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Australian Aboriginal Culture : The Gift That Time Gave?

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis is an investigation into the possible effects of one culture upon people of another. My aim is not to generalize that all cultures have either positive, negative, or indeed any effects upon each other, but rather to monitor, using two case studies, some possibilities. In short, according to two Irish artists, are the Aboriginals of Australia a gift that time gave and if so, why? In studying the effects of different lifestyles, beliefs and modes of thought upon another, many factors must be considered. Are both cultures willing to learn about each other ? Is there a dominant culture, which may have the desire to control the other ? Is there a fear in less dominant cultures of being controlled ?

Many cultures throughout the world have died due to domination by another. Cultural colonialism is not a new movement, but an age-old device. At the 1989 Biennale Exhibition of Art in Sydney, Australia, many reporters, art critics and artists commented on the dominance of Western culture upon the native Aborigines. Australian writer Garey Foley is quoted in Sandy Nairne's book, State Of The Art, Ideas And Images In The 1980's, speaking of this exhibition,

> It is interesting that the organisers of these sorts of events usually do feel impelled to include Aboriginal people because there is an inherent recognition that to ignore what must, and can only, be regarded as the true cultural heritage of this country [Australia] would be a pretty major mistake on their part... (13, p. 216)

Ironically, and perhaps what urged Foley to make this statement, was the fact that, although the exhibition was held in Australia and although the theme was 'origins', only two Australian Aboriginal art pieces were exhibited there.

' Cultural colonialism ', according to Kenneth Coutts-Smith in his article, Australian Aboriginal Art ,

> does not massacre and imprison and institutionalise a subservient people, but, more gently, it absorbs the values of a peripheral cultural system into the larger system of the dominant one... (13, p. 216)

Australian Aborigines have struggled to retain their culture from such 'colonialism' and in many Northern regions, have managed to keep it alive. Over a century ago, European settlers came to the Northern region from Southern Australia, riding horses and driving cattle. However, the country was too harsh for cattle raising, and the Aboriginals were too unwelcoming, so for a long time, the settlers remained in Southern and Western areas of Australia. This meant that the Aborigines of the Northern regions retained their culture for a longer period of time than Southern and Western Aboriginals. I have chosen to discuss the culture of Northern Australian Aborigines due to its undeniable strength through its refusal to bend totally to Western ways of thinking. Foley is quoted as speaking of this strength,

> ..So much time and effort two hundred years of very concerted effort to destroy Aboriginality and Aboriginal culture, has gone into this country [Australia]. The fact that Aboriginal culture does remain a living thing is in itself an extraordinary political statement about their resilience, their adaptability and their tremendous willpower..(13, p. 216)

I concentrate on the Aborigines, living in reservations, in Northern Australia (fig. 1) since the case studies made in this thesis have had most interaction with people from these areas. Also, in the light of the fact that Aboriginal culture varies throughout Australia, and that all varieties are so complex, I feel that this thesis is only of sufficient length to discuss one area in any detail.

Reservations or Outstations (fig.2), as they are often known, are settlements of Australian Aboriginal people who have moved back to their land, living in the traditional ways, by hunting and gathering food, and performing religious ceremonies. The Aborigines of these reservations, such as the people of Yirrkala in the Northern Territory, who were granted land rights in December 1976, now have the authority to decide who has access to their lands, in an effort to live autonomously and to preserve their culture. Reservations were devised by the Australian government, according to the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in 'acknowledgement of the fundamental importance to Aboriginal culture of the right to land ownership', and in an effort not only to redress the damage, '..but also preserving, promoting and perpetuating the unique culture of the original Australians..'(19, p. 1)

Although born in Galway, Irish contemporary textile artist, Desmond Dillon has lived most of his life in Clonmel, County Tipperary. He was first introduced to the Australian Aborigines during childhood, when he stumbled upon a photograph, in a Children's Encyclopedia

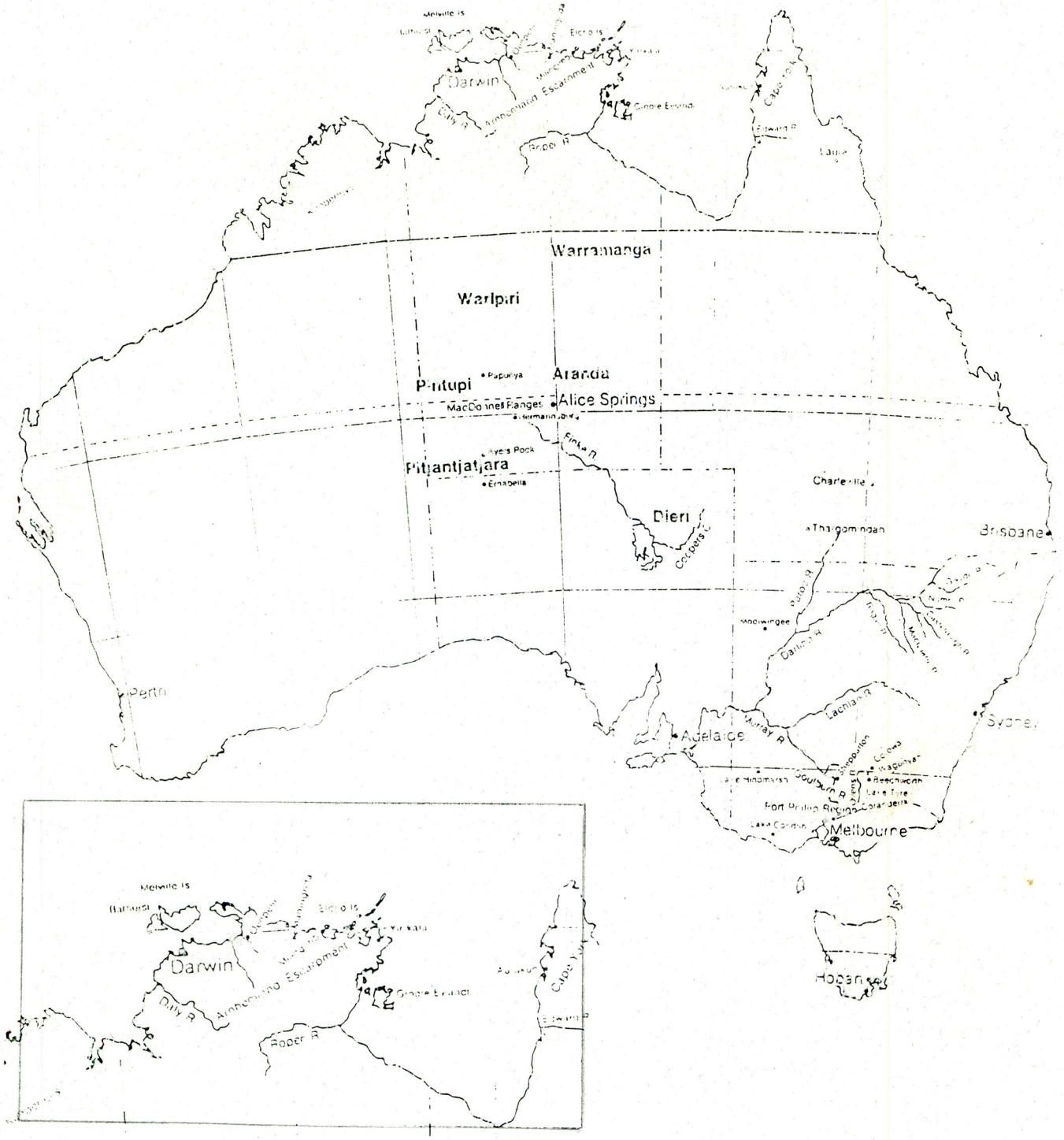

FIG. 1

Map of Northern Australia

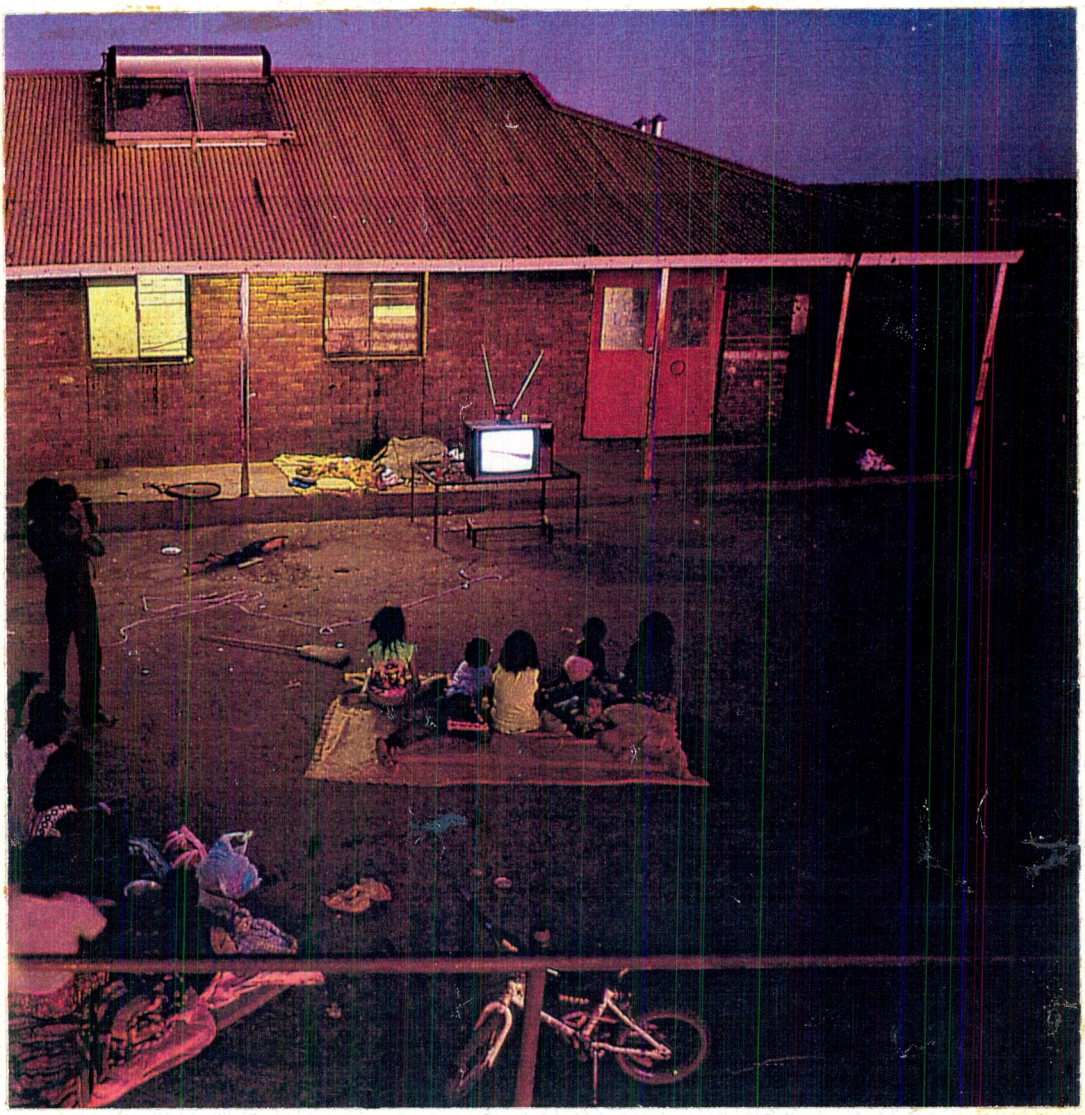

FIG. 2

Outstation at Balgo Hills in the

Great Sandy desert

of knowledge, of an Aboriginal man holding a boomerang (fig. 3). Although, initially, it was the powerful image of the photograph which interested Dillon, it also, perhaps, urged him to learn more about these people. Through further reading came the knowledge that Australian Aboriginality consisted, in fact, of a highly complex cultural system, and the image of Aborigines as primitive people began to fade.

Today, Desmond Dillon is an artist who expresses his emotions about the society he lives in and his environment through textile sculptures and tapestries. I believe that his knowledge of Australian Aboriginality and his stay in Australia, where he lived with the Gunabitji community in Maningrida, Arnhem Land, has played a major role in both how he expresses his emotions visually and why he does so. This issue is of major importance to my thesis since it is an affirmation of my central argument; that it is possible that learning from another culture can, in fact, facilitate the process of learning one's own.

Also of relevance to this thesis is the work and voiced opinions of contemporary Dublin artist, Oliver Whelan. I feel that his interaction with Australian Aborigines has played a role in how he views his society and how he expresses these emotions visually.

I do not use the fact that Australian Aboriginal culture has affected both Dillon and Whelan, to make general assumptions. I am not claiming that these men represent the views of an entire culture. After all, it can be argued that they are two people, others may not be

FIG. 3

Australian Aboriginal man
holding a traditional boomerang, and
other hunting equipment

affected at all by this culture. However, what is of importance to my thesis is my belief in the possibility of people of one culture, for example, Irish culture, productively relating to another culture. For this purpose, Dillon's and Whelan's sole experiences with Aboriginal culture, shown through their art work and voiced opinions are of great relevance and warrant detailed discussion. Also included is a brief discussion of non-Aboriginal artists whose work reflects Australian Aboriginal influences. Two such artists are Ann Newmarch and Wesley Stacey, both of white Australian backgrounds.

My reasons for choosing Desmond Dillon and Oliver Whelan as case studies for my thesis vary. In Dillon's case, his work is traced through a strong line of influence by Australian Aborigines, and, by speaking with him, his expression of his wishes to bridge cultural gaps, and find links between his own Irish culture and that of the Australian Aborigines. The fact that both men are artists provides, for them, a mode of expression which when explained or simply viewed, gives us an insight into how they view their culture and the influence of Australian Aboriginal culture upon it. Whelan's work represents years of reflection on himself, his society and the influences on both. Together with Dillon's more youthful work and views, I can present the similar case studies of two quite different men. Both artists have spent time trying to understand Australian Aboriginal culture, and both hold a deep respect for this culture. It is for these reasons that I have chosen to discuss Dillon and Whelan.

The first two chapters explore the effects of Europeanisation upon Northern Aborigines living in reservations today. I will stress the factors which make their culture, still, a uniquely Australian Aboriginal way of life, but also the factors which have removed it from its traditions. I aim to portray the kind of people with whom Dillon and Whelan became acquainted. Through incidents which occurred whilst the artists were with Aborigines, and in researching the subject, it is quite clear that the Aborigines of these areas can be humorous, witty and quite clever people.

These chapters lay the foundation on which to build my theory that, although Australian Aboriginal culture seems, at first glance, to be far removed from our Irish culture, as human beings, it is possible for us to relate to it. Cultural anthropologist Keesing believes,

> ..to seek to understand ...non-Western peoples is to seek to understand ourselves..,(8, p. 176)

since anthropology promotes the idea that,

> ...each culture represents a separate instance of human possibility, a different way of being human..(8,p. 109)

In other words, man adapts to his environment , and his culture relates to this adaptation. Thus, people who have adapted differently to their environment have different cultures. I believe that cultures can interrelate if they each understand that no culture is inferior, but that they are simply different adaptations of human living. For example, in the case of the Australian Aborigines, progress and change are not ideals. Their culture survived successfully through generations of tradition,

skills which had been perfected throughout the ages, and knowledge of their land. Thus to think them inferior or primitive, as many white settlers did, and indeed many people still do, is an intolerable ignorance. The Australian Aborigines simply portray another 'instance of human possibility'(8, p. 109)

Because of the harsh Australian climate, the Australian Aborigines were semi-nomadic people. This factor influenced their culture, predominantly noticeable in their lack of material possessions and permanent art pieces. The climate in Europe does not demand constant travel for survival, which was thus reflected through permanent residences and collections of material possessions. This stability afforded Europeans the flexibility to continually strive for progress and change.

Ultimately, my reason for choosing to discuss the Australian Aborigines is because I have great respect for their culture, and having researched it quite thoroughly, I feel that it has influenced me a great deal. All the characteristics of Australian Aboriginal culture discussed throughout this thesis have been instrumental in this influence. I have not been to Australia and so, I have not yet had the chance to meet with the Australian Aborigines so my interviews with Desmond Dillon and Oliver Whelan proved very informative on this level. I think it is possible to be influenced by a culture whose people I have not yet met since it is the code by which these people live which interests me, and to learn of this code of behaviour and thought does not always require first-hand experience.

CHAPTER ONE: I'D RATHER FEEL THE EARTH BENEATH MY FEET: The Australian Aboriginal Relationship With The Land

In order to understand the effects of Northern Australian Aboriginal culture upon people of Irish culture, we must first consider some characteristics of this culture. The following two chapters aim to do this through the discussion of some features of the culture as it is today. The particular people relevant to this thesis live in reservations, struggling to keep their culture alive. Undoubtedly, even these people have been influenced to some degree by Westernization. Therefore, these chapters aim to give an honest account of these people and aspects of their culture as it stands today, presenting and understanding of them as best a non-Aboriginal can. The points of their culture I have chosen to discuss are the aspects, I feel, have had most influence on the two artists with whom I have spoken, and also, offer the greatest understanding of these people in such a short discussion.

Perhaps the deepest spiritual and most powerful bond in Northern Australian Aboriginal culture is the relationship between its people and its land.

> ..The civilized keep alive the territorial war... Erase the race that claim the place and say we dig for ore or dangle Devils in a bottle and push them from the Pull of the Bush..(24)

These lyrics are taken from a song written by a singer/songwriter Kate Bush. They emphasise dramatically

the 'raison d'être' of Australian Aborigines: the 'Pull of the Bush'. It is this spiritual force that contributes to the survival of Northern Australian Aboriginality, since it has impelled many of these people to live in reservations, in an effort to continue many of their traditions.

However, of major threat is the increasing rate of alcoholism among these communities. The 'Devils' (a reference to alcohol) are indeed strong temptations to a race who have had to watch as their most powerful bonds are severed as the 'civilized..dig for ore..'(24) (a reference to the white settlers who have engaged in mining, ignoring the spiritual relevance of the land to the Australian Aborigines). Biologically, the Australian Aborigines have no tolerance to alcohol nor to sugar-based products. Therefore, the introduction of these commodities can be fatal if taken excessively. Because of this, many reservations have banned the sale of alcohol to Aborigines. An elder from Arnhem Land explains,

> If you take our land, you take our soul. And now our soul is gone, why shouldn't we have a drink? (9, p. 125)

Contributing to the alcohol problem also, is the introduction of money into Aboriginal culture. Desmond Dillon, whilst living with the Gunabitji community at Maningrida, Arnhem Land, in Northern Australia learnt that,

> ..even the full-blooded Aborigines got a dole, and when they got this money at the start of the week, they would spend it on Coca-cola, and really sickly things. They have no conception of money, and they think that there is no point in saving anything..(17)

In Western civilization, where materialism and wealth play such important roles in society, it is indeed difficult to understand and, perhaps for some, to respect a race who have not aspired to these Western goals, nor to the goals of progress and change.

> ..Technologically the Aborigines are indeed a primitive people, whose level of development is far surpassed by our own progress. In achieving a harmony within themselves, however, and in expressing this harmony, the Aborigines have advanced far beyond us..

says Eric Rowlison, in his introduction to ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIA (1, p. 13). Western culture seems to have lost sight of this equilibrium and we tend to be infinitely searching for the reasons our achievements have driven us farther from it. Our vision of poverty reaches no further than the lack of material possessions, therefore, when Bruce Chatwin states in his book, THE SONGLINES ,

> ..what could be done for Aboriginals was to preserve their most essential liberty : the liberty to remain poor, or.. more tactfully, the space in which to be poor if they wished to be poor..(5, p. 4),

he is acknowledging their denial of the Western ideal of materialism. However, to be poor by Australian Aboriginal standards, I believe, is to be without their land, their sacred sites, their dreamings: to be, in fact, without their culture.

The harmony Rowlison spoke of is inherent both physically and mentally in Australian Aborigines. Their affinity with the earth and all other beings on it, stems from traditions rooted in their belief in the creative period, when the world, as we know it, came into being.

This period, the Dreamtime, is discussed in more detail in Chapter Two, but it is important to understand that, in Australian Aboriginal culture, all aspects of life, physically, mentally and spiritually are interlinked. To separate them, or treat them as separate entities, is to misinterpret their culture.

> Once you take them [Aborigines] off their natural land, they just decide they might as well die, there is no point in going on. You can't take one part away from them, it's all interlinked..

explains Dillon (17). Spiritually, the land will provide for its inhabitants as long as the Dreamtime constantly recurs, and the Dreaming characters are eternally involved in this repetitive process. Thus, the survival, through time, of the Dreaming beings ensures the survival of human life. Cultural anthropologist, Keesing, theorises that when people are in an environment that they have not got the technology to control, then they must accept the environment as it is. Thus, Tribal peoples are characterised as having a oneness with the earth, rather than being masters of it,

> ..In a world you cannot control, a natural balance you must study and adjust to, a human environment dominated by climate, the cycling of the days and the years, your kinship with nature is compelling and sacred..(8, p. 129)

Perhaps these theories should be spread to a wider audience, especially at a time when 'our efforts to control and dominate nature have placed our planet gravely at risk'(8, p. 129)

Physically, the Australian Aborigines can cope with the harsh climate and the somewhat dangerous surroundings of the Australian outback. Both artists,

Dillon and Whelan have commented on the adeptness and skill of the Aborigines in their environment. They have an acute sense of hearing, sight and smell, and a knowledge of the bush that is crucial to their survival.

Dillon tells a story, which not only illustrates this point, but also says something of their sense of humour. Whilst in Maningrida, each time a truck was approaching the reservation, the Aborigines would hear its rumblings at least five minutes before Dillon himself could, and they would proclaim to him, 'truck coming'. One particular day, Dillon heard the sound of an engine and looking around, noticed that the Aborigines had not heard it. So, feeling quite proud of his triumph, he proclaimed loudly 'truck coming', at which point the Aborigines all pointed to the sky where a large plane was flying directly above.(17)

Whelan told of an incident which occurred whilst he was heading towards an island with some Aborigine friends. In the distance, one of the Aborigines saw not only the island, but also two men in a boat at its shore. Whelan could not see anything but the straight horizon line. It was not until thirty minutes later that he spotted the island, and another fifteen minutes before making out the figures.(18)

Both interviewees commented also on the skills of the Aborigines in fishing, hunting and their knowledge of the location of water-holes (fig. 4). This knowledge is accumulated throughout rituals, dances and paintings. Amazingly, an Aborigine can go 'walkabout', a journey that recreates the steps of his ancestors. Having learnt, from

FIG. 4

Skilled kangaroo hunters,

Northern Australian

songs, paintings and instruction (fig. 5), the journey through the bush, he knows his way, where he can get water and food, and can cover many kilometres without loosing track of his exact whereabouts. Of course today it is more difficult for Aborigines to know that their land has been untouched. Since the arrival of white settlements, many sacred sites and landmarks crucial to these 'walkabouts' have been defaced or destroyed completely by mining expeditions, or bomb testing zones. At reservations, such as those at Canberra, Maningrida and Cullen, hunting and fishing are still practised, as are 'walkabouts' and all aspects of ceremonial life.

The creation of artefacts used in daily life required skill, and their decorative appearance links them spiritually with the Dreamtime (fig. 6). The spear (fig. 6a), the throwing stick and the digging stick are each fundamental instruments in the hunter-gatherer way of life. These instruments are also used as weapons in war and as ceremonial objects in rituals, all contributing to the interlinking of all aspects of life. A woomera, or spear-thrower (fig. 7), is an associate part of the spear. It is essentially a tool used to increase the force of the spear throw. Fighting shields (fig. 8) in Northern Australia are made from the roots of native fig trees. The designs are painted with natural pigments, and associate the shield with the totem of its owner. Once painted, the shield is thought to have spiritual protection. Shields play an important role in the initiation of the young men, when they are each given a blank shield to paint at the final stages of the ceremony.

FIG. 5

Aboriginal man's country,

where his dreaming has left marks of his

journey, Ningie Nangala, acrylic on canvas, (91 x 61 cm)

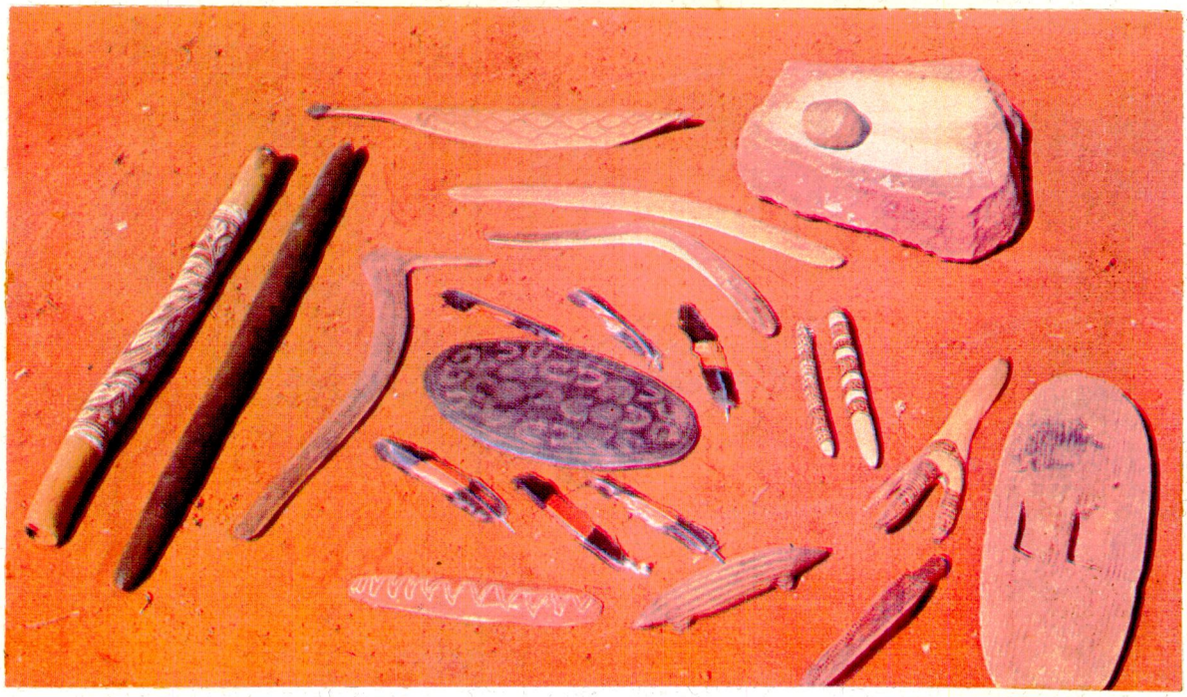

FIG. 6

Decorated utilitarian and totemic objects

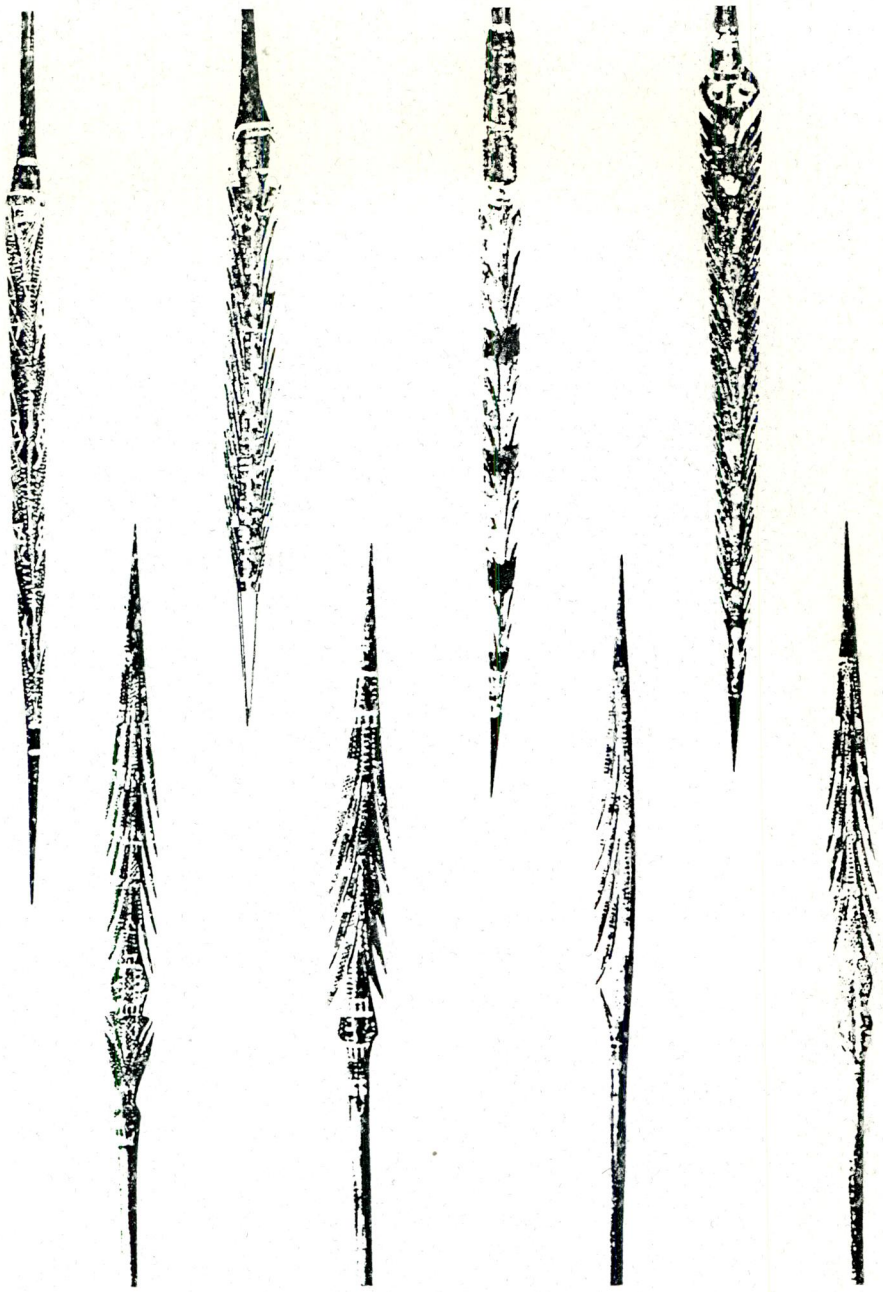

FIG. 6a

A variety of elaborately carved Northern Australian Aboriginal spears

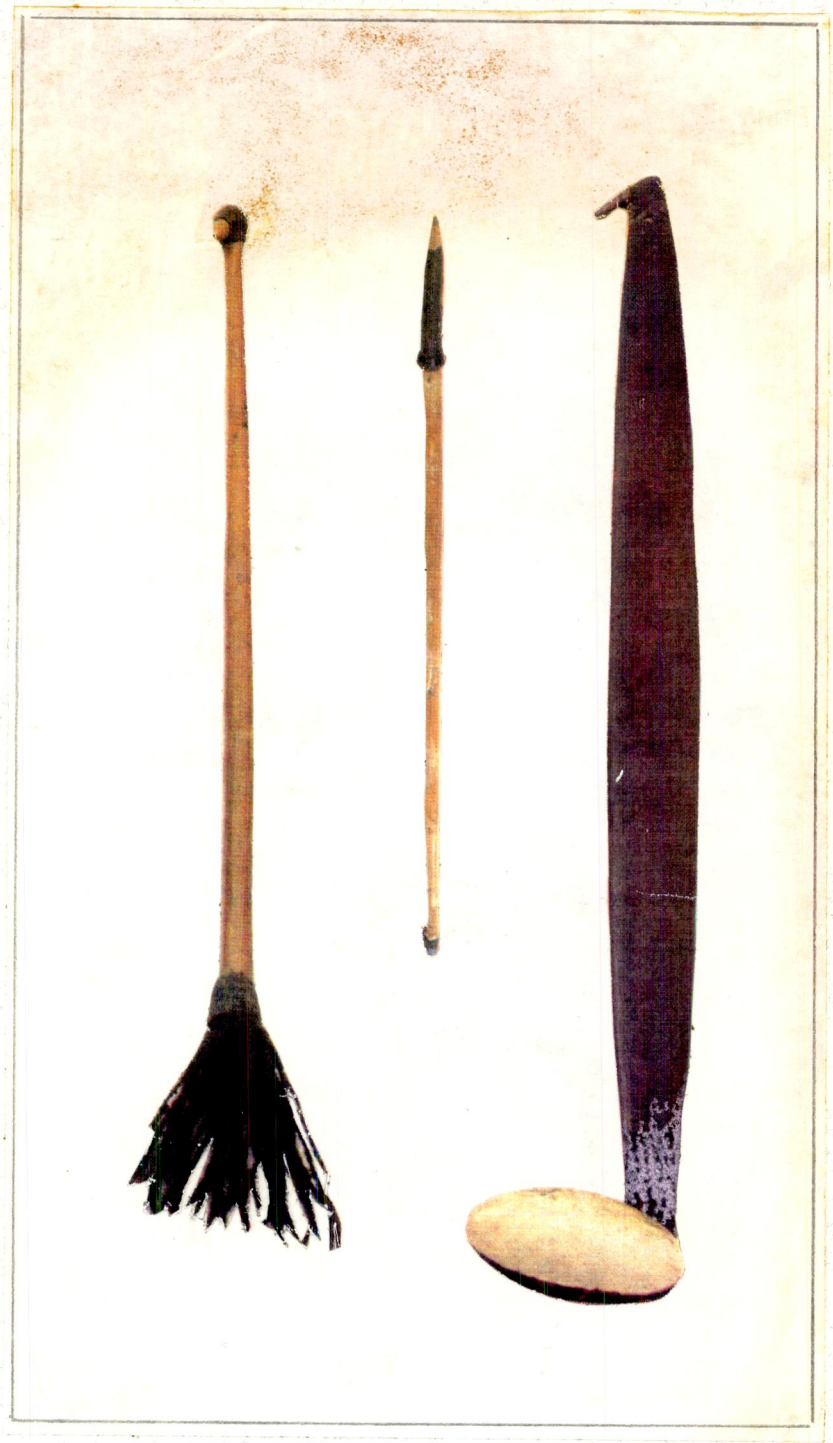

FIG. 7

Three typical WOOMERAS, or spear-throwers of Northern Australia

FIG. 8

Rainforest Fighting Shield

Some tools have today been replaced with European implements, however, the traditional hunting instruments and ritual objects continue to be used in ceremonies and in daily life.

As modernization of all aspects of Aboriginal life approaches, explains Dillon,

> ..they are recording the songs and with the videos, they are trying to hold onto the dance and it is the only way for it to survive, I think. As we see them, the original Aboriginals will disappear but hopefully, it is the Aboriginality that will shine through in a modern setting..it will survive..(17)

CHAPTER TWO: THIS STORY IS OLD:

The Australian Aboriginal Relationship With The Land

This chapter continues the theme of the relationship between the Australian Aborigines and the land. It concentrates on the roles of art and ceremony within this theme and also explores the concept of the Dreamtime in greater depth.

The Dreamtime, which was introduced in Chapter One, is the largest, single source of imagery expressed in Australian Aboriginal art, dance and ceremony (figs. 9, 10 & 11). Its concept is one of great importance in the study of Australian Aborigines since it is the core of their culture. The Dreamings formed the laws by which Aboriginal society lives, all the social rules and religious ceremonies inherent in their culture, and created the land and its inhabitants. The Australian Aborigines do not pay homage one god, instead they attribute to the creation of each thing a separate god or dreaming. Therefore there are infinite dreamings, and since the Dreamtime is considered to be an on-going process, new dreamings are encorporated into the overall Dreamtime as they occur, such as money or car dreamings. The Dreamtime is past, present and future, and must be constantly recreated through art, ceremony, music and dance, to ensure the survival of life itself. Australian Aborigines' respect for the land stems from this belief. All things, both animate and inanimate are important since they too were created by Dreamings. The land is full of signs, left by the ancestral beings,

FIG. 9

Rainbow Snakes Dreaming,

Mick Gill Tjakamarra, Acrylic on canvas, (180 x 120 cm)

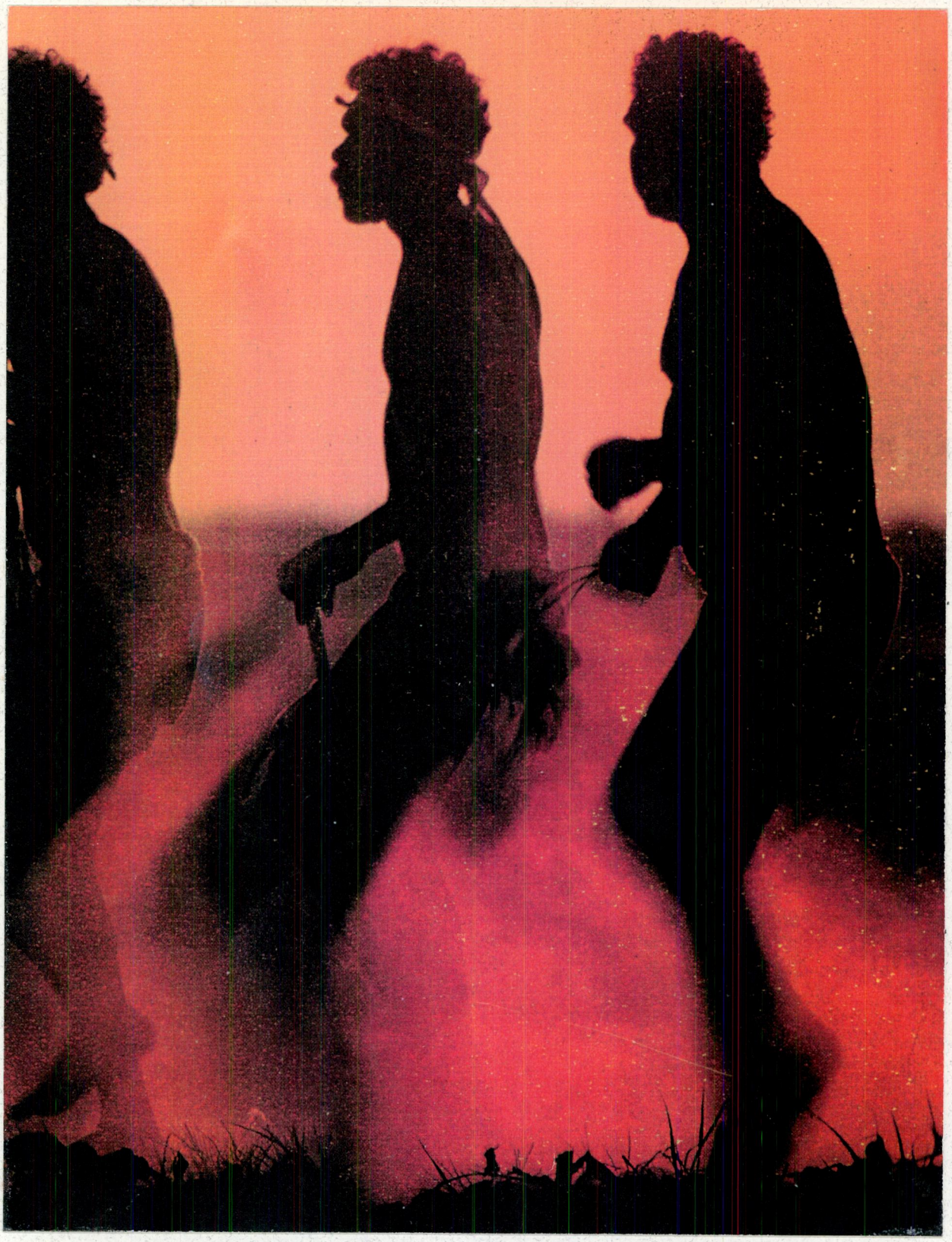

FIG. 10

Corroboree, re-enacting the deeds of the dreaming ancestors of the Gagudju people, Northern Australia

FIG. 11

Initiation ceremony for boys into adulthood,

Arnhem Land

> ...a land humanised so that it could be used and read by Aborigines who were/are ultimately familiar with it, and read as clearly as if it were bristling with notice-boards..(4, p. 6),

explains R and C Bernt. Therefore, one can understand the personification used by Australian Aborigine Bill Neidjie, in his book KAKADU MAN,

> ..while you sleeping, you dream something. Tree and grass same thing. They grow with your body, with your feeling... when you sleep, tree growing like other trees... they got lots of blood..(14, p. 52)

Although the Australian Aborigines feed off animals and plants from the earth, they understand the importance of the recycling of life. When collecting crocadile eggs (fig. 12), for example, they would never take all of the eggs that they have found, since this would contribute to the extinction of the crocadiles of that region, and thus the end of the cycle of life.

It is obvious that the Dreamtime is a most complex phenomenon and I believe that its study can only be taken to shallow depths by non-Aboriginal people. It is, after that, a very personal spiritual relationship for each Australian Aborigine and, to try to explain it would be an impossible task. An Aboriginal man tried to teach anthropologist, W.E.H. Stanner the meaning of the dreaming concept. Stanner's account of the incident was as follows,

> '..My father... said this: "My boy, look! Your Dreaming is there; it is a big thing; you never let it go...all Dreamings come from there." Does the white man now understand?'

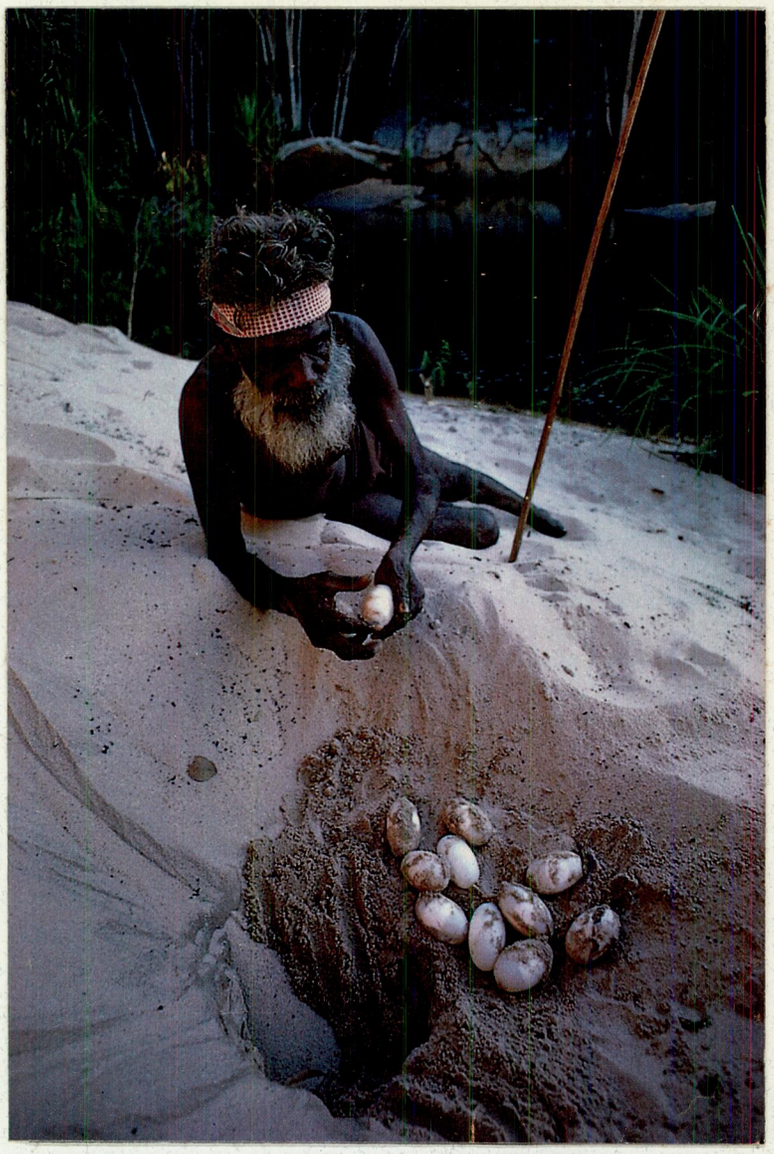

FIG. 12

An Aboriginal elder collecting crocadile eggs,

Northern Australia

> The black fellow, earnest, friendly, makes a last effort. 'Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know what; something.' There is a struggle to find words, and perhaps a lapse into English. 'Like engine, like power, plenty of power; it does hard work; it pushes..'(16, pp. 14-15)

Writer, Mervyn Meggitt described how an old Walbiri man who was his spiritual guide, eventually explained to him that he, Meggitt, had reached his philosophical depth and could no longer follow into the mysteries of the universe.(8, p. 333)

The bond between an Australian Aborigine and his or her dreaming ancestors is created even before birth. In Northern Australian Aboriginal belief, when the expectant mother feels the baby's first kick, this is the time when the spiritual ancestor of the child has entered her body. The expectant mother notes her whereabouts at this time since this area, or the nearest sacred site, is now the child's 'conception site', and will be the property of the child once it is born. The site belonging to the child is an area within the overall land belonging to the clans within one moiety. The people belonging to areas of land are separated into moieties, the people of Northeast Arnhem Land, for example, are divided into the Dhuwa and the Yirritja moieties. The clans living within these moieties are made up of separately named groups traced patrilineally. Each clan owns its own area of land through its own dreaming ancestors, and the songs, dances and designs associated with it. Both clans and moieties were traced through patrilineal descent and it was considered incestuous for people of the same moiety or

clan to intermarry. Thus, the wives within a clan were originally from another clan of the opposite moiety.

Because the relationship between clans and dreamings was totemic and because each clan considered their dreaming to be like a brother or sister, it is not permitted for members of a clan to kill one of its own totems for food. For example, those related to the kangaroo dreaming could not kill a kangaroo and to do so is considered to be both cannibalistic and fratricidal, and would result in extreme punishment.

Within clans ownership of art lies with certain members. By ownership, I refer to the inherited rights of certain clan members to paint and create art objects. In Northern regions, these rights lie with patrilineal clans or sections of such clans. Senior members of each clan have the most power in art ownership, as well as ownership of music, dances and sacred names. They choose who has access to art pieces and the meanings and symbolism of these pieces are only taught to younger clan members on their approval.

In traditional Australian Aboriginal culture, most art was sacred, for the purpose of ceremony and ritual. Today, of course, the introduction of the marketing of Australian Aboriginal art has somewhat compromised this tradition. However, whether the artist paints for the purpose of sale or otherwise, strict control is exercised over what he paints. For secular purposes he can not paint his own clan designs, and he has a 'minder' of sorts, who surveys his work to ensure he remains within the laws of his culture. In Northern

Australian Aboriginal culture, the rights to sacred paintings lie with the men, however, today, secular paintings are created by both male and female (fig. 13).

There are many debates between people world-wide, who believe that Australian Aborigines are being exploited, that their popular designs are just a 'fashion craze' in the world of art, that their art is not true art since once it is transferred from rock and bark (figs. 14 & 14a) to canvas, and from natural pigments to acrylic paints (fig. 14b), it ceases to be truly Aboriginal. As these debates continue, and art critics throw their views to and fro, Australian Aborigines are selling more and more paintings, gaining more publicity for their own culture and politically forcing the Australian Government into a moral dilemma. Through this publicity, the world becomes an audience in the struggle for land rights and the right to keep sacred sites untouched. Money acquired through the sale of paintings contributes to the upkeep of the outstations, and the increasing numbers of Toyota Landrovers for mobility between these outstations (fig. 15). Together with government schemes, video equipment to record their rituals, songs and dances have also been acquired. As the Western world squabble about who is exploiting who, the Aboriginals of Northern Australia are using their intelligence to take from the Western culture what they need to strengthen their own.

The use of Australian Aboriginal art as a political statement, to create awareness of a culture, seems to be justifiable for a race who have been

FIG. 13

Maggie Napangardi painting

Initiated Women Dreaming, Yuendemu, 1987

FIG. 14

Australian Aboriginal Rock Art,

Kakadu National Park, Northern Australian

FIG. 14a

Man Hunting A Kangaroo,

Aboriginal bark painting

FIG. 14b

Bush Potato Dreaming, Victor Jupurrula Ross,

1987, Yuendemu, Acrylic on Canvas, (1590 x 1060 mm)

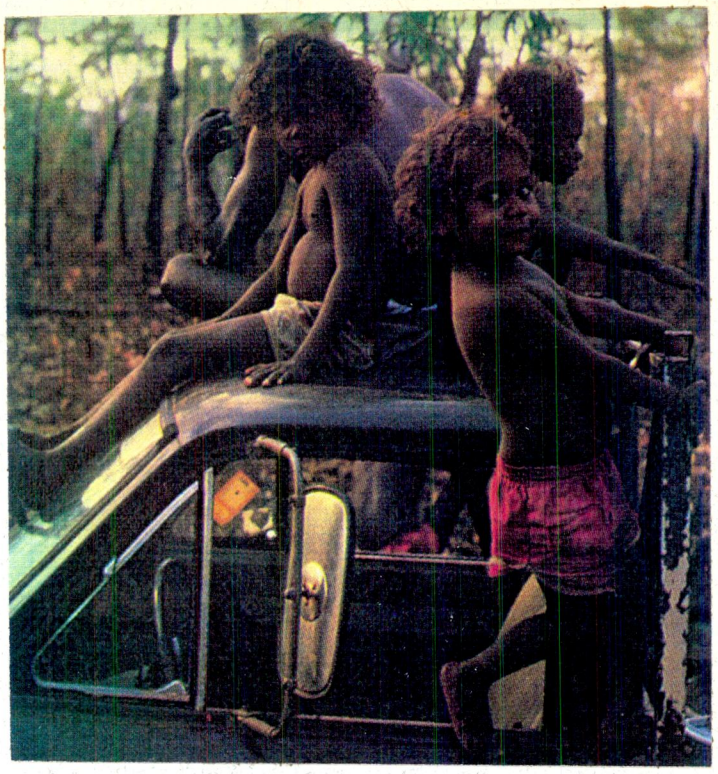

FIG. 15

A Toyota Landrover belonging to the Aboriginal residents of an Outstation in Northern Australia

previously so badly treated and whose voice has been constantly ignored.

Bill Neidjie explains this lack of communication,

> ...If we tell white European story, he slow to listen. If we get little bit wild, he might listen ...but slow. Him got to always ask questions. He want that place. That's why we frightened... (14, p. 49)

Englishman Thomas Major proved the point by saying in 1900,

> ...Our treatment of the natives may be deemed unjustifiable by some. Naturally they may say that it was their country, and ask what business we had there? Quite so, but the same argument may be used in all new countries. It will not hold water, however, nor can we change the unalterable law of Nature. For untold centuries the Aborigines have had the use of the country, but in the march of time they, like the extinct fossil, must make way. (13, p. 213)

Today, for the Aborigines of the North, it seems that they will not 'make way', nor are they prepared to fade out of existence like the 'extinct fossil'.

Another tradition which has broken its way into White Australia is the ceremonial corroborees, or dances as we would recognise them to be. As in the case of painting, only secular dances are performed publicly. However, such an unusual form of entertainment is certain to attract tourism, a fact which could, arguably, be a large contribution towards the newfound awareness of Aboriginal culture in White Australian society, and ultimately, statements such as the following one,

> ...Culture is the vital, but rarely acknowledged ingredient for a lucrative tourist industry, for profitable business entertainment and ultimately for a

successful foreign policy...(13 p. 205)

Prove exactly why the 'awareness' is such an important step. I stress that this fact is arguable and that many people, both Australian and otherwise, are not solely interested in the Australian Aborigines for the marketability of their culture and their fiscal value.

Ceremonial dances of a sacred nature tend to be much more powerful than the secular versions. Dillon describes a ritual he was permitted to attend in Maningrida Outstation, Northern Territory. The ritual, DANCE OF THE MATING TURTLES, was a present for one of the women of the reservation, who had married a few months earlier. This ritual was a public ceremony, meaning that women were allowed to attend, and also, presumably, Dillon's presence as a visitor and adult male was also acceptable.

> ...I was allowed to go and see the men getting painted but the women were not permitted ...at the ritual, the women were wailing and crying ...putting it on for the dance ...we were all clapping while the dancers were pretending they had fishing nets and were catching all the turtles. The dancing was really strange, powerful, direct moves and then suddenly, they would stop..(17)

Dillon seemed to be most affected by the powerful atmosphere of the ritual. The deep, haunting sounds of the Didgeridoo (fig. 16), a long wind instrument made from tubular hollow wood, together with the clapping and dancing beats and the dark, painted bodies of the dancers (fig. 17) in the firelight of the camp seemed to create a spiritual atmosphere never before experienced by Dillon (fig. 18). The feeling that time, days, months and

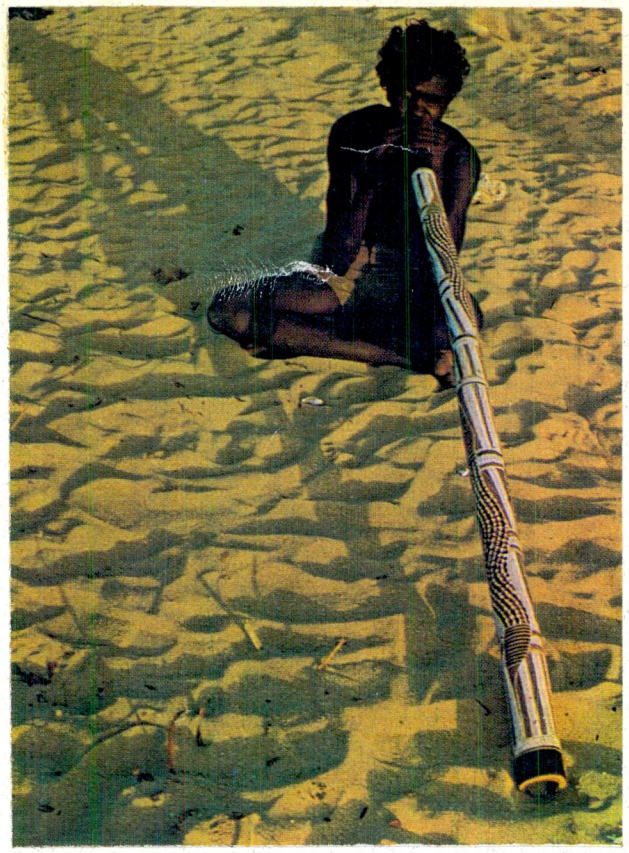

FIG. 16

An Australian Aboriginal man playing a traditional instrument, the Didgeridoo

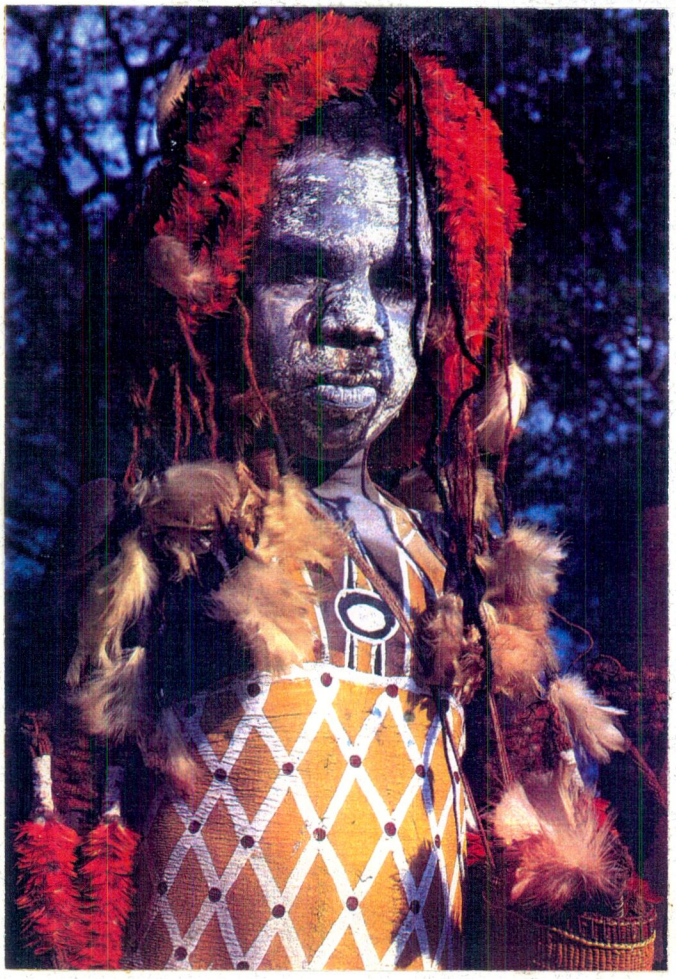

FIG. 17

Man and child adorned with body painting in preparation for a ceremony

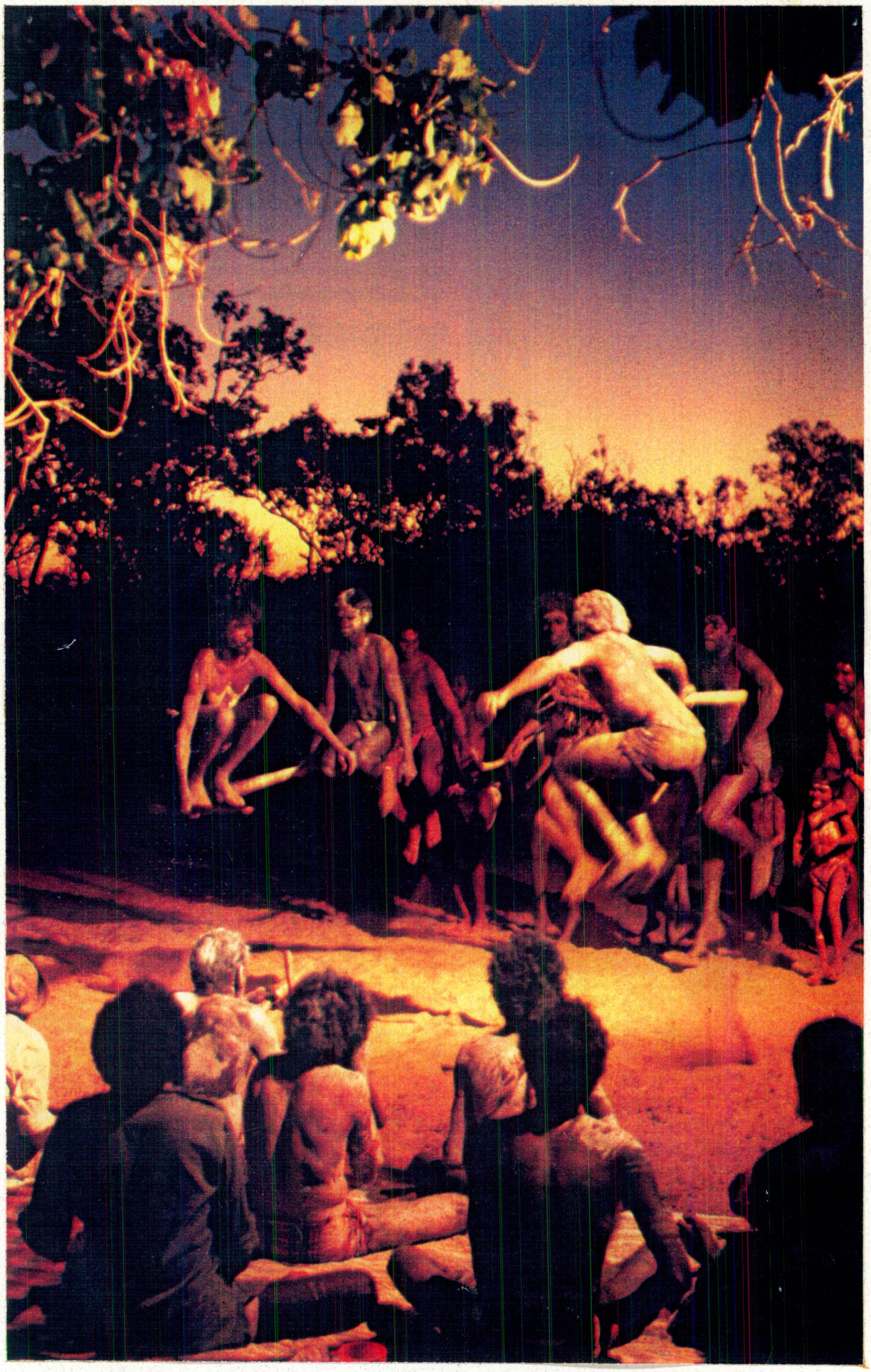

FIG. 18

A ceremony creates a spiritual atmosphere, Arnhem Land, Northern Australia

other cultures were somewhere far away but not in the past nor in the future touches upon the Australian Aboriginal sense of time. It is this concept of constantly recurring time that makes Australian Aboriginal thought so different from European.

European idea of time is as a passing but continual move towards a future period. The Australian Aborigines tend not to separate the past from the future. Their time moves, according to Whelan, horizontally. Ancestors, Dreamings, and new generations are all on the same horizontal time span, they just slot into different spaces along it. Dillon tells of two separate incidents which explains the point more clearly. The first is the alarming rate of Aboriginal jail suicides. Many of these suicide victims are people who have been jailed for minor crimes and have been told that they will be released the next day or within a week. However, they do not understand the concept of tomorrow or even of a week, and so they opt for suicide. The second incident relates to the H-bomb testing zone in Maralinga, Central Australia. Dillon explains that the zone is now so polluted that it will not be safe again for thousands of years. The Australian Aboriginals state that they will wait until then. This concept of time is spiritual, and it is interlinked with all other aspects of time in Australian Aboriginal culture.

Chapters One and Two have aimed to explain some of the factors of Australian Aboriginal culture which have influenced Dillon and Whelan, and indeed, other non-Aboriginal artists.

The final chapter in this thesis discusses the work of Dillon and Whelan in this light, and also, takes a brief look at other artists who have been influenced by Australian Aboriginal culture. The chapter aims to prove that Dillon and Whelan have been facilitated in learning more about themselves and their own culture through their interaction with the Aborigines of Australia.

CHAPTER THREE: I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I CAN SEE:
The effects of Australian Aboriginal culture on Irish Artists Desmond Dillon and Oliver Whelan

I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I CAN SEE, 1990,(fig. 19) is a textile piece created by Desmond Dillon. It deals, fundamentally, with the transition from ignorance into knowledge, although it may be interpreted in other ways, which are discussed later in this chapter. Dillon believes that people tend to make judgements on others without having enough knowledge to form them. Perhaps this is a reference to the Australian Aborigines, who tend to be judged as alcoholics by some and as subhuman by others, neither of which is correct.

Oliver Whelan was astonished to find, on his first visit to Australia in 1979, that so many White Australians had never seen an Australian Aboriginal. His interest in their culture had stemmed from a film he had seen called WALKABOUT (fig. 20), the story of the growth of a relationship between two white children who were lost in the Australian desert, and an Aboriginal boy who found them, adapted from the book of the same name. (10)

Both Whelan and Dillon were drawn to the Australian Aboriginal culture through visual media, a fact which is not surprising since both men are visual artists. However, their interest encouraged them to learn more about this culture and eventually, to meet with the people of this culture. I believe what encouraged both men in this direction was the desire to view the world in a way that was different from the European way. Both artists

FIG. 19

I Was Blind But Now I Can See, Desmond Dillon, 1990, fabric, acrylic & wire, (32" x 42")

FIG. 20

A Still from the film, Walkabout

felt that, in learning from Australian Aboriginal culture, they could then look at their own Irish culture in a different light. I do not feel that this desire stemmed from being disillusioned with Ireland and Irish culture, but, in Dillon's case, it may have stemmed from disillusion with the direction Irish culture is taking. The move towards commercialism, materialism and the increasing pace that Irish daily life is taking on, leading to the idea that 'time is money' is one that Dillon would sooner forget,

> ...I like the idea, here in Ireland, that the roads are in bad shape, it just means that you have to travel more slowly.... Why do we have to cut down all the hedges and put up electric fences?...It's the European way, make more use of the space you have, save time, save money... I like the Aborigines because they are in touch with the land... (17)

Dillon's work tends to deal with issues regarding man and his environment. The Australian Aborigines, having such strong links with their environment, provided inspiration for Dillon, who feels that his society is becoming so detached from its roots that '...for a while, they thought they could cut out the human involvement altogether...' (17)

Dillon's work questions the direction Irish culture is taking by illustrating, in an almost mythical way, the beauty of what it is leaving behind. TOUCH NOT A SINGLE BOUGH, 1990,(fig. 21) a textile piece by Dillon, made two years after his time in Australia, continues the theme of man in his environment by dealing with the mistreatment of trees in Ireland. Dillon uses his unique technique of creating three-dimensional work within a

FIG. 21

Touch Not A Single Bough, Desmond Dillon, 1990, fabric, wool & acrylic, (18"x 25")

two-dimensional framework, to place the viewer in a forest. He also creates the illusion that the mythical childlike figure guarding the tree is inside each one of us, in an area untouched by the corruption of the modern world

> ...I used the child as being a sort of innocence but awareness about what is going on... (17)

explains Dillon. The mythical figure bears resemblance to his Australian Aboriginal figure of previous work THIS STORY IS OLD, 1988,(fig. 22) and DANCE TO REMEMBER, DRINK TO FORGET, 1988 (fig. 23). The colours of the naked body blend in with the landscape, a feature which struck Dillon whilst in Australia, as being physical proof that the Australian Aborigines belong to their land. The exaggeration of the hands and feet, also inspired by the Australian Aborigines, express the skills needed to survive in the Australian environment. The message behind this piece is a moral one: respect your natural environment. It is directly associated with the Irish environment, the textures and colours relating to big oaks and shrubs found in Irish forests. However, it could also relate to the Australian Aboriginal struggle for land rights, asking the Australian Government to stop mutilating their land, replacing it with high-rise buildings or bauxite mines, in fact, to 'Touch Not A Single Bough' (fig. 24)

Whelan's work differs from Dillon's in many respects. Whelan uses the medium of paint to express, in a highly symbolic manner, his thoughts and visions. Dillon's tangible, three-dimensional textile pieces tend

FIG. 22

This Story Is Old, Desmond Dillon, 1988,

fabric & fleece

FIG. 23

Dance To Remember,

Drink To Forget,

1988,

fabric & acrylic

FIG. 24

Land Rights demonstration, Sydney, Australia, 1988

to be less symbolic, but no less self-expressionist. What relates both artists to each other is their mutual interest in Australian Aboriginal culture, and the fact that both artists have productively learned more about their own culture through their involvement with the Australian Aborigines.

Originally, Whelan's interests lay in viewing the Irish landscape in different ways (fig. 25). His college work explored this theme, looking at the Irish landscape through micro and macro lenses. Now, according to Whelan, he tends to view his own Irish culture in this exploratory way (18). Australian Aboriginal culture offered him another viewpoint, another way of looking, which enabled him to rediscover his own culture by looking at it almost through Australian Aboriginal eyes. Whelan feels that his most recent work relates more to the Australian Aboriginal culture than any previous work (fig. 26). It is now twelve years since Whelan's first visit to Australia, which was funded by the Australian European Scholarship awarded to him by the Department of Education of Australia in 1978. This award enabled him to travel within Australia, meeting and living with Aboriginal communities and studying Aboriginal culture.

Whelan's most recent work, shown in the THREE IN THE LANDSCAPE exhibition at the Guinness Hop Store, Dublin, in April 1990, deals with issues relating to energies in nature. Whelan believes that '..the world is in a constant state of flux..'(18), and perhaps, so too, is each individual. He relates the idea of constant change in each human individual's personal existence with the

FIG. 25

Looking at the Irish landscape, Oliver Whelan

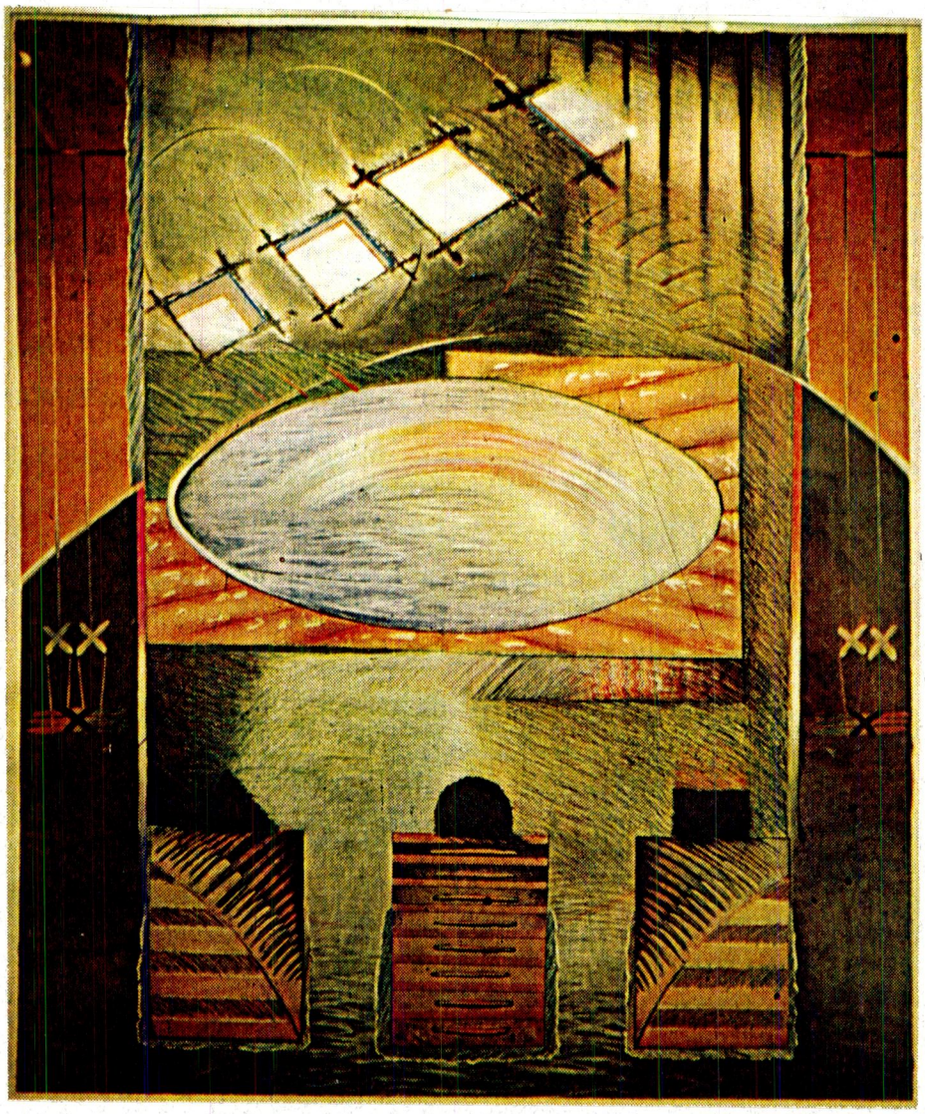

FIG. 26

Rainbow Serpent, Oliver Whelan, 1990,

Oil on gessoed paper

energies in operation in the land. The Australian Aborigines believe in the natural forces of good and evil at work in their environment. Certain areas are believed to have within them evil spirits and energies, such as the H-bomb testing zone at Maralinga. In traditional Aboriginal belief, this area contained bad energies below the surface of its land, which, if disturbed would cause great destruction. The English H-bomb test in this area, which went badly wrong because of a change in wind direction, caused many Aboriginals and animals to die. The idea of bad energies was almost a premonition of the disaster to come.

Whelan's recent work reflects this belief in natural energies through his exploration of the change between life and death. At a time when people close to him were experiencing this change, the Australian Aboriginal belief in time as a horizontal process played on his mind. His work, as a result, dealt with death as an on-going process, rather than a final one. Perhaps his pieces GENERATION TO GENERATION, 1990, (fig. 27) and PARENT TO PARENT, 1990, (fig. 28) are the best examples of this. In GENERATION TO GENERATION, liquid, representing knowledge is poured from bowl to bowl, each bowl representing a generation. The living generation is golden in colour, but the shape is no different from the others. Death of one generation is not symbolized by a broken bowl or an empty bowl, it is simply the same bowl in another space along constant time. The idea of the passing of knowledge, the infinity of tradition through constant renewal directly relates to the Australian

FIG. 27

Generation To Generation, Oliver Whelan, 1990,

Oil on gessoed paper

FIG. 28

Parent To Parent, Oliver Whelan, 1990,

Oil on gessoed paper

Aboriginal belief in the Dreamtime.

In PARENT TO PARENT, the bowl symbolism is used again. Whelan associates the bowl with humanity. He sees it as a '..fundamental human invention..'(18), and also as a symbol of the intellect; a mode of gathering information and storing it. Could these pieces possibly be exploring man's power in relation to the power of nature? The bowl, which is a human invention, set against death, which is a force of nature.

> ...Nature here is a reservoir of primeval knowledge and meaning, as venerable and mysterious as the calm, densely worked...surfaces of the paintings. The mystically inclined symbols seem to emerge authentically from the cloudy backgrounds...(20),

wrote Aidan Dunne in the SUNDAY TRIBUNE newspaper of Whelan's work in the aforementioned exhibition.

Whelan's continual use of the circular form is explained in his statement,

> The square is a man-made form, the triangle is a crystalline form but the circle is nature made.(18)

Whelan believes that Tribal peoples relate mostly to the circle since they are more akin to nature that other cultures. The cyclical element is apparent in the Australian Aboriginal belief in the constant renewal of the Dreamtime, of life forms, of plant growth and even of death. In death ceremonies, the body of the deceased is placed in a carved hollow tree bark, called a Pukamani pole, (fig. 29) so that the body will return to the earth. The ceremony guides the spirit of the deceased back to its original site, thus completing the circle of life.

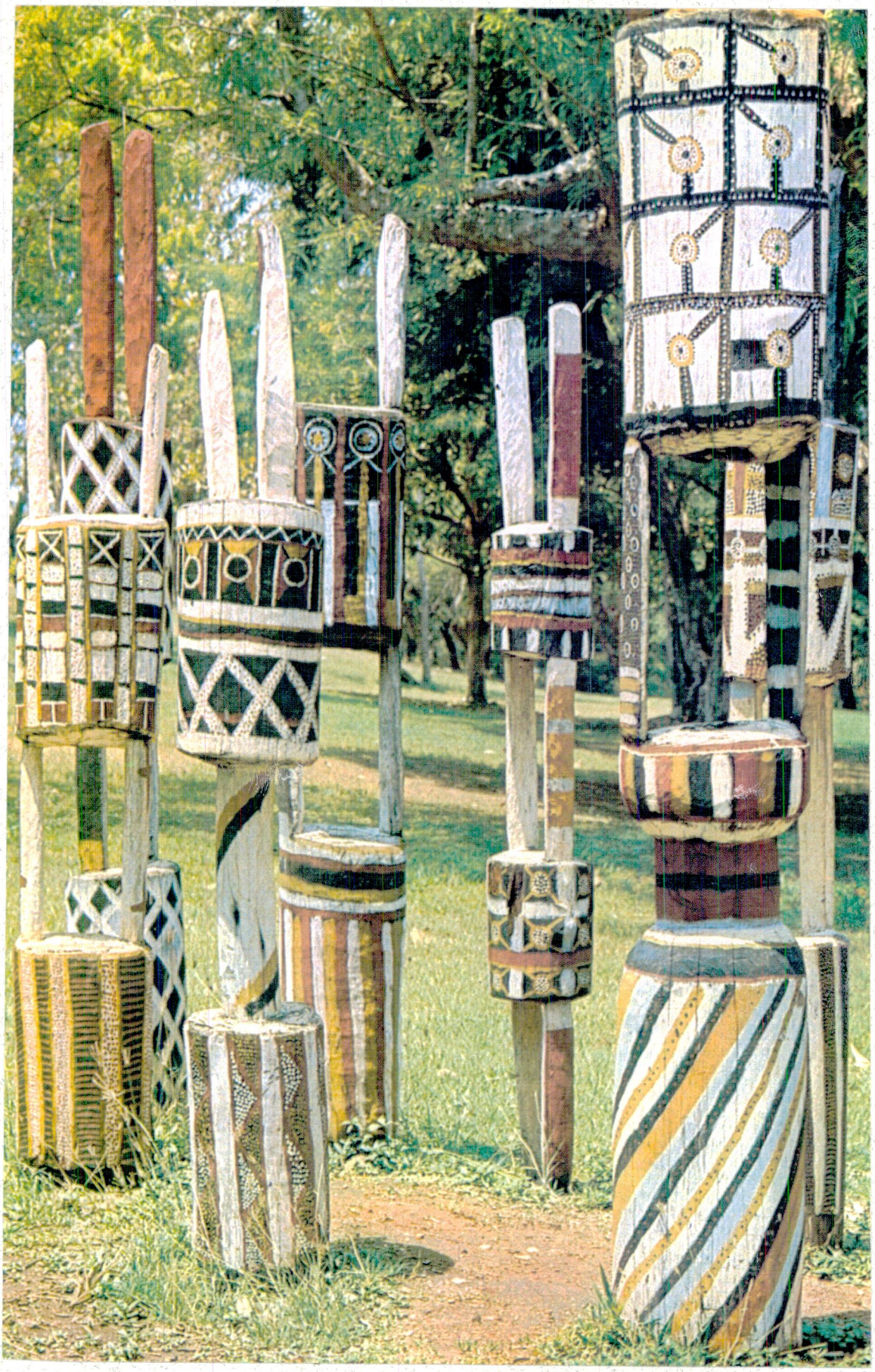

FIG. 29

Australian Aboriginal burial poles,

PUKAMANI poles

Whelan's juxtapositioning of tangible elements with mystical elements gives his work a powerful aura. It seems to permeate spirituality and the forces of nature whilst examining how various cultures deal with human experiences.

Dillon's piece, I'D RATHER FEEL THE EARTH BENEATH MY FEET, 1990, (fig. 30) is, in its appearance, quite literal in comparison with Whelan's highly symbolic work. However, it tends to have a strength of message which appeals to human instinct. This element, I believe, is not so apparent in Whelan's work, which tends to appeal more to the human intellect.

I'D RATHER FEEL THE EARTH BENEATH MY FEET, seems to relate to Dillon's previously discussed piece, TOUCH NOT A SINGLE BOUGH. The mythical figure is characterized once again by its large hands and feet, and it's nakedness. The frames of both pieces have been similarly treated; both are incorporated into the action within the frame and both are devices to explain the message behind the piece. I dislike this method, feeling that the frames tend to visually overstate the message. However, Dillon's work emanates a wonderful childlike view of the stark and sometimes morbid realities of life.

I'D RATHER FEEL THE EARTH BENEATH MY FEET is, on one level, the Australian Aboriginal desire to be on their land, living by their own culture. By discarding his clothes, the figure is also discarding the European way of life. In his book, WALKABOUT (10, pp. 25-27), Marshall draws attention to the importance of clothes in European society , and pokes fun at their misplacement in the

FIG. 30

I'd Rather Feel The Earth Beneath My Feet,

Desmond Dillon, 1990, fabric, fleece & acrylic

Australian desert. The triviality of the indecency of nakedness is emphasised by the constant reminder that, in the Australian bush, death is always only a moment away.

The image in Dillon's piece is powerful, the body, once again, suited to his environment emanates a sense of freedom that the Australian Aborigines can feel only in their own environment.

In the way that Whelan's use of liquid media creates spiritual atmospheres, Dillon's use of fabrics and yarns creates tangible environments and beautifully structured figures. Dealing with any rendering of the human form requires skill, and with Dillon's media there is always the chance that the figure may resemble a puppet or a rag-doll. The textile medium provides softness and flexibility, and weaving techniques provide strength so that, when Dillon combines these properties, the result is lively and quite unique.

I see in Dillon's figures, as in Whelan's, an element of self-portrait. Perhaps not always physically, but within the actions of the figures or the eyes viewing the world. I WAS BLIND BUT NOW I CAN SEE views the world through the eyes of a bat. The relationship between man and animal is a reflection of the totemism in Australian Aboriginal culture,

> ...the figure turning into a bat is like a totem animal, like the Aborigines doing a dreaming dance... (17)

explains Dillon. On his return from Australia, Dillon set out to rediscover his own Irish culture. He wanted to see more of Ireland and learn more about its

traditions. He found that the gap between Irish culture and that of the Australian Aborigines was not a large one. The Irish relationship with the land had been a very strong one, up to and beyond the famine of 1845. Rural Irishmen saw the land as being almost sacred. It had a powerful grasp on the Irish, as phenomenon which is closely studied in the film adaptation of John B Keane's play, THE FIELD (23).

The determination to keep the land transcends all boundaries, religious or secular, and the character 'Bull' McCabe, proves this throughout the film. His fight is in order to keep the field in which his family had worked for generations,

BULL: Do you know what he's doing father?

McCabe asks a priest of the intended actions of an American buyer,

BULL: He intends to pour concrete on the green grass, now that's a mortal sin.

On being reminded that the field was, by law, belonging to a widow, McCabe responds

> There's another law, stronger than the common law ...the law of the land.(23)

Dillon believes that Irish culture respected its land,

> ...I have this belief that Aboriginality is an awareness of who you are, an appreciation of a certain amount of your culture ..being in another country links you up directly with your own country ...(17)

Both artists remarked on how the predominant colours of the Australian outback differed so much from Ireland. Dillon tends to emphasize his colour palette according to the landscapes he creates. THIS STORY IS

OLD, 1988, a piece based on the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime, is made up of yellow and red ochres, sienna and deep cobalt blue. These colours capture the Australian outback. In DOWN THROUGH THE HEATHER, 1989,(fig. 31), a look at man in his Irish landscape, Dillon uses a large variety of greens, together with yellow, red, purple and grey, giving the effect of the Irish landscape. He believes that colour plays an important role in his pieces, and in the pieces of art create by the Australian Aborigines,

> ...I love the art of the Aborigines, it really links up with their whole culture, its colours are rich like the Australian outback...(17)

Australian non-Aboriginal artist, Sidney Nolan found inspiration for his paintings in the Australian landscape (fig. 32). He felt that the Australian outback was full of life through its smell, colours and light (fig. 33) features which undoubtedly inspired the works of both Dillon and Whelan.

In Australia itself, an increasing number of artists are being influenced by Australian Aboriginal art and culture. According to Sutton, these post-1960's artists are viewing Australian Aboriginal art for its cultural and spiritual relevance, as well as its aesthetic relevance. This,

> ...combined with a heightened sense of their own position as artists in Australian politics has enabled some recent borrowers from the Aboriginal tradition to translate... complex responses to Aboriginal art into elements of their own vision of things...
> (16, p. 212)

as an important step forward in bridging the

FIG. 31

Down Through The Heather, Desmond Dillon, 1989,

wool, tweed and acrylic, (5 x 3 ft)

FIG. 32

Kelly In Bush, Sidney Nolan, 1946,

ripolinon masonite, (25 x 30)

FIG. 33

Australian landscape, the Olgas, near Uluru (Ayers Rock)

cultural gaps in Australia.

Ann Newmarch, an Adelaide artist exemplifies this forward step. Her work does not appropriate Australian Aboriginal art but recognises the natural links between this art and the Australian land. The example Sutton uses is between the markings of tire-tracks and snake scales in the Australian desert.

In Newmarch's silk-screen print, SEE AUSTRALIA FIRST, 1987, (fig. 34) she uses images of the desert landscape, piled up, written-off cars and the Australian Aboriginal method of dotting to create both a powerful image and make a strong statement. Sutton describes the use of the dead car imagery in the outback as '...microcosms of the impact of the world economic system on the remotest of places...'(16, p. 211)

Both Whelan and Dillon have learned a lot about themselves and their view of the world by relating to Australian Aboriginal culture. This is evidenced in both their work and their voiced opinions, proving Australian Aboriginal culture can provide us with a clearer understanding of our lives; all we need do is listen.

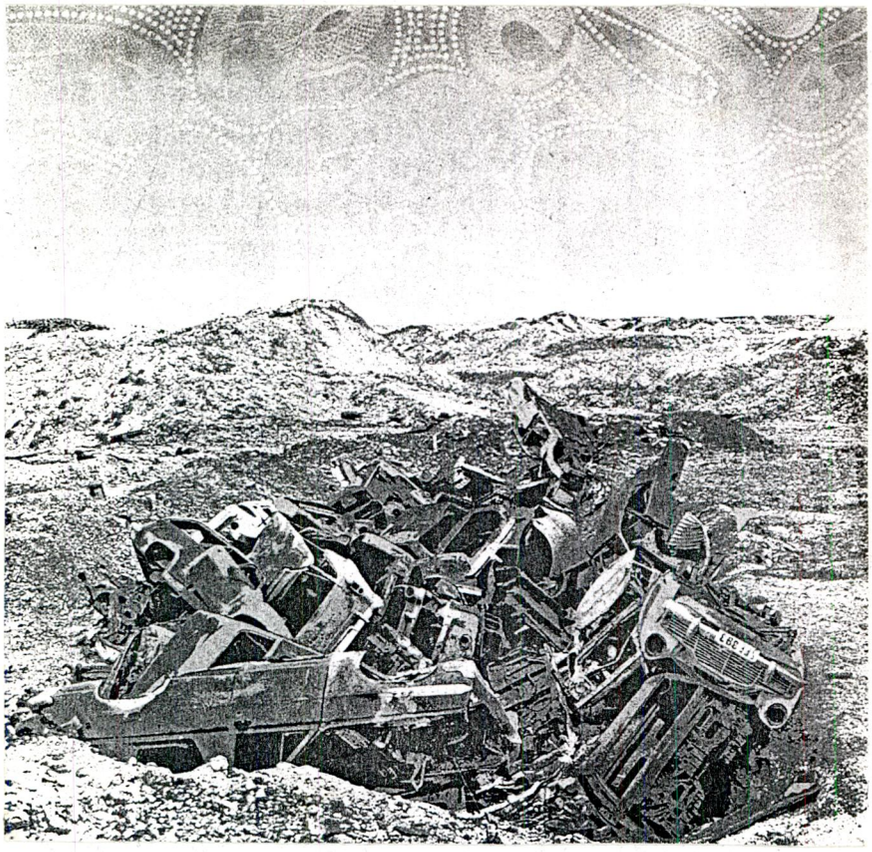

FIG. 34

See Australia First, Ann Newmarch, 1987, Adelaide,

silk-screen print, (44 x 47 cm)

CONCLUSION

This investigation into the possible effects of one culture upon people of another has provided me with an opportunity to prove that, in some cases, the hope for cultural survival for 'minority' groups is not totally idealistic. Of course, in cases such as the Australian Aborigines, this cultural survival rests upon largely compromising the culture in order to maintain it in an alien society. However, an important step in the survival process is respect from other cultures. In my thesis, I have tried to point out the possible advantages gained by each culture from their meeting. In Australian Aboriginal culture, many disadvantages have arisen from the arrival of European society, mainly due to the lack of respect and understanding shown by the new settlers. However, today, a new understanding is possible and Oliver Whelan and Desmond Dillon are contributors to such an ideal. Through them, the Australian Aborigines with whom they have met understand that there are Europeans who respect Australian Aboriginal culture.

Californian cultural researcher, Elizabeth L Mayerhoff, lived with the Pokot tribe of Kenya for six years, from 1972 to 1978. She realized that modernisation of the Pokot culture is inevitable but states

> ...I only hope that modernization will be carried through with an understanding of, and sensitivity to, Pokot beliefs and values...(21, p. 140)

It is this understanding that will ensure the survival of a culture that will otherwise be trampled in the stampede of modernisation. Mayerhoff hopes to play a

positive role in the future of the Pokot people, helping to bridge cultural gaps. She feels that the Pokot people have had a positive effect on her life, and is grateful for the opportunity to share '...in the richness of the Pokot world...'(21, p. 140), proving that she has learned from a culture that is quite unlike her own. Mayerhoff has offered the Pokot people assistance in the difficult change that they are experiencing. Although she has not got the power to stop the modernisation process, she can facilitate the Pokot people in her support of their culture and her help in the preservation of its beliefs so that the aboriginality of the Pokot people will not be completely destroyed.

I believe that it is possible for any person to be influenced in a positive way by another culture. However, for this to be achieved, respect and willingness to try to understand another culture is essential. As Europeans, it could serve us well to learn from cultures whose respect for and understanding of our earth maintains its continuous richness and ensures the survival of all natural things. The geneticist, Neel has written,

> ...the intellectual arrogance created by our small scientific successes must now be replaced by a profound humility based on the new knowledge of how complex is the system of which we are a part...In the most sophisticated way we can summon, we must return to the awe, and even fear, in which primitive man held the mysterious world about him, and like him, we must strive to live in harmony with the biosphere...(8, pp. 129-130)

In a society governed by planned actions and mathematically equated principles, we surely should listen to peoples, such as the Australian Aborigines, whose lives

are governed by instinctive human responses to natural forces.

Australian artist Wesley Stacey, has worked with the Aborigines of Australia and has developed a new appreciation of natural places through them.

> ...It is very stimulating to consider what I might show to an English audience in 1982 through my photographs, after being educated by koories [Australian Aborigines] to the concept of 'the land my mother'...(26, p. 34).

explains Stacey, referring to the exhibition in 1982 of Australian artists, called iEUREKA! (fig. 35 & 35a). Stacey believes that our efforts to control the earth are destroying it,

> ...Our ruthless exploitation of land has already created desert areas ...the question is, are cultural adaptations possible here? Is it too late for a new respect for the natural environment to have some effect- or will the expanding deserts of the interior claim the coastal fringe?...(26, p. 34)

Nature is a powerful force to try to control, and we have already lost so much in our efforts to control it.

> ...To them [the forms of nature], I may have owed another gift, of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood, in which the burthen of the mystery, in which the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world, is lightened...,

taken from Wordsworth's TINTERN ABBEY

(11, p. 103)

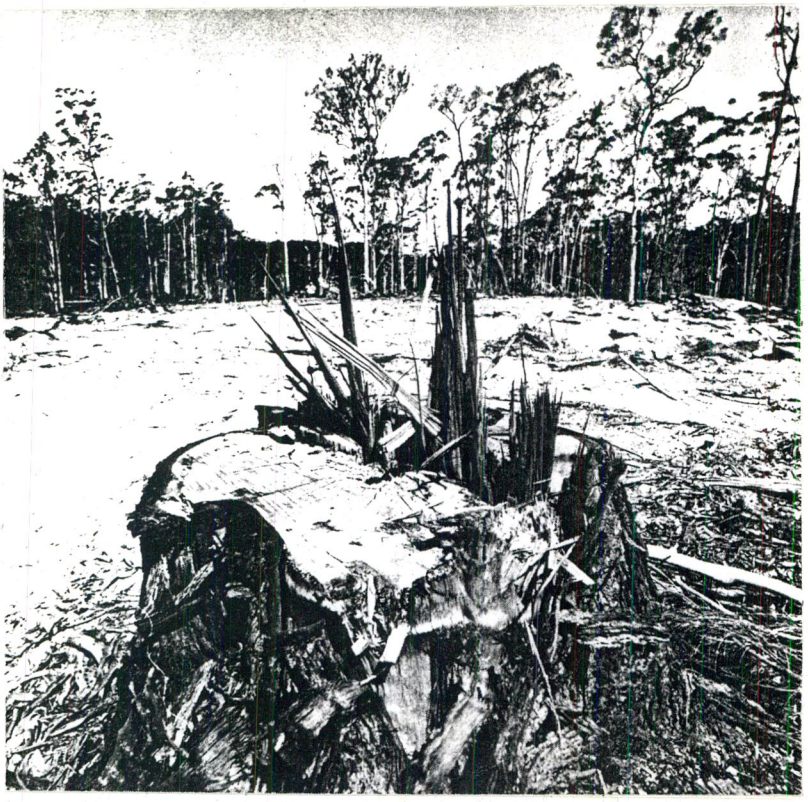

FIG. 35

Logging On Mumbulla Mountain, Wesley Stacey, 1982,

photograph

FIG. 35a

Rocky Creek In Mumbulla Sacred Place, Wesley Stacey, 1982

photograph

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