real meaning in these settlements, not as an inducement to literacy, which might be one of its messages, but as a statement of fact.

There are a number of questions which can be related to what has already been said:

How far is the community involved in the school? One must answer: Little or not at all. The school is outside the community and relates to the world outside; parents visit only for elections, for filling in unemployment-benefit forms, for school-concerts where children recite meaningless verses or perform meaningless gymnastics.

What sort of continuity is there between schooling and employment? Again the answer must be "almost none". Immediate school leavers are rarely employed. When they do finally take up employment, their school learning has little applicability to the work available - mostly cattle work and labouring.

What sorts of concessions does the school make to community life? On the one hand the school follows the normal school calendar. For Aurukun and Edward River this means that the long holidays coincide with the "Wet", which is relatively cool and an inconvenient time to have children at home; "holiday-time", between August and October, when large numbers of Aboriginals head back to their traditional camping places - particularly at Edward River - is rendered difficult as it does not coincide with a long school holiday. Parents either stay in the community, or they depart with their children. There was a high rate of absenteeism at Edward River on this count. On the other hand, school hours are regulated at Aurukun so that a long period is available at midday as a rest period. This coincides with traditional practice. Further, a midday meal is provided at the school which relieves parents of the necessity of preparing food and allows them to spend the day hunting, if they wish.

A high positive value is attached to knowledge and education by Aboriginals at Aurukun. In fact, many people give education as an important reason why they decided to move from the bush into the Mission. Many older men - often aggressively anti-Mission and with what can only be described as a *white collar* mentality, would like to be better educated so that they could better manipulate the system. This has been a stated objective.

It seems then that the relative failure of the educational system at Aurukun, and of its almost complete failure at Edward

River, cannot be explained simply in terms of personal motivational factors. I have suggested that there are certain inbuilt difficulties in the community system, on the basis of which I arrive at the following conclusions:

Communities were established with the aim - stated or unstated - that they were to be educational institutes for Westernizing traditional Aboriginal society. Their relative failure in this respect is paralleled closely with the failure of the educational system, properly-speaking, in the settlements. It is tempting and almost certainly legitimate to state that the reasons for the one are at least partial reasons for the other. Certainly failure to Westernize has been interpreted as a failure to educate.

As far as the settlements are concerned we may be obliged to recognize that not only have they failed to serve as efficient *Westernizing* devices in that they have not simply created Queensland country towns, but that, in the short term, this sort of evolution is unlikely to occur. A better statement of what has happened might be to say that Aboriginals have moved into communities which have become fairly distinctive in their composition and that, socially anyway, they appear to be viable. (It may be useful not to see them as transitional, but as positive social forms, at once traditional and modern, but closer to the latter than to the former).

It seems clear that a confusion must be removed: education for living in an Aboriginal community is not and should not be the same as for living in Western society. Our present Western educational system is not sufficiently broad for this purpose. Nor are there any grounds for believing that our present system, designed for living in Western society, is a necessary or sufficient part of any program of Westernization. To believe this is to be guilty of loose thinking.

Trite and embarrassing though it might be, one question needs to be asked before any other matters can rightly be considered. Education for what? For community living? Or for Westernization?

#### FOOTNOTES

1. One's view of the hierarchy is of course relative, depending on one's position in it. This is expressed best perhaps at Edward River where Thaayorr-side refers to itself as *Number One (village)*

and to Mungkan-side as *Number Two (village)*. Mungkan-side reverses the terminology.

2. Even well-intentioned and worthwhile activities may be instrumental in reinforcing this impression. Aurukun provides a substantial cooked lunch for all schoolchildren. For meals in the boys' section it has been standard practice for one of the Aboriginal policemen to act as supervisor.

3. Although no formal research has been conducted into this aspect, it is clear from essays written by senior boys in 1969 that stockwork rates virtually supreme among employment aspirations.

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#### THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

In a recent publication\* Halsey examines the concept of equal opportunity. Until the 1950's the policy promulgated in Britain was equality of opportunity: that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds, should have access to the more advanced stages of education. Halsey attributes the failure of these policies to an inadequate theory of learning: the major determinants of educational attainments are "not schoolmasters but social situations, not curriculum but motivation, not formal access to the school but support in the family and the community." (p.8).

Later the concept of equality was re-defined to mean equality of achievement. This would mean that the proportion of people from different groups at all levels of education would be much the same as the proportion of these groups in the general population. As Halsey concludes, however, equality of opportunity requires equality of social conditions.

He then points out that the debate about equality should now move to a reappraisal of the functions of education in contemporary society. Education for what?

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\*Halsey, A.H.: *Educational Priority: E.P.A. Problems and Policies*. London H.M.S.O. 1972.