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TALKING WITH ABORIGINES

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This paper is intended to provide positive advice about talking with Aborigines. It is not intended as a simple set of instructions, a 'do-it-yourself' kit; that would be an exceedingly dangerous way to approach the paper. For one thing there is extreme variability throughout Australia and behaviours in one location may take on an entirely different meaning in another location. Moreover, there have been very few studies devoted to this question (see the references provided at the end of this paper). Consequently, this paper must be taken as being only a preliminary statement, open to question and debate, and intended more to sensitise people to some of the issues than to put forward indisputable propositions and facts. It may also serve as a basis for future observational studies. It is hoped that the paper can be upgraded as more information comes to light. All those who have spent any time dealing with Aborigines will have developed at least some communicative skills; many will be quite expert. However, for expertise to be transmitted to other people it must be raised to a level of consciousness and codified.

MEETING PEOPLE

Many of us work in situations where we already know the Aboriginal people involved quite intimately but all of us may be called upon to confront situations where we must meet people for the first time. This is exceedingly difficult. Most Aborigines live in a universe where everyone is known. However, even Aborigines are called upon from time to time to meet people—including other Aborigines—whom they do not know. These situations are always characterised by a high degree of diffidence. They are awkward situations, and there are no set mechanisms for resolving them easily. I recall travelling with an Aboriginal man, Mickey, from Edward River. We stopped at Mareeba to buy some food. Mickey remained in the vehicle. I observed an Aboriginal man walk past him along the footpath. He was clearly intrigued to find out who Mickey was, and Mickey was equally curious. The man walked backwards and forwards several times. Finally he came up to the vehicle and the conversation went something like this:

Mareeba man: 'Where you from?'
Mickey: 'I'm Edward River man. Where you from?'
Mareeba man: 'I'm Lama Lama man . . . do you know X?'
Mickey: 'No. Do you know Y?'
Mareeba man: 'No. Do you know Z?'
Mickey: 'Yes. She's my aunty.'
Mareeba man: 'That old lady's my granny. I must call you daddy.'
Mickey: 'I must call you boy. You give me cigarette.'

Of course this type of approach is possible even between Europeans and Aborigines, especially if the European already knows a number of Aborigines who have fitted him into the kinship system. People can search for relations whom they share and then establish their relationship on that basis. Presentation of a cigarette—an almost standard device in my experience—or another small gift may seal this preliminary transaction as it did on the occasion in Mareeba.

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However, frequently it is difficult to go through this complicated rigmarole, especially given the fact that Europeans want to know first of all whom they are talking to. We find it easier if we know the person's name. Often Aborigines are reluctant or embarrassed to give their own names. Even so, it is often convenient and not altogether impolite to offer one's own name and ask, in a fairly circumspect way, the name of the other person. One could say for example—and in deliberately polite English—'I hope you don't mind me asking this question but could you tell me your name?' or 'Sorry to ask you this question but can you tell me your name?' If this is done quietly people will normally not take offence. As among Europeans, when people exchange names they shake hands. Aborigines often will give their full names rather than just their first names. They will sometimes tender their names in an extremely formal manner, often prefixing it with 'Mr'; for example, 'My name Mr Toby Horsebreaker'. Consequently, it is often a good idea to give one's own full name.

Once this preliminary name exchange has occurred either participant can initiate the business of establishing people whom they know in common—either European or Aboriginal. Aborigines often believe that if Europeans have the same surname, for example, they must be related. There is probably not much point denying this absolutely but where there is no obvious genealogical connexion it would be best to say something like 'We not close relations, but we might be relations before, very long time'. Or, perhaps a more normal way of ordering the information: 'We got same name so we might be relations before. But we not family. We not close-to relations.'

When a third person is present who knows both parties the situation obviously is easier, but one will find that Europeans will tend to use names to carry out the introduction while Aborigines will tend to use kin terms. I have been in situations, however, where although I stood in a kinship relationship to a particular Aborigine he introduced me to another Aborigine—from a remote area and unlikely to know the context in which our kinship relationship had been established—as 'boss'. Normally he called me 'boy'. Situations like this may still be encountered and signal something about the power relationships which continue to operate in a general sense between Europeans and Aborigines.

The opposite problem to the one indicated is that in certain areas Aborigines are often unfamiliar with the names given to them by authorities or what in English would be surnames. For example, this is a problem for some adults at Oenpelli. Moreover, a number of people who, properly speaking, only have Aboriginal names are often loath or embarrassed to use them with Europeans. Consequently, they sometimes assign themselves a European first name or surname.

Throughout Australia Aborigines commonly belong to what is often described as a patrilineal descent group. Membership of this group is primary and is rarely surrendered. For example, when women marry they still retain membership of, and rights in, this primary group. One of the markers that people are apt to have is a personal name or a set of personal names specific to this group. At Aurukun it was not unusual for women to be very annoyed when introduced, with their husband, as Mr and Mrs X. I have known a woman to say 'My husband is Mr X. I am Mrs Y'. It should be noted that personal names are subject to extreme variability and change in response to such circumstances as deaths, ceremonies, and other social considerations.

APPROACHING A PERSON OR GROUP

There are some considerable differences in the ways in which Europeans greet or approach other Europeans and the ways in which Aborigines greet and approach other Aborigines. There are some obvious variations in the procedures adopted by Europeans, for example, dependent upon the status of the people involved. People of low status are likely to be deferential in front of others who occupy a higher status, and so on. Among Aborigines procedures also vary according to the status of the people involved, but here status should not be seen so much in terms of hierarchy and power as related to kinship considerations and to

states of being—for example, where a woman has just had a child, after deaths, in ceremonial situations, etc.

Despite the variability, certain general remarks can be offered. There is a general notion that people should not 'sneak-up' on others. In other words, approaches must be public and to an extent formal. This is particularly true for strangers. Behaviour tends to be more relaxed within the family although, even there, there are behavioural regulations to be observed.

Let me describe the approach made by one man at Aurukun. I was sitting talking to another man in front of the place where I was staying. I noticed EK approaching from about 50 metres away. Characteristically, he approached in a slightly crabbed posture; nor was his line of approach direct. He progressed through a shallow arc which kept him just in sight until he passed behind me and then emerged on the other side. This gave me a chance to adjust my position and to include him in the small group. Nervously, he hopped from one foot to the other until I indicated a place where he should sit down.

It is customary for people to approach others in fits and starts, especially if they are a bit unsure of their ground. It is possibly significant that this is the way that one approaches sites or ceremonial shades. In these cases the leader of the party will often stop at regular intervals and call out either to the site or to the group assembled in the shade (in these circumstances people always approach Indian file). At night people will never approach too close to a person's camp or house without making a sound to attract attention. At Aurukun this takes the form of a simulated cough accompanied by foot shuffling. During the day time the same procedure may be followed and it is easily observed that there is a careful avoidance of direct facial contact. The approaching person makes guarded glances in the direction of the person he wishes to talk to and may signal the other to withdraw from the group. Alternatively, if the person approached does not wish to be disturbed he may acknowledge with a hand gesture—at Aurukun the hand is held horizontal, palm downwards and moved through about 90 degrees from side to side with a simple cutting motion—the approaching person's presence and signal that he will catch up with him later.

People will occasionally stand if the conversation is short, though if the weather is hot it is normal to look for some shade—often more for the feet than for the head. Customarily, people will be seated. The host should allocate a place to sit—either a chair or a piece of the floor space if it is inside his own house, or on the ground. Generally, the guest should not sit until a space has been indicated. With a large party of people there can be considerable reshuffling. The main point is that the two interlocutors should be at the same level. This is an important principle. There are good examples of what to do and what not to do in Curtis Levy's film *Sons of Namatjira.* The Europeans who come into Keith Namatjira's camp remain standing. This indicates, apart from anything else, an unwillingness to enter into serious and considered negotiations. The one exception is David Parsons, then of Aboriginal Legal Aid. Not only does he sit in the approved manner, but he begins negotiations by offering a cigarette.

When one visits a person's house at Aurukun or Edward River it is customary, after the preliminaries, to be offered a cup of tea. When someone visited my tent or my accommodation, and it was clear that we were to be engaged in serious discussions, I made a point of offering the visitor tea or coffee. Matters of importance must not be approached too quickly or too directly. It was only after we had finished drinking that we would engage in serious discussions. At Oenpelli one is rarely offered a drink. This does not indicate a set of different practices but simply a breakdown in Aboriginal/European relations. Perhaps, historically, Europeans have shown themselves over-concerned with matters of hygiene. Or, perhaps, Aborigines are unaccustomed to being received in European houses. At Nabarlek—as opposed to Oenpelli—one is always given a cup of tea or a soft drink. And when I visited Cadell Gardens with a party of people from Oenpelli in October 1979 we were almost immediately presented with an enormous billycan of tea. During the whole course of our visit tea and damper were provided by the hosts. As a general principle it is the responsibility of the hosts to ensure that the material comforts of the visitors are adequately met—they must provide food, shelter, firewood, and so on. At Aurukun people say they would be ashamed if visitors had to fend for themselves.

So far, I have concentrated on the physical aspects of approach and reception. I now wish to turn our attention to the question of initiating conversation. I am assuming that you already know the person. If there has been a long gap since you last encountered the person additional specific behaviours may be required. For example, if someone has died in either person's family it is customary—indeed obligatory—if both parties are Aborigines to acknowledge the fact by formal means. This normally means embracing and crying. If people are very close and there has been a long period of absence the same procedure is followed. Such behaviour is readily observed between mothers and sons, especially if it is the son who has been away. In these circumstances the son often sits somewhat stiffly and looks embarrassed as his mother cries loudly over him. When the European knows the people involved intimately the same procedure may be followed, and not infrequently someone will be appointed to take the European—if he is the visitor—to see all the relations of the deceased.

Even in what are sometimes described as sophisticated contexts—among European-educated Aborigines with office jobs in Darwin, for example—there must be some acknowledgement if a death has occurred. One can say something like 'Sorry to hear your bad news. I was properly sorry to hear that news'. Note that one does not refer specifically to the identity of the deceased. Such specification must be avoided at all costs; indeed, the name of the deceased must be avoided even in contexts where it is not the deceased to whom reference is being made, e.g., a person or a plane or other object with the same or a similar name. For example, at Aurukun when a man called Sam died people had to use a special term to refer to jam, and when a man called Billy died the mission plane known as 'The Bill Mac' had to be referred to by a special term. This avoidance practice is common all over Australia but varies in length and intensity. In the case of close relatives one does not even refer directly to the kin relationship in which people stood with the deceased. One cannot say 'your father', 'your mother', 'your aunty', etc. One has to say something like 'the dead person' or 'the old man/lady before'. All references are characterised by extreme circumspection.

Given the above discussion, it is not surprising that in talking to people after a long absence it is crucial to establish which people have died. This is customarily the first information people will attempt to convey to you. References take the form of 'You know that old man father to X? . . Well, I sorry to tell you this news but that old man pass away', and so on. Even when the person speaking is not a close relation of the people who have died the information will be conveyed. It is regarded as an essential part of good manners and allows the person re-entering the society to avoid committing *faux pas.*

After short absences, small talk—which in my experience is always initiated by the host—takes the form of establishing what the visitor has been doing: Did he go hunting yesterday? Who went with him? Where did he go? How did he get there? What did he get? Or there can be reference made to an event which everybody can be expected to have known about, e.g., a fight, a departure, a death. If people have been away they will often give an account of their journey in detail indicating every place at which they stopped, ate, and slept. They would also pass on amusing anecdotes from the journey, e.g., somebody making a fool of himself.

Sometimes it is obvious that the visitor wishes to make a request. Aborigines habitually have great difficulty in making requests, even for seemingly trivial items such as a box of matches or 10 cents to go to the films. Sometimes one can get through the small talk at Aurukun simply by asking 'Which way?' which effectively means 'what have you got on your mind, what do you want, how can I help you?' People will preface a request by a device which protects them from obvious refusal. For example, at Aurukun people might say, 'You might agree or you mightn't agree. No matter. I just ask'. If they are refused they'll say something like 'No matter. I just gammon (pretend to) ask'. Given the niceties of the request, one should not offer a harsh or brutal refusal. One should normally not just say 'No, I cannot do it'. One should say something to soften the blow, e.g., 'I would really like to help but I can't . . .' and give a reason, or 'Sorry I can't help. Might be come back again I can do something'. Postponement of a request will normally be interpreted by Aborigines as a (polite) refusal, and unless more specific arrangements are made for the request to be made again,

mostly in which the person to whom the request had been directed takes the initiative—e.g., by arranging to visit the requester's house at a later time—it is unlikely that the request will be repeated. I might add that even where firm arrangements have been made by the person to whom the request has been made the arrangement will be simply ignored if the requester has been able to find satisfaction elsewhere. This can explain a situation commonly encountered by Europeans. They believe they have made firm arrangements yet find, in their terms, that the arrangements have subsequently been broken. Aborigines will not delay gratification if they can find satisfaction elsewhere, whereas Europeans will be prepared to delay if they know that someone has made a firm commitment. This contrast between Europeans and Aborigines applies as much to urban Aborigines as it does to so-called tribal Aborigines. It might be added that, in my experience, if Aborigines really want something they will pursue their interest relentlessly, working at it day and night. (It is this characteristic which makes Aborigines superb negotiators. There is little gap between the desire and attempts to establish the means to satisfy it. Consequently, arrangements can be entered into with astonishing rapidity.* Correspondingly, if desires or wants cannot be fulfilled immediately, they can be endured with extraordinary stoicism. For example, Aborigines can sit on the side of the road waiting for a lift for hours on end without the slightest impatience, even if a person has made a firm commitment to pick them up at a specific time and that time has well and truly passed.)

In serious discussion it is important for the person initiating discussion to state his intentions directly and clearly, but he must never couch them in terms which would require the other person to offer him a direct refusal or even a direct disagreement. Discussion in these circumstances is not so much a matter of backwards and forwards conversation with each person interrupting the other, which is customary when Europeans encounter each other. Instead, each person makes a speech—it can be short or it can, in fact, be very long—stating his/her position. Such speeches are often full of stylised disclaimers: 'I might be right, I might be wrong', 'This just my idea', 'I one man myself', 'I just talking what in my own mind'. If people wish to stress or to defend a point they will not say 'I'm right' and leave it at that. They will have recourse to earlier authorities, e.g., their father or grandfather: 'I seen my father do that before' or 'My grandfather been doing it that way before', or to empirical evidence: 'I didn't believe that before but I seen it with my own eyes' or 'You might not believe and I didn't believe myself, but I seen it with my own eyes'.

Disagreement is equally carefully rendered. People do not say directly 'You are wrong' unless they have been extremely provoked and/or they are senior to the other party. For example, old men will often say to young men 'You don't know; you just young man' (a catchphrase often invoked to support claims of privilege or great knowledge). Normally people will express disagreement not by directly answering the other person's comments but by directly putting their own case and referring only obliquely to what the other person said. Unless one listens carefully one may think that two people are in substantial agreement when in fact they are engaged in a major conflict. Obviously when one is talking to another person one must be careful to pick up the appropriate signals. Important conversations are characterised by a willingness to modify or re-state more carefully one's position and by compromises. One might even state that the intention is not to bring about the conversion of one person by the other but to achieve greater understanding and to arrive at a situation acceptable to both (or to many). Consensus is not normally reached by one person imposing his views on others and arguing a case single-mindedly from the beginning of discussion to the end. Powerful people in Aboriginal societies will, in my experience, refrain from revealing their position until they have observed the positions stated by others. The discussion may even terminate without the most prominent individual speaking if it seems to him that his views are likely to be challenged or not accepted. His silence will signify disapproval. He will bide his time and commit himself to nothing. If there is an apparent agreement possible it is this person who will make the final

*Conversely, tardiness in pursuing a matter can signal either a general reluctance to deal with it (indicating disapproval) or the presence of difficulties which people consider insuperable (e.g., known antagonism from certain individuals or groups) or uncertainty (the matter may not properly be understood).

speech stating what he is prepared to accept as the joint position and where appropriate making a rallying cry for action. If there is some urgency to the discussion and it has not proceeded well the same person may make a speech in anger telling people what should be the case or cursing them for their stupidity or lack of vision. This may be enough to put people on side, but it may not. The above remarks have obvious salience to the question of whether decisions apparently reached in group discussions are binding or not. If there is real agreement it is habitual at the conclusion of any discussion for someone to run through point by point future plans of action which such a decision will entail.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

Public meetings are held in contemporary Aboriginal societies. The extent to which they occurred in pre-contact times is a moot point. However, there must always have been discussions of a public nature involving all members of a particular community. In addition, there are old photographs and other records which suggest that men gathered together to discuss particular issues, probably mostly in the context of ceremonies and often, perhaps, in secret shades at the ceremonial grounds. Perhaps these could be likened to board meetings or Cabinet meetings — a gathering of important people *in camera*. What is clear is that the nature of the meeting and the people present vary according to the issues to be discussed and decided upon.

When people have grievances it is common for them to air them publicly. This public airing commonly occurs at night when everyone is sitting quietly by their camp fires or about to go to sleep. In fairly traditional situations one may see men armed with spears and woomera—and in other areas, wielding boomerangs—passing backwards and forwards near their own camp yelling out their grievances to the world at large. Mostly they will receive no answer. Mostly people sit silent. However, under extreme provocation someone may feel obliged to respond. The matter may be taken up by everyone and end in fighting. Such fights may, even so, have a highly stylised—even ritualised—character, with people divided into principal protagonists, support 'troops' and blockers. Some women may be observed throwing potential weapons off into the bush, standing behind their sons armed with large sticks, or singing abusive songs accompanied by violent footstamping. The blockers will physically interpose themselves between fighters, remove weapons from fighters who may or may not feign the desire to retain them, and attempt to talk reason and to restore peace and calm.

Fights are rarely if ever indiscriminate, and although they may surge back and forth in apparent chaotic fashion—'spreading like bushfire' as people at Aurukun might say—they are much more ordered than they appear. If caught in a fight, Europeans would be unwise to interpose themselves, even though they may hear their names mentioned and despite feelings that they are involved, either because the issues seem to touch upon them or because they are anxious for the safety of one or other of the participants. It is not a good idea either to flee the scene or to take undue interest. The best procedure is simply to sit down quietly on the ground and to feign indifference. One will notice that this is what all people not directly involved in the fight will do. To show interest may be interpreted as 'looking too hard' and may well raise someone's ire. Equally, movement away from the scene of the conflict may also be misinterpreted. To 'walk away' is regarded in certain places as a deadly insult. At Aurukun if one wishes to offer a deliberate insult, this is probably the most powerful one available.

While on the subject of fighting, one of the things most astonishing to a European observer is how quickly matters can be set right. Grudges are rarely held for long and sulky behaviour, though a common occurrence, never lasts for long. Fights or arguments in European society are likely to lead to permanent hatreds and enmities. Lifelong friends may never speak to each other again. Husbands and wives may avoid each other scrupulously though they continue to live in the same house for the next 25 years. In Aboriginal societies friendly relationships—or apparently friendly relationships—will be resumed as if nothing has happened. Even the most serious issues, including accusations that someone is the agent of another's death through the practice of sorcery, will eventually be resolved—sometimes by spearing or payback killing, sometimes by counter sorcery, but often simply by people being

prepared to agree that the issue should be put aside and that they are 'satisfied'. Sometimes there is a special friendship ceremony to mark the termination of interpersonal or intergroup hostilities. Once satisfaction has been achieved the re-opening of hostilities would be considered intolerable and the worst breach of social etiquette.

In the light of the above remarks it is worth remembering that even the most heated discussion with an Aborigine is unlikely to lead to a permanent rupturing of social relationships. Indeed some of the most important skills one must learn are when and how to make apologies and to re-establish friendly relations. I have found in my own experience that some of those people who publicly affirm their undying affection for me and who have declared themselves to be 'great mates' are in reality my worst enemies. Super-politeness covers dislike. I do not mean to imply by this that the politeness is feigned. It is so obligatory that it is no longer, as we would say in colloquial English, 'an act'.

THE ORGANISATION OF CEREMONIES

In societies where ceremonial life is still active there are always people whose responsibility it is to act as organisers. Depending on the ceremony to be held the identity of these organisers may vary. These organisers are almost always major political figures. It is always interesting and instructive to observe the ways in which they operate.

Ceremonies require a good deal of organisation. The organisers must negotiate for various people to participate, co-ordinate the activities with the various participants, make decisions when contingencies arise, and make certain that arrangements governing back-up services—e.g., the provision of food—are being fulfilled. There is always a high level of conflict, both overt and concealed, permeating the texture of Aboriginal daily life. One might describe this as a high level of local politicking. One of the first tasks of the organisers is to ensure that social harmony is restored sufficiently for the ceremony to proceed and for people to act with some semblance of a common purpose. This is particularly important in the case of a local group which is inviting a large number of participants from elsewhere to attend its ceremony. Such calls to solidarity may require an organiser to engage in a number of discussions with given individuals. This may be followed—once some sort of agreement looks likely—by a gathering of the local participants in the main ceremonial shade. They may demonstrate their solidarity by rehearsing songs or even, on occasions, by practising the actual dances. Even such apparently minor activities may require considerable back-up—young men to carry water and food to the camp, the women preparing damper and other food for what are now economically non-productive males. At Aurukun I commonly observed that the leader of one of the ceremonies—once a certain course of action had been decided upon and the ceremonial shade or 'practice shade', as it is known in that area, had been constructed—would often remain in the shade area from early morning to late in the afternoon. Others would move in and out of the shade area as the mood took them, though there would be a tendency for men to gather about 4 o'clock—that is, when the heat began to go out of the day. Throughout the day the ceremonial leader and others would engage in a variety of activities, sometimes sitting quietly thinking, sometimes manufacturing objects or repairing spears and woomeras, telling stories (sometimes of a mythological character), sometimes sleeping or resting. From time to time the ceremonial leader might direct one of the junior participants to go and carry out a particular task, e.g., chop a tree down to provide wood for a carving or to shoot or spear birds for feathers. Sometimes one of the younger men might even be instructed to go hunting. Game caught would be cooked in or near the ceremonial camp. Sometimes one of the senior men, including the leader himself, might go off to engage in one of these types of activities on his own initiative.

The pattern varies a little from group to group. In one group it may be the ceremonial leader who provides the inspiration by dancing at rehearsals. In another the leader may organise some of the younger people to provide the dancing. Practices may vary from day to day. Ideally, however, each day concludes with a flurry of activity and excitement. People

feel that they cannot leave the shade until some act of completion has been accomplished. At Aurukun this takes the form with all groups—regardless of what has proceeded it—of a final group performance of one of the songs. A strong performance rounds off the day.

If it appears that there will be insufficient people to achieve a suitable finale for the day people may grow agitated. Messages may be sent, by the medium of the junior men, to get particular, more senior individuals to appear. If this stratagem is not successful there may be a good deal of vituperation and abuse—mostly group rather than individual directed. 'We proper no good mob. That other mob alright . . . but we mob cannot pull together.' Correspondingly, a small group which can get its act together may indulge in an excess of self-congratulation: 'No matter we small mob, we proper strong. Not like those other fellas. They got biggest mob of people but their dance can't come up. We keep our ceremony strong, not like those other people.' (The above discussion relates to Rule No. 2—*avoidance of direct criticism of particular individuals.*)

Although the criticism has the appearance of being group-directed, and the example of other groups may be called upon to create a sense of what might be called 'group shame', there is of course implied criticism of those individuals who are, as we might say in English, 'letting the side down', and those individuals implicated will respond to such imputations in an over-ready and touchy manner. One response might be to storm into the ceremonial ground and to demand whether it is indeed him to whom the criticism applies. Such a strategy may bring forth hot denials—although, of course, the previous 'slacker' is now under a fairly strong obligation to remain. Another response is to plead some excuse, mostly weak, like having a sore foot (a common excuse in ceremonial contexts; indeed, I know cases where the condition has become 'permanent'). A third response is to withdraw. The withdrawal can take extreme forms, e.g., departure from the community (called 'having holiday' at Aurukun) or going on a drunken binge (e.g., Oenpelli or Hermannsburg). If people systematically fail to turn up the ceremonial leader may himself withdraw, retiring to his own house or, in the case of Aurukun, going for a 'holiday' and a drunken binge at Weipa or Cairns. Alternatively, he may resume the rounds of private negotiations with the individuals who ought to be involving themselves or, as I have observed, walk around the community publicly cursing his mob. In my own experience the non-dramatic withdrawal of the leader, to be observed sitting placidly in his own camp, or a preparedness to resume intimate negotiations are the most successful strategies. Public anger and any sort of over-reaction are likely to provoke reactions of contempt or a general feeling that the leader is making a fool of himself (see Rule No 3—*loss of personal dignity*).

In the contemporary situation what might be described as community meetings have become common phenomena. In the light of my own experience in various communities across Australia they exhibit certain structural similarities.

1. There is a marked division of the sexes. Men sit on one side, women on the other; or men sit closest to the foci of attention, women sit more remotely. At Aurukun it is common for men to sit in a circular formation, the circle expanding to take in new arrivals. This is particularly true of meetings concerning Aboriginal-defined issues. When they are required to confront visiting Europeans, e.g., politicians or officials from Queensland's Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement, there may be a tendency to sit in little clusters. Women tend to sit in little groups more remote from the centre of the action, often attending to small children. More rarely one or other of the men may be nursing a small child. The prominent speaker or speakers sits/sit facing and comprising one segment of the circle.

2. When the meeting is convened by or with respect to a visitor or group of visitors there can be no certainty that those Aborigines who choose to speak are structurally important within the society. Indeed, one of my informal rules is to posit an inverse relationship between verbosity in such situations and importance. The real correlation probably is between rate of vocalisation, on the one hand, and capacity and confidence to speak English (and to confront visitors/strangers) on the other. At Aurukun the correlation

between these qualities and their possessor's structural importance in the society is not high. At other places it may be very high indeed.

3. In exclusively or basically Aboriginal meetings there is, of course, no necessity for skills in English to be a factor. People will be inclined to speak in their own languages. Even so, there is some variability as to who speaks and about what. When a public meeting concerns important issues such as ceremonial life or cultural maintenance it is not unusual to find only the most important senior men speaking. Each leader will rise in turn and give a formal speech specifying his position. When discussion does not turn exclusively on matters of knowledge and does not raise questions of authority a wider range of people may speak, especially if they see some personal advantage to be gained from the situation, e.g., competition for membership of a party of dancers travelling to another community for a ceremony or a dance festival.

4. Women play a more or less active part in public meetings depending on the society. At Aurukun certain women are among the most active participants (see the MacDougalls' film *Takeover*). Their active engagement is countenanced on the grounds that they are 'strong to talk'—speak good and often colourful English—and 'can't be fright'. They often feel under an obligation to represent their families, as members of which they may be the most forceful, indeed the dominant, personality.

   However, women will generally maintain a low public profile. Sometimes a woman will publicly support her husband, especially if he is a man of substance, and frequently women will pass comments among themselves. At Oenpelli women generally sit with their backs to proceedings. Occasionally they will erupt with a violent outburst—men and women all talking at once. (Compare this with Aurukun where the principle of one speaker at a time is rigorously adhered to even in moments of great heat and passion.)

There are certain procedures which ought to be followed or avoided in public meetings.

1. Public meetings should not be treated as information-giving situations. Information may be relayed but only to confirm, for each person present, that what he or she has been told in a more private context is what in fact has been told to everyone else. In other words, information previously given is confirmed.

2. Public meetings should not be used to extract information, especially it if affects particular individuals. There should be no challenge to a person's existential status in a public context, no cross-examination of an individual to determine his or her opinion or views on any matter. People may wish to state their views but they must not be called upon or required to offer further elucidation. Attempts to do this will be met by immediate confusion and embarrassment. Such behaviour will always be taken as constituting a questioning of the information, and this questioning will be interpreted as a personal attack. For the same reason people should not be publicly queried about the sources of their information. And corrections should be administered very gently. People should never bluntly be told that they are wrong.

3. Public meetings can be used to ratify a consensus. They are not normally the mechanism whereby consensus is established. Certainly, public meetings are never the sole mechanism employed.

   This should not be taken to mean that all negotiations must be carried out on an individual to individual basis. The key issue is to establish those groups which we might choose to describe as 'natural social groups'. The delineation of such groups will always require a detailed knowledge of the community in which negotiations are occurring and a level of anthropological expertise.*

*This is a difficult topic to which I wish to devote a separate paper. Certainly it goes much beyond what I call the 'traditional owner formula' currently employed in the Northern Territory and promoted by the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*.

TERMINATING A CONVERSATION

Another difficult phase in any conversation is bringing it to a close or recognising when the person or persons one is speaking to wishes/wish to bring to to a close. The main point in any 'rupturing' of a social relationship, when Aborigines are involved, is that it is not perceived as permanent or enduring. In an extreme form a departure can be likened to a death. When I first left Edward River those people with whom I had established close relationships appeared regularly to establish the exact time of my departure and the exact time of my return. I was not able to satisfy them on the latter score, and they clearly became agitated. People kept on asking me, 'You coming back— ey? You not going for good—ey?' I hastened to re-assure them. Once they were certain in their own minds that I would be coming back they would say 'That's alright. We know you coming back, that means we won't cry for you'. If this sentiment brings a tear to the reader's eye—and let me assure you, without flattering myself in the process, that people's anxieties were entirely genuine—let me also add that people were apt to assuage their potential 'grief' by making certain that they had an adequate supply of keepsakes: sandshoes, hats, belts, pendants, and even loose change. Reciprocal transfers were also made: fire sticks, dilly bags, spears and woomeras, but mostly at a price.

Many elements of departures and even short-term separations or breaks in contact may be analysed out of this anecdote.

1. Departures must not be arbitrary. Reasons are frequently given, or, if not, specific details are given. Among the *Kugu-Nganhchara*, to give an example of this latter point, there is no single word for 'good-bye'. If people get up and leave a group they will say something like 'I'm now going west' (or other directionals may be used), 'I'm going to sleep', 'I am going to bathe', 'I am going to see my aunty' 'I am going to urinate'. One cannot say simply 'I am going now'.

2. I have noticed among all Aborigines the tendency to leave things in one's care. In the urban context it can vary from an article of apparel to a book or a cassette or some other object. Correspondingly, there can be demands for equivalent objects or for short-term loans of money or for extremely valuable possessions. In so-called traditional societies custodianship relationships may be established, both on a formal and an informal basis. Europeans may find themselves acting as guardians of the most sacred objects. The reasons given may appear to be based on questions of security. However, I would argue that it is more to do with symbolising the nature of the interpersonal relationship. (It is interesting to observe in this connexion that Europeans in general have failed to entrust really valuable items from their own culture to Aborigines.) Demands for objects, especially money, may be misinterpreted simply as demands. Often, however, the transaction will be intended to serve as an excuse for the relationship to be re-established in the future. This is probably not so different from housewives borrowing the proverbial cup of sugar. It serves to open a relationship and to set up a series of reciprocal transfers or prestations.

   What I wish to stress in this discussion is the fact that when Aborigines say 'good-bye' or 'good-night' they do not wish it to be interpreted as a final act. There must be some way of re-establishing the relationship. Aborigines may appear more insecure in this respect than most, but not all, Europeans. They are not only fearful that perhaps that they will be rejected in the future, but also anxious not to give immediate offence by appearing to leave prematurely. People will often make such remarks when departing as 'I leave you now but I'll be back shortly'. Frequently they will appear to make very definite arrangements about when they will see you next. Often these arrangements will be broken in fact. However, it would be wrong to take arrangements at face value. They have a symbolic rather than a factual force.

3. The likening of a departure to a death can be treated as a guilding principle.

GIFT-GIVING AND CUSTODIANSHIP

Many Europeans when they are about to enter relationships with Aborigines are terrified of the excessive demands which they are sure will be placed on them. Many of their fears relate to what they anticipate will be continuous requests for money, insistent demands for the purchase or transport of alcohol, and requests for lifts and repairs to vehicles, radios, guns, and so on. Certainly, requests of this type are legion, and some Europeans go to enormous lengths to avoid them or to keep them in check. For example, I knew one European living in a desert community who budgeted a fixed sum which might be allocated as a total at any one time as personal loans. The figure was something in the order of $300. If someone approached him with a request for money and the 'bank' was already totally allocated, this European would simply tell the person making the request that all the money had gone and that he would not be able to offer the person a loan until certain individuals, whom he might or might not name, had made their repayments. Presumably part of the strategy was to get the person making the request to put pressure on the person to whom the money had been lent to make his or her repayment expeditiously. This would be in breach of a rule which I spell out later—namely, Rule No. 1: *avoid personal names and personal reference wherever possible.*

Let me say that people's fears are not unrealistic. The nature of Aboriginal requests and European responses to them bring into sharp relief the conflict of values which operates between the two types of society. The barrage of requests which one is sometimes subjected to can be seen as a form of harassment. Europeans often feel that the strategies involved are devious—for example, that the real reasons are not always given, and certainly some Aborigines learn to gear their requests to take into account what they see as European foibles or to provide rationalisations which they think will be acceptable: asking for $10 for food because the children are starving, and then rushing off and buying two flagons of tawny port, for example. In these circumstances Europeans may feel justifiably that they are not being treated as sentient and feeling human individuals but simply as exemplars of an unpleasant and gullible race.

I recall certain situations which may be instructive. Once, having just returned to Edward River after a particularly difficult and trying mapping trip involving a lot of hard driving, I was approached by an individual who told me that two old ladies were still out in the bush, that they needed to come in for their pension cheques, and that it would be highly desirable if I picked them up. Hopefully I said all the right things, but effectively I issued a refusal: 'I am too tired . . . I've just come back from bush . . . I need rest . . . I can't go out today . . . might be tomorrow alright'. The first requester retired only to be replaced by another a quarter of an hour later, and so on throughout the day. The pension cheque excuse had been tried on me many times before so I was basically suspicious. However, given the nature of the beast, my suspicions really could not have been a factor in my refusing or agreeing to their request. The fact is that I was simply too tired.

I basically make a practice of ignoring the reasons why a request is made and acceding to requests essentially on social rather than utilitarian grounds. Obviously there will be exceptional circumstances which give particular urgency to some requests and these must be taken into account on humanitarian grounds. Late in the day I finally succumbed. It was probably too late for the pensioners to get their cheques or even to do any shopping at the store for the weekend. It was a Friday and the store would be closed for the weekend. The drive was not a long one—about 10 km along an exceedingly rough track; it took about half an hour. In the event the old ladies were there, not there exactly but across the mouth of the river, seated under a low bough-leaf shelter.

AH, who accompanied me to the river mouth and who was the person who had first approached me in the morning, stripped off most of his clothes, which he left in a tidy pile near the water, and swam across to the other side. Both the ladies were ancient and one had been born a cripple. To bring them across the river, which was flowing swiftly with the falling tide, was an arduous task for their two adult and bush-skilled sons who dragged them across with

the aid of floating logs. Mostly the crippled old lady was carried although sometimes she crawled, leaving a distinctive track wherever she went in the bush. Despite her handicap she had successfully raised several children. To have carried her the 10 km back to the mission would obviously have involved a considerable effort. No doubt members of her family would have managed to bring her back using their own devices, and on foot as they did not have access to any other vehicle. However, in approaching me they had typically relied on what might be called an external excuse—not approaching the real reason head on and at least partly because it would have brought the existential condition of the old lady into question. It was more appropriate to say that she would have to cash her pension cheque, independently of whether this was strictly true or not, than to say that she was crippled.

On a more humorous note and involving the same community, a husband and wife team were in the habit of approaching an anthropological colleague resident in the community at the time for assistance with their fishing enterprise. They had a large gill net with which they dragged river mouths and waterholes; catches were sold to residents of the community for $1.00 per fish. It was clear that, in the minds of this couple, I stood in the place of my colleague when he was absent, and they had no hesitation whatsoever in approaching me to carry out the sort of servicing with which he provided them when he was present. This could involve driving them to their fishing places or picking them up with their net and their catch, or both. One day the wife approached me and said that her husband was down at Chapman Creek and that I should drive her down to pick him up. The husband had in fact taken a large catch of barramundi which we all proceeded to load into the Land Rover. When we arrived back in the community the wife asked me whether I would like a fish. I thought to myself, 'How generous . . . and how nice', and said 'Yes'. The lady passed me a large barramundi and said 'John, that will be $1.00 please'. (This story says something about the notion of exchange and reciprocity; it does not relate to the following discussion.)

It should be noted that it is inconceivable to perhaps all Aborigines that Europeans could have no money. If it can be established that a European does, in fact, have no money it can be the source of some hilarity or embarrassment. A friend of mine living in Brisbane was once sent a message by people at Aurukun that he should travel up there for a ceremony. No funds were provided for the trip and as he could not finance it independently he had to send back a message saying regretfully he could not attend because of money reasons. Henceforth he became known, at least to certain members of the community, as 'Mr Stoney Broke'.

In 1973, when I was running an office in Darwin, I was approached by a number of Tiwi men whom I knew quite well. They wanted some assistance with their air fares to return to Bathurst Island. They were all quite drunk, it was outside office hours, and I was carrying no money. I just said to them, 'I'm sorry but I've no money'. The leader of the group let out a loud and disbelieving guffaw. As is culturally acceptable in these circumstances I was able to feign anger and say 'Oh, you calling me liar, eh?' 'Oh no', said the leader of the group, 'you can't be got no money'. Again, with the pretence of anger I replied—very sure of my ground—'What, you can't call me liar, I been already tell you I got no money'. Again there was a loud guffaw of disbelief. Angrily then, and knowing that it would shock them deeply, I stood up and turned my pockets inside out. They were deeply ashamed, and I knew that if, in fact, they had had any money at all they would have given it to me immediately.*

COMMITMENT AND INCORPORATION

It is impossible to operate in an Aboriginal context without an explicit social (and to some extent ideological) commitment. For Aborigines there is no objective external position. One is either inside or outside, either for or against. Sometimes Europeans confuse commitment with identification and take on the externals of Aboriginality, e.g., body markings of various kinds.

*Peter Sutton tells me a confirmatory story. At Aurukun one of the men, a close putative relation, asked him for $20. Peter said he had nothing. His relation immediately gave him $70.

What I am referring to more specifically is a demonstrated understanding of and sympathy for the 'Aboriginal way'.

Anyone dealing with Aborigines must be accorded a degree of insider status. One way this is marked is by adoption into the kinship system. My views on how seriously this adoption should be regarded have varied over the years and from place to place. Indeed, it is not a matter amenable to hard-and-fast rules. At Aurukun I enjoy a number of close relationships with particular families and with reference to which I am accorded a kin status. Often my status with respect to one family is incompatible with the status I occupy *vis-a-vis* another family. But no one seems to mind. And, indeed, people in western Cape York Peninsula seem quite content to operate in a non-systematised kin universe. They track relationships through close kin to more distant kin, often changing the linking kinsperson/s to suit their purposes or particular contingencies.

The use of kin terms is only one aspect of kin-based behaviours. Complex rules and normative behaviours are attached to all kin relationships and they can take a long time to learn. Moreover, an over-rigid adherence can vitiate the functions the European (or other 'outsider') may be called upon to perform. This applies to anthropologists as much as to anyone else. In my own case, at Aurukun my European-ness was never forgotten, and the assignation of a set of kin statuses had symbolic rather than actual force. Particular Aboriginal groups may value the outsider as well as the insider position of their 'captive' Europeans.

At Oenpelli the insistence that I should be incorporated into the kinship order has always been stronger than it ever was at Aurukun. Indeed, the obligatory conversation on first meeting someone is to establish mutual kin term usage. Despite the operation of the subsection system, which gives the illusion of systematising the whole kinship universe (and which is absent at Aurukun), the reality is that as one becomes more and more incorporated one finds that one is 'tracking' through certain specified individuals. Just as there is a greater insistence on kin term usage at Oenpelli than at Aurukun, so too is there a greater insistence on following the correct behavioural procedures: some people must be avoided, some people must be given things in a special way, and so on. (This is despite the fact that at Aurukun the rules are more complex and cover a wider range of activities.)

There is certainly a direct relationship between the degree of incorporation and the level of knowing. Aborigines tend to divide Europeans into 'those who know' and those who do not. I have found this particularly true of central Australia. Aborigines have all sorts of tests to establish the degree of knowing, not so much in the sense of precise cultural details as an understanding of the Aboriginal way of seeing the world. Once Aborigines have satisfied themselves that the newcomer 'knows' doors are miraculously opened. Without this 'knowing' the outsider is likely to find his/her target groups taciturn, vaguely hostile, and giving all the appearances of dullness and stupidity.

THE CHOICE AND USE OF LANGUAGE

In a country where few Europeans are genuinely fluent in any Aboriginal language it is both paradoxical and explicable that the knowledge of Aboriginal languages is seen as a magic key to entering the Aboriginal psyche. What is essential, as I have indicated above, is a knowledge of Aboriginal culture—of which language is, of course, an important component. I do not argue that Aboriginal languages should not be learnt. There is always tremendous value in this exercise (for one thing it shows a seriousness of purpose in dealing with particular groups). However, it is only one of a number of aspects with which the newcomer to an Aboriginal society should grapple.

I do not propose—despite the title of this paper—to talk about language as such in any detail. However, I do offer the following comments.

1. In initial encounters standard English is generally an acceptable medium. Of course, attention must be paid to rate of delivery and choice of vocabulary but equally important are such matters as clarity of exposition, the logical ordering and juxtaposition of ideas, the

capacity to concretize (e.g., instead of saying 'I have consulted with Aborigines all over Australia', saying 'I have talked with Aboriginal people in Queensland—in Aurukun, Edward River, Mornington Island, and then, I come this way and talked with people at Borroloola, Roper River—some people call it Ngukurr—, Bamyili . . .' and so on), the maintenance of circumspection, and a capacity to dissociate oneself to a degree from one's own ideas. (In many contexts Aborigines use other people to put their ideas for them; it is a useful practice to speak as though one were an intermediary. The idea should be somewhat external to the self. One way of doing this is to locate the action elsewhere: 'People at place X say such and such . . .' or 'People at place Y do such and such . . .' or 'I don't know what people do here, but at place Z they do things this way. Is it the same here? Or is it a bit different?') Humour is also a useful tool but it must not be *personally* directed (unless at oneself). Generally speaking, I argue that ideas must be kept clearly separate from each other and that one should determine whether an idea is understood and agreed with before proceeding to the next point or idea. (At Oenpelli people will mark such points in the discussion by saying *yoh*, or *mah*, or *kamak*. They can be treated as signals to proceed to the next point.)

2. The use of standard English is not ideal. There are varieties of Aboriginal English and *Kriol** in use with which it is possible to gain some familiarity in a relatively short period of time. This familiarity should provide some insight into how Aborigines structure and present ideas.

3. The use of the appropriate Aboriginal language may be thought to constitute the ideal. However, there are problems of which one should be aware:

   Aboriginal languages cannot be learnt overnight. It may take years to acquire even basic control let alone approach fluency. For this reason it is generally more sound for the person consulting with Aborigines over an important issue or presenting a difficult argument to use his/her own first language. One can then have some certainty that the ideas have not been garbled. What is important is to have sufficient knowledge of the language of one's interlocutors to understand what they say to each other and to oneself. In short, it is much sounder for all participants to use their own first languages than to adopt a single language of communication. In any case, this is largely in accord with Aboriginal practice.

   It is unusual to find monolingual speech communities (disregarding English). There are some places, including Oenpelli, that defy this generalisation, but then only to a degree. The consequence is that to understand the first language of every member of a social field, however small, one must ordinarily learn a number of languages; alternatively, one may acquire one language and oblige all one's interlocutors to operate in that language exclusively. To give a concrete example: in western Cape York Peninsula small outstations numbering no more than 20 people could easily represent, from a linguistic point of view, 10 or more languages and/or dialects.

Learning a language is a form of identification. A European's attempts to learn one language may identify him/her with a particular group. As Sutton rightly says (personal communication), this explains the flattering rumours that surround some of us who have been active in the field that we speak this or that language 'right through'. Yet we may not have been exposed to the language for more than two days. It represents an attempt to identify us, often exclusively, with a particular social group. Aboriginal societies are frequently marked by extreme factionalism; yet it may not always suit our designated function to be too closely locked in to one group rather than another.

Although at the beginning of this paper I stated that I wished to avoid dogmatic pronouncements it may be useful to commence, in a tentative fashion, the formulation of some 'rules'.

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*See, for example, John & Joy Sandefur, Pidgin and creole in the Kimberleys, Western Australia. *Newsletter* (ns) No. 14, September 1980, pp. 31–37.

Rule No. 1

Avoid personal names and personal references wherever possible, particularly where their usage will call that person into account. I will try to illustrate this rule by giving some examples.

1. Europeans are often insensitive to Aboriginal beliefs and practices. It has been reported to me, and I know from my own experience, that when Europeans hear of particular Aboriginal beliefs and practices they are apt not to believe the person reporting them. They invariably want to go and 'check up'. Europeans as much as Aborigines tend to be sceptical of things that lie outside their own field of experience. They want to see with their own eyes or 'get it straight from the horse's mouth'. Those of us who have had extensive experience with Aborigines are frequently embarrassed when after telling a European staff member about a particular belief or practice, we find that the European has rushed off to confirm it. Confirmation is not the problem. It depends how it is done. In examining the following example, note that it was a European who brought the story back to the person who first conveyed the information, not the Aborigine who was affected (in this particular case the Aboriginal person would be likely simply to convey his or her disgust in general terms by saying something to the effect that X is insensitive or 'doesn't know much'). A linguist on a particular community had been trying to stress to various people that when someone died one should not mention the name of the deceased, especially not to a close relative. Having been told this one of the Europeans rushed straight off to an Aboriginal woman who was well known to, and 'loved' by, the bulk of the mission staff. The European said to the Aboriginal lady (whom I shall call Ruth for convenience): 'Oh Ruth (breaking the rule once), Rose (the name of the linguist—breaking the rule twice) tells me that I shouldn't use the name James' (the name of Ruth's newly deceased uncle—breaking the rule three times and 'shaming', indirectly, the linguist). There is a general point which I have reiterated: in approaching any topic one does so with circumspection and at a level of generality which avoids concrete specific examples. For example, in the case just reported, the European would have been quite correct if he or she had said something to the effect that 'Someone (without specifying the name of the informant) told me that when someone dies no one should use the name of that dead person'. (This principle of generality may in fact be universal in cases where people wish to broach touchy or socially difficult topics.* It may relate to such conversational devices in English as the hypothetical case.)

2. To give a second example. In one field situation there was tremendous rivalry operating between two of my main informants. One was brilliant and perceptive, made suggestions which could often be fruitfully pursued, and was frequently wrong. The other was encyclopedic, certain, and even on those odd occasions when his information was suspect he was such a powerful figure socially and politically that his version of the facts became the new orthodoxy. When the former individual felt he might be getting out of his depth he would frequently refer me to the second, not so much because he was deferential in any real way but because he was anxious about the consequence of the second individual discovering that I had been given misleading information. The second individual was anxious about my relationship with the former individual because he perceived it as a possible challenge to his authority, and in any case he placed a high value on what he saw as 'the truth'. In his own view—and in the view of others—he simply 'knew' more than the other man. Sometimes I would wish to check pieces of information which I had been given, and using the formula that I have outlined above I would say 'someone has told me' or 'some people have told me that if x then y . . .' or something of that sort. He would look at me cagily and try to discover the source of the information. He always attributed it to William, despite the fact that the attribution was not always correct. He would never refer directly to William. He would simply refer to 'that man', or point in the direction where William lived with his mouth and head and say something to the effect that 'He doesn't know much'.

See also Sutton 1979.

1. I would always, as a matter of principle, deny that William was the source even if frequently he were. I recommend this procedure to anybody working in the field. If it is not adhered to rigorously one can end up in the middle of a furious controversy, as well as being—and this is unavoidable—a pivotal point in a fierce interpersonal rivalry. (Aborigines are always demanding of personal loyalty but the fact that two men may be rivals and often deadly enemies need not preclude any third person from being friends of both.)

Rule No. 2

Avoid direct criticisms of particular individuals. One has to be very careful about how one challenges or corrects another person. This is particularly true for a European who is inevitably seen as representing a culture which continually stressed its omniscience and superiority in its dealings with Aborigines. Moreover, most, perhaps all, Europeans enter Aboriginal societies either consciously or unconsciously with an educative mission—they feel under an obligation to educate Aborigines about the 'big wide world'. There is nothing wrong with this—just that it must be done carefully. To suggest to someone that he/she is ignorant of something is perceived as a criticism, both by him/her and by others.

Gossips are regarded as troublemakers in Aboriginal societies with which I am familiar. They are accused of 'telling story' (or having 'long tongue' or 'big mouth'). 'Telling story' is a dangerous occupation. In small societies it is easy for the 'story-teller' to be discovered and challenged. Habitual gossips are well known, and people will be cautious in entrusting information to them.

Europeans frequently encounter a strong silence—I sometimes call it 'cultural deafness'—when they ask directly for information, even as apparently innocuous as the names of people on the Council. This silence should rarely be interpreted as ignorance or stupidity. It may be that the person questioned does not like the way the Council operates, or dislikes one or more of its members, or feels that he/she should be a member instead of one or all of the existing members. The topic itself may evoke felt criticisms and there may be a wish to avoid it simply on these grounds. To answer it—giving the names in a straightforward neutral fashion as Europeans might (regarded as simply passing information, though the order in which we give the information may reveal our prejudices)—may well be interpreted (in the mind of the respondent) as signalling approval. Silence automatically implies a criticism or disapproval or an element of 'touchiness' about the topic. (It can be taken as a general rule that agreement is active, signalled by words or other gestures of confirmation; disagreement is passive, the most active form of which is withdrawal—turning one's back, retreating 'into one's shell', failure to appear, walking away.)

When people are reporting events of which they disapprove, or which they feel will be condemned either by Aboriginal or European law, they will carefully avoid giving the names of the miscreants. They may indicate vaguely where they live or refer obliquely to those 'crazy young fellows, always doing silly things'. A recent example can show some of the elements involved: a young man climbed over the barbed wire fence surrounding the social club one night in the hope of getting access to the beer in the cold room. People knew of the attempt from tomahawk marks on the doors and windows. In discussing the issue no one, including the main information-giver, referred by name to the culprit. People who did not know his identity narrowed the field down by referring to different camps (where known 'wild men' lived) and interpreting the successive responses—varying in intonation—of 'might be'. The information given then suggested that one might be able to discover the culprit's identity—'might be'—by looking for cuts from the barbed wire. This was not to be interpreted as a line of enquiry which the police might follow; rather, it was saying that the culprit had in fact been cut by the barbed wire and this would serve to identify him to everyone.

Such indirection is typical. It is a principle to be followed. In making criticisms refer to 'some people', not to particular people by name. If they happen to reside in Darwin or Alice Springs or Canberra, orient the body so that it indicates where they reside (with or without the lip pout).

Rule No. 3

Do not cause anyone to suffer the loss of personal dignity. Aborigines are very aware of personal dignity and suffer its loss badly, both in themselves and in others. People should not be publicly humiliated—'make people shame'—unless one is extremely provoked. It may then be legitimate to 'walk out', but only under extreme provocation and as a deliberately calculated strategy.

Feigning is an important element of public encounters. The people most vitally involved in an issue may feign disinterest, sitting with elaborate casualness; those whom one would expect to be the first to arrive at a public discussion may be the last to appear; the person most eager to dance may light up a cigarette just at the moment it seems his desire may be gratified.

It is bad strategy to lose one's temper publicly and in reality. It means a loss of face and can in addition cause people embarrassment. Feigned anger—either of the 'rant and rave' variety or the quiet deliberate 'white heat' variety—can be a powerful weapon. Certainly never become involved in a public shouting match. *Ad hominem* attacks must be avoided at all costs (see Rule No. 2). Excessive behaviour is severely discountenanced.

Rule No. 4

Practise circumspection and the use of disclaimers. At various points I have stressed the need for caution and circumspection. It cannot be stressed sufficiently. It is *the primary consideration.*

Partly it consists of not presenting oneself too forcefully and not linking oneself too closely with one's own ideas. If a topic is known to be touchy, apologise in advance: 'I don't know if I talk right way or wrong way. But can't be helped. I got job to talk about this thing. If I talk wrong way, well we might have to think different way . . .'. There should be an extensive use of conditionals: 'Might be', 'could be, 'might be some people talk/think that way . . .', and so on. Leave oneself an escape route: 'Might be I right or wrong . . .' Do not talk loudly or aggressively (known as 'talking rough'). Do not interrupt another person when he/she is speaking, even when what they are saying is nonsense. Every community has its incessant babbler who seemingly is confused on every issue and uses every opportunity to seek an audience. That person will annoy everyone, but it is seen as excessively rude to silence him or her and people just sit and take it. Leave it to close relations to perform the silencing operation.

In some communities young people may take a devil's advocate role—putting the unsaid views of some of the older people or shyer people, of people who cannot or will not talk. Sometimes they will appear to speak 'rough'. Do not misinterpret their behaviour. Their 'roughness' of speech may signal their own personal attitude to the views they are expressing. In any case, their arguments should be answered calmly and reasonably. They are not necessarily speaking for themselves.

Rule No. 5

'Knocking people back'. Of all the 'sins' committed by Europeans in their dealings with Aborigines this is probably the one most seriously regarded and readily observed by Aborigines. When Aborigines say of a European that he/she 'cannot knock people back' it should be taken as a great compliment, not as a statement of perceived weakness.

Aborigines will often approach Europeans with anxieties or proposals which seem quite unrelated to the European's functions or skills. People should be listened to seriously and offered *positive* alternatives if the particular European involved cannot help them. Aborigines tend to operate through social relationships rather than through functional or business relationships. The latter may become acceptable if there is a referral from a sympathetic and known European because it can be interpreted as an extension of the personal network. Unfortunately, such approaches often indicate the breakdown of relationships between particular Aborigines and particular Europeans. The fact that such breakdowns are common suggest the value of Europeans, knowledgeable and well regarded in the social situation, taking on multiple rather than single-stranded roles. Alternatively, it suggests how important it is for

Aborigines to be able to have direct access to the 'powers-that-be', and the value of direct negotiation.

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REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

The following list does not attempt to be comprehensive. The field of interest covered in this paper is somewhat 'underdeveloped'. However, the works listed below make notable contributions to various aspects of it, or take up issues which I have chosen to pass over quickly.

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Sutton, P., *Wik: Aboriginal society, territory and language at Cape Keerweer, Cape York Peninsula, Australia.* Ph.D. thesis, University of Queensland, 1978 (see especially chapter 5, The selection of speech varieties across and within dialects).

Sutton, P., Personal power, kin classification and speech etiquette in Aboriginal Australia (to appear in a volume of Australian kinship studies edited by Jeffrey Heath).

Since this paper was written Basil Sansom's important book, *The Camp at Wallaby Cross,* has been published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (Canberra, 1980). It is essential reading for anyone keen to arrive at a fuller understanding of the nature of communication and its relation to some events occurring in Aboriginal communities.