

Steel Axes for Stone–Age Australians

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I

Like other Australian aboriginals, the *Yir Yoront* group which at the mouth of the [Coleman River](#) on the west coast of [Cape York Peninsula](#) originally had no knowledge of metals. Technologically their culture was of the old stone age or paleolithic type. They supported themselves by hunting and fishing, and obtained vegetables and other materials from the bush by simple gathering techniques. Their only domesticated animal was dog; they had no cultivated plants of any kind. Unlike some other aboriginal groups, however, the *Yir Yoront* did have polished stone axes hafted in short handles which were most important in their economy.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century metal tools and other European artifacts began to filter into the *Yir Yoront* territory. The flow increased with the gradual expansion of the white frontier outward from southern and eastern Queensland. Of all the items of western technology thus made available, the hatchet, or short handled steel axe, was the most acceptable to and the most highly valued by all aboriginals.

In the mid 1930's an American anthropologist lived alone in bush among the *Yir Yoront* for thirteen months without seeing another white man. The *Yir Yoront* were thus still relatively isolated and continued to live an essentially independent economic existence, supporting themselves entirely by means of their old stone age techniques. Yet their polished stone axes were disappearing fast and being replaced by steel axes which came to them in considerable numbers, directly or indirectly, from various European sources to the south.

What changes in the life of the *Yir Yoront* still living under aboriginal conditions in the Australian bush could be expected as a result of their increasing possession and use of the steel axe?

II The course of events

Events leading up to the introduction of the steel axe among the *Yir Yoront* begin with the advent of the second known group of Europeans to reach the shores of the Australian continent

In 1623 a Dutch expedition landed on the coast where the *Yir Yoront* now live. In 1935 the *Yir Yoront* were still using the few cultural items recorded in the Dutch log for the aboriginals they encountered. To this cultural inventory the Dutch added beads and pieces of iron which they offered in an effort to attract the frightened “Indians.” Among these natives metal and beads have disappeared, together with any memory, of this first encounter with whites.

The next recorded contact in this area was in 1864. Here there is more positive assurance that the natives concerned were the immediate ancestors of the *Yir Yoront* community. These aboriginals had the temerity to attack a party of cattle men who were driving a small herd from southern Queensland through the length of the then unknown Cape York Peninsula to a newly established government station at the northern tip. Known as the “Battle of the Mitchell River”, this was one of the rare instances in which Australian aboriginals stood up to European gunfire for any length of time. A diary kept by the cattlemen records that:

“... ten carbines fired volley after volley into them from directions, killing and wounding with every shot with very little return, nearly all their spears having already been expended. About thirty being killed, the leader thought it prudent to hold his hand, and let the rest escape. Many more must have been wounded and probably drowned, for fifty-nine rounds were counted as discharged.”

The European party was in the *Yir Yoront* area for three days; they then disappeared over the horizon to the north and never returned. In the almost three-year-long anthropological investigation conducted some seventy years later – in all the material of hundreds of free association interviews, in texts of hundreds of dreams and myths, in genealogies, and eventually, in hundreds of answers to direct and indirect questioning on just this particular matter – there was nothing that could be interpreted as a reference to this shocking contact with Europeans. The aboriginal accounts of their first remembered contact with whites begin in about 1900 with references to persons known to have had sporadic but lethal encounters with them. From that time on whites continued to remain on the southern periphery of *Yir Yoront* territory. With the establishment of cattle stations [ranches] to the south, cattle men made occasional excursions among the “wild black-fellows” in order to inspect the country and abduct natives to be trained as cattle boys and “house girls.” At least one such expedition reached the Coleman River where a number of *Yir Yoront* men and women were shot for no apparent reason.

About this time the government was persuaded to sponsor the establishment of three mission stations along the seven-hundred-mile western coast of the Peninsula in an attempt to help regulate the treatment of natives. To further this purpose a strip of coastal territory was set aside as an aboriginal reserve and closed to further white settlement.

In 1915, an Anglican mission station was established near the mouth of the Mitchell River, about a three-day march from the heart of the *Yir Yoront* country. Some *Yir Yoront* refused to have anything to do with the mission, others visited it occasionally, while only a few eventually settled more or less permanently in one of the three “villages” established at the mission.

Thus the majority of the *Yir Yoront* continued to live their old self-supporting life in the bush, protected until 1942 by the government reserve and the intervening mission from the cruder realities of the encroaching new order from the south. To the east was poor, uninhabited country. To the north were other bush tribes extending on along the coast to the distant Archer River Presbyterian mission with which the *Yir Yoront* had no contact. Westward was the shallow Gulf of Carpentaria on which the natives saw only a mission lugger making its infrequent dry season trips to the Mitchell River. In this protected environment for over a generation the *Yir Yoront* were able to recuperate from shocks received at the hands of civilised society. During the 1930's their raiding and fighting, their trading and stealing of women, their evisceration and two- or three-year care of their dead, and their totemic ceremonies continued, apparently uninhibited by western influence. In 1931 they killed a European who wandered into their territory from the east, but the investigating police never approached the group whose members was responsible for the act.

As a direct result of the work of the Mitchell River mission all *Yir Yoront* received a great many more western artifacts all kinds than ever before. As part of their plan for raising native living standards, the missionaries made it possible for aboriginals living at the mission to earn some western goods, many of which were then given or traded to natives still living under bush conditions; they also handed out certain useful articles gratis to both mission and bush aboriginals. They prevented guns, liquor and damaging narcotics, as well as decimating diseases, from reaching the tribes of this area, while encouraging the introduction of goods they considered “improving.” As has been noted, no item of western technology available, with the possible exception of trade tobacco, was in greater demand among all groups of aboriginals than the short handled steel axe. The mission always kept a good supply of these axes in stock; at

Christmas parties other mission festivals they were given away to mission or visiting aboriginals indiscriminately and in considerable numbers. In addition, some steel axes as well as other European goods were still traded in to the *Yir Yoront* by natives in contact with cattle stations in the south. Indeed, steel axes had probably come to the *Yir Yoront* through established lines of aboriginal trade long before any regular contact with whites had occurred.

III Relevant Factors

If we concentrate our attention on *Yir Yoront* behavior centering about the original stone axe [rather than on the axe – the object itself] as a cultural trait or item of cultural equipment we should get some conception of the role this implement played in aboriginal culture. This, in turn, should enable us to foresee with considerable accuracy some of the results stemming from the displacement of the stone axe by the steel axe.

The production of a stone axe required a number of simple technological skills. With the various details of the axe well in mind, adult men could set about producing it [a task not considered appropriate for women and children]. First of all a man had to know the location and properties of several natural resources found in his immediate environment: pliable wood for a handle, which could be doubled or bent over the axe head and bound tightly; bark, which could be rolled into a cord for the binding; and gum, to fix the stonehead in the haft. These materials had to be correctly gathered, stored, prepared, cut to size and applied or manipulated. They were in plentiful supply, and could be taken from anyone's property without special permission. Postponing consideration of stone head, the axe could be made by any normal man who had a simple knowledge of nature and of the technological skills involved, together with fire [for heating the gum], and a few simple cutting tools – perhaps the sharp shells of plentiful bivalves.

The use of the stone axe as a piece of capital equipment used in producing other goods indicates its very great importance to the subsistence economy of the aboriginal. Anyone – man, woman, or child – could use the axe; indeed, it was used primarily by men, for theirs was the task of obtaining sufficient wood to keep the family campfire burning all day, for cooking or other purposes, and all night against mosquitoes and cold [for in July, winter temperature might drop below 40 degrees]. In a normal lifetime a woman would use the axe to cut or knock down literally tons of firewood. The axe was also used to make other tools or weapons, and a variety of material equipment required by the aboriginal in his daily life. The stone axe was essential in the construction of the wet season domed huts which keep out some rain and some insects; of platforms which provide dry storage; of shelters which give shade in the dry summer when days are bright and hot. In hunting and fishing and in gathering vegetable or animal food the axe was also a necessary tool, and in this tropical culture, where preservatives or other means of store are lacking, the natives spend more time obtaining food than in any other occupation—except sleeping. In only two instances was the use of the stone axe strictly limited to adult men: for gathering wild honey, the most prized food known to the *Yir Yoront*; and for making the secret paraphernalia for ceremonies. From this brief listing of some of the activities involving the use of the axe, it is easy to understand why there was at least one axe in every camp, in every hunting or fighting party, and in every group out on a “walk-about” in the bush.

The stone axe was also prominent in interpersonal relations.

Yir Yoront men were dependent upon interpersonal relations for their stone axe heads, since the flat, geologically-recent, alluvial country over which they range provides no suitable stone for this purpose. The stone they use came from quarries for hundred miles to the south reaching the *Yir Yoront* through long lines of male trading partners. Some of these chains terminated with the *Yir Yoront* men, others extended on farther north to other groups, using *Yir Yoront* men as links. Almost every older adult man had one or more regular trading partners, some to the north some to the south. He provided his partner or partners in the south with surplus spears, particularly

fighting spears tipped with the barbed spines of a sting ray which snap into vicious fragments when they penetrate human flesh.

For a dozen such spears, some of which he may have obtained from a partner the north, he would receive one stone axe head. Studies has shown that the sting ray barb spears increased in value as they move south and farther from the sea. One hundred and fifty miles south of *Yir Yoront* one such spear may be exchanged one stone axe head. Although actual investigations could not made, it was presumed that farther south, nearer the quarries one sting ray barb spear would bring several stone axe heads

Apparently people who acted as links in the middle of the chain and who made neither spears nor axe heads would receive certain number of each as a middleman's profile.

Thus trading relations, which may extend the individual personal relationships beyond that of his own group, were associated with spears and axes, two of the most important items in a man's equipment. Finally most of the exchanges took place during the dry season, at the time of the great aboriginal celebrations centering about initiation rites or other totemic ceremonies which attracted hundreds and were the occasion for much exciting activity in addition to trading.

Returning to the *Yir Yoront*, we find that adult men kept axes in camp with their other equipment, or carried them when travelling. Thus a woman or child who wanted to use an axe as might frequently happen during the day—had to get one from a man, use it promptly, and return it in good condition. While a man might speak of “my axe,” a woman or child could not

This necessary and constant borrowing of axes from older men by women and children was in accordance with regular path of kinship behavior. A woman would expect to use her husband's axe unless he himself was using it; if unmarried, or if her husband was absent, a woman would go first to her older brother and then to her father. Only in extraordinary circumstances would a woman seek a stone axe from other male kin. A girl, a boy, or a young man would look to a father or an older brother to provide an axe.

It will be noted that all of these social relationships in which the stone axe had a place are pair relationships and that the use of the axe helped to define and maintain their character and the roles of the two individual participants. Every active relationship among the *Yir Yoront* involved a definite and accepted status of superordination or subordination. A person could have no dealings with another on exactly equal terms. The nearest approach to equality was between brothers, although the older was always superordinate to the younger.

Since the exchange of goods in a trading relationship involved a mutual reciprocity, trading partners usually stood in a brotherly type of relationship, although one was always classified as older than the other and would have home advantage, in case of dispute.

It can be seen that repeated and widespread conduct centering around the use of the axe helped generalize and standardize these sex, age, and kinship roles in their normal benevolent and exceptional malevolent aspects. The status of any individual *Yir Yoront* was determined not only by sex, age, and extended kin relationships, but also by membership in one of two dozen patrilineal totemic clans into which the entire community was divided³. Each clan had literally hundreds of totems, from one or two of which the Clan derived its name, and the Clan members their personal names. These totems included natural species or phenomena such as the sun, stars and daybreak, as well as cultural “species”: imagined ghosts, rainbow serpents, heroic ancestors; such eternal cultural verities as fires, spears, huts; and such human activities, conditions, or attributes as eating, vomiting, swimming, fighting, babies and corpses, milk and blood, lips and loins. While individual members of such totemic classes or species might disappear or be destroyed, the class itself was obviously ever-present and indestructible. The totems, therefore, lent a permanence and ability to the Clans, to the groupings of human individuals who generation after generation were each associated with a set of totems which distinguished one clan from

another.

The stone axe was one of the most important of the many totems of the Sunlit Cloud Iguana Clan. The names of many members of this Clan referred to the axe itself, to activities in which the axe played a vital part, or to the clan's mythical ancestors with whom the axe was prominently associated. When it was necessary to represent the stone axe in totemic ceremonies, only men of this Clan exhibited it or pantomimed its use. In secular life, the axe could be made by any man and used by all; but in the sacred realm of the totems it belonged exclusively to the Sunlit Cloud Iguana people.

Supporting those aspects of cultural behavior which we have called technology and conduct, is a third area of culture which includes ideas, sentiments, and values.

These are most difficult to deal with, for they are latent and covert, and even unconscious and must be deduced from overt actions and language or other communicating behavior.

In this aspect of the culture lies the significance of the stone axe to the *Yir Yoront* and to cultural way of life.

The stone axe was an important symbol of masculinity among the *Yir Yoront* [just as pants, or pipes, are to us]. By a complicated set of ideas the axe was defined as "belonging" to males, everyone in the society [except untrained infants] accepted these ideas. Similarly spears, spear throwers, and fire-making sticks were owned only by men and were also symbols of masculinity. But the masculine values represented by the stone axe were constantly being impressed on all members of society by the fact that females borrowed axes but not other masculine artifacts. Thus the axe stood for an important theme of *Yir Yoront*: the superiority and rightful dominance of the male, and greater value of his concerns and of all things associated with him. As the axe also had to be borrowed by the younger people it represented the prestige of age, another important theme running through *Yir Yoront* behavior.

To understand the *Yir Yoront* culture it is necessary to be aware of a system of ideas which may be called their totemic ideology. A fundamental belief of the aboriginal divided into two great epochs: [1] a distant and sacred period at the beginning of the world when the earth was peopled by mildly marvelous ancestral beings or culture heroes who are in a sense the forebears of the clans; and [2] a period when the old was succeeded by a new order which includes the present.

Originally there was no anticipation of another era supplanting the present. The future would simply be an eternal continuation and reproduction of the present which itself had remained unchanged since the epochal revolution of ancestral times.

The important thing to note is that the aboriginal believed the present world, as a natural and cultural environment, was and should be simply a detailed reproduction of the world of the ancestors. He believed that the entire universe "is now as it was in the beginning" when it was established as left by the ancestors. The ordinary cultural life of the ancestors became the daily life of the *Yir Yoront* camps, and the extraordinary life of the ancestors remained extant in the recurring symbolic pantomimes and paraphernalia found only in the most sacred atmosphere of the totemic rites.

Such beliefs, accordingly, opened the way for ideal of what it *should be* [because it supposedly was] to influence or help – determine what actually is. A man Galled Dog-chases-iguana-up-a-tree-and-barks-at-him-all-night-long had that and other names because he believed his ancestral alter ego had also had them; he was a member of the Sunlit Cloud Iguana Clan because his ancestor was; he was associated with particular countries and totems of this same ancestor; during an initiation he played the role of a dog and symbolically attacked and killed certain members of other Clans because his ancestor [conveniently either anthropomorphic or kynomorphic] really did the same to the ancestral alter egos of these men; and he would avoid his mother-in-law, joke with a mother's distant brother, and make spears in a certain way because his and other people's ancestors did these things. His behavior in these

specific ways was outlined, and to what extent determined for him, by a set of ideal concerning the past and the relation of the present to the past.

But when we are informed that Dog-chases-etc. had two wives from the Spear Black Duck Clan and one from the Native Companion Clan, one of them being blind, that he had four children with such and such names, that he had a broken wrist and was left handed, all because his ancestor had exactly these same attributes, then we know [though he apparently didn't] that the present has influenced the past, that the mythical world has been somewhat adjusted to meet the exigencies and accidents of the inescapably real present.

There was thus in *Yir Yoront* ideology a nice balance in which the mythical was adjusted in part to the real world, the real world in part to the ideal pre-existing mythical world, the adjustments occurring to maintain a fundamental tenet of native faith that the present must be a mirror of the past. Thus the stone axe in all its respects, uses, and associations was integrated into the context of *Yir Yoront* technology and conduct because a myth, a set of as, had put it there.

IV The Outcome

The introduction of the steel axe indiscriminately and in large numbers into the *Yir Yoront* technology occurred simultaneously with many other changes. It is therefore impossible to separate all the results of this single innovation. Nevertheless, a number of specific effects of the change from stone to steel axes may be end the steel axe may be used as an epitome of the increasing quantity of European goods and implements received by the aboriginals and of their general influence on the native culture. The use of the steel axe to illustrate such influence would seem to be justified. It was one of the first European artifacts to be adopted for regular use by the *Yir Yoront* whether made of stone or steel, the axe was clearly one of the most important items of cultural equipment they possessed.

The shift from stone to steel axes provided no major technological difficulties. While the aboriginals themselves could not manufacture steel axe heads, a steady supply from the outside continued; broken wooden handles could easily be replaced from bush timbers with aboriginal tools. Among the *Yir Yoront* the axe was never used to the extent it was on mission or cattle stations [for carpentry work, pounding tent pegs, as a hammer and so on]; indeed, it had so few more uses than the stone that its practical effect on the native standard of living was negligible. It did some jobs better, and could be used longer without breakage. These factors were sufficient to make it value to the native. The white man believed that a shift from steel to stone axe on his part would be a definite regression. He was convinced that his axe was much more efficient, that it would save time, and that it therefore represented technical "progress" towards goals which he had set up for the native. But this assumption was hardly born out in aboriginal practical Any leisure time the *Yir Yoront* might gain by using steel axe or other western tools was not invested in "improving the conditions of life," nor, certainly, in developing aesthetic activity but in sleep—an art they had mastered thoroughly.

Previously, a man in need of an axe would acquire a stone head through regular trading partners from whom he knew w to expect, and was then dependent solely upon a known adequate natural environment, and his own skills or easily acquired techniques. A man wanting a steel axe, however, was' no such self-reliant position. If he attended a mission festival when steel axes were handed out as gifts, he might receive either by chance or by happening to impress upon the miss' staff that he was one of the "better" bush aboriginals missionaries definition of "better" being quite different that of his bush fellows]. Or, again almost by pure chance, might get some brief job in connection with the mission w would enable him to earn a steel axe. In either case, for older men a preference for the steel axe helped change the situation from one of self-reliance to one of dependence, and a shift in behavior from well-structured or defined situations in technology conduct to ill-defined situations in conduct alone. Among the n, the older ones whose earlier experience or knowledge of white man's harshness made them suspicious were particularly careful to avoid having relations with the mission, and thus included themselves from acquiring steel axes from that source.

In other aspects of conduct or social relations, the steel axe was even more significantly at the root of psychological stress among the Yir Yoront. This was the result of new factors which missionary considered beneficial]: the simple numerical increase in axes per capita as a result of mission distribution, and distribution directly to younger men, women, and even children. By winning the favor of the mission staff, a woman might be en a steel axe which was clearly intended to be hers, thus creating ting a situation quite different from the previous custom which necessitated her borrowing an axe from a male relative.

As a result a woman would refer to the axe as "mine," a possessive form she was never able to use of the stone axe. In same fashion, young men or even boys also obtained steel directly from the mission, with the result that older men no longer had a complete monopoly of all the axes in the bush unity. All this led to a revolutionary confusion of sex, age, kinship roles, with a major gain in independence and loss of information on the part of those who now owned steel axes n they had previously been unable to possess stone axes.

The trading partner relationship was also affected by the new situation. A *Yir Yoront* might have a trading partner in a tribe to south whom he defined as a younger brother and over whom he would therefore have some authority. But if the partner were in contact with the mission or had other access to steel axes, his subordination obviously decreased. Among other things, this took some of the excitement away from the dry season fiesta-like gatherings centering around initiations. These had traditionally been the climactic annual occasions for exchanges between trading partners, when a man might seek to acquire a whole years supply of stone axe heads. Now he might find himself, prostituting his wife to almost total strangers in return for steel or other white man's goods. With trading partnerships ended, there was less reason to attend the ceremonies – and less fun for those who did.

Not only did an increase in steel axes and their distribution to women change the character of the relations between individuals [the paired relationships that have been noted], but a previously rare type of relationship was created in the Yir Yoront's conduct toward whites. In the aboriginal society there were few occasions outside of the immediate family when an individual would initiate action to several other people at once. In any average group, in accordance with the kinship system, while a person might be superordinate to several people to whom he could suggest a command action, he was also subordinate to several others with whom such behavior would be tabu. There was thus no overall chieftanship or authoritarian leadership of any kind. Such complicated operations as grass-burning animal drives or totemic ceremonies could be carried out smoothly because each person was aware of his role.

On both mission and cattle stations, however, the whites imposed their conception of leadership roles upon the aborigines consisting of one person in a controlling relationship with subordinate group. Aborigines called together to receive gifts including axes, at a mission Christmas party found themselves facing one or two whites who sought to control their behavior the occasion, who disregarded the age, sex, and kinship variables of which the aborigines were so conscious, and considered—them all at one subordinate level. The white sought to impose similar patterns on work parties. [However, he placed an aboriginal in charge of a mixed group of postdiggers, for example, half of the group subordinate to “boss,” would work while the other half, who were superordinate to him, would sleep.] For the aboriginal, the steel axe and European goods came to symbolize this new and uncomfortable form of social organization, the leader-group relationship.

The most disturbing effects of the steel axe, operating in conjunction with other elements also being introduced from white man's several sub-cultures, developed in the realm of traditional ideas, sentiments, and values. These were undermined at a rapidly mounting rate, with no new conceptions defined to replace them. The result was the erection of a mental and moral void which foreshadowed the collapse and destruction of all *Yir Yoront* culture, if not, indeed, the extinction of biological group itself.

From what has been said it should be clear how changes in overt behavior, in technology and conduct, weakened the value inherent in a reliance on nature, in the prestige of masculinity and of age, and in the various kinship relations. A scene was in which a wife, or a young son, whose initiation may not have been completed, need no longer defer to the husband or father who, in turn, became confused and insecure as he was forced to borrow a steel axe from them. For the woman and boy the steel axe helped establish a new degree of freedom which they accepted readily as an escape from the unconscious stress of the old patterns—but they, too, were left confused and insecure. Ownership became less well defined with the result that stealing and trespassing were introduced into technology and conduct. Some of the excitement surrounding the great ceremonies evaporated and

they lost their previous gaiety and interest. Indeed, life itself became less interesting, although this did not lead the *Yir Yoront* to discover suicide, a concept foreign to them.

The whole process may be most specifically illustrated in terms of totemic system, which also illustrates the significant role played by a system of ideal, in this case a totemic ideology, in the breakdown of a culture.

In the first place, under pre-European aboriginal conditions where the native culture has become adjusted to a relatively stable environment, few, if any, unheard of or catastrophic crises can occur. It is clear, therefore; that the totemic system serves very effectively in inhibiting radical cultural changes. The closed system of totemic ideas explaining and categorizing a well-known universe as it was fixed at the beginning of time, presents considerable obstacle to the adoption of new or the dropping of culture traits. The obstacle is not insurmountable and the system allows for the minor variations, which occur, in the normal daily life. But the inception of major changes cannot easily take place.

Among the bush *Yir Yoront* the only means of water transport a light wood log to which they cling in their constant swimming of rivers, salt creeks, and tidal inlets. These natives know that tribes 45 miles further north have a bark canoe. They know these northern tribes can thus fish from midstream or out at sea, instead of clinging to the river banks and beaches, that they can cross coastal waters infested with crocodiles, sharks, sting rays and Portuguese men-of-war without danger. They know the materials of which the canoe is made exist in their own environment. They also know, as they say, that they do not have canoes because their own mythical ancestors did not have them. They assume that the canoe was part of the ancestral universe of northern tribes. For them, then, the adoption of the canoe could not be simply a matter of learning a number of new behavioral skills for its manufacture and use. The adoption would require a much more difficult procedure; the acceptance by the entire society of a myth, either locally developed or borrowed, to explain the presence of the canoe, to associate it with some one or more of the several hundred mythical ancestors [and how decide which?], and thus establish it as an accepted totem of one of the clans ready to be used by the whole community. The *Yir Yoront* have not made this adjustment, and in this case we can only say that for the time being at least, ideas have won out over very real pressures for technological change. In the elaborateness and explicitness of the totemic ideologies we seem to have one explanation for the notorious stability of Australian cultures under aboriginal conditions, an explanation which gives due weight to the importance of ideas in determining human behavior.

At a later stage of the contact situation, as has been indicated, the phenomena unaccounted for by the totemic ideological system begin to appear with regularity and frequency and remain within the range of native experience. Accordingly, they cannot be ignored [as the "Battle of the Mitchell" was apparently ignored], and there is an attempt to assimilate them and account for them along the lines of

principles inherent in the ideology. The bush *Yir Yoront* of the mid-thirties represent this stage of the acculturation process. Still trying to maintain their aboriginal definition of the situation, they accept European artifacts and behavior patterns, but fit them into their totemic system, assigning them to various clans on a par with original totems. There is an attempt to have the myth-making process keep up with these cultural changes so that the idea system can continue to support the rest of the culture. But analysis of overt behavior, of dreams, and of some of the new myths indicates that this arrangement is not entirely satisfactory, that the native clings to his totemic system with intellectual loyalty [lacking any substitute ideology], but that associated sentiments and values are weakened. His attitudes towards his own and found to be highly ambivalent.

All ghosts are totems of the Head-to-the-East Corpse clan, are thought of as white, and are of course closely associated with death. The white man, too, is closely associated with death, and he and all things pertaining to him are naturally assigned to the Corpse clan as totems. The steel axe, as a totem, was the associated with the Corpse clan. But as an "axe," clearly linked with the stone axe, it is a totem of the Sunlit Cloud Iguana clan. Moreover, the steel axe, like most European goods, has no distinctive origin myth, nor are mythical ancestors associated with it. Can anyone, sitting in the shade of a tree one afternoon create a myth to resolve this confusion? No one has, and horrid suspicion arises as to the authenticity of the origin myths, which failed to take into account this vast new universe of the white man. The steel axe, shifting hopelessly between one clan and the other, is not only replacing the stone axe physically, but it is hacking at the supports of the entire cultural system.

The aboriginals to the south of the *Yir Yoront* have clearly passed beyond this stage. They are engulfed by European culture, either by the mission or cattle station sub-cultures or, for some natives, by a baffling, paradoxical combination of both incongruent varieties. The totemic ideology can no longer support the inrushing mass of foreign culture traits, and the myth-making process in its native form breaks down completely. Both intellectually and emotionally a saturation point is reached so that the myriad new traits, which can neither be ignored nor any longer assimilated simply force the aboriginal to abandon his totemic system. With the collapse of this system of ideas, which is so closely related to so many other aspects of the native culture, there follows an appallingly sodden and complete cultural disintegration, and a demoralization of the individual such as has seldom been recorded elsewhere. Without the support of a system of ideas well devised to provide cultural stability in a stable environment, but admittedly too rigid for the new realities pressing in from outside, native behavior and native sentiments and values are simply dead. Apathy reigns. The aboriginal has passed beyond the realm of any outsider who might wish to do him well or ill.

Returning from the broken natives huddled on cattle stations or on the fringes of frontier towns to the ambivalent but still lively aboriginals settled on the Mitchell River mission, we note one further devious result of the introduction of European

artifacts. During a wet season stay at the mission, the anthropologist discovered that his supply of toothpaste was being depleted at an alarming rate. Investigation showed that it was being taken by old men for use in a new toothpaste cult. Old materials of magic having failed, new materials were being tried out in a malevolent magic directed towards the mission staff and some of the young aboriginal men. Old males, largely ignored by the missionaries, were seeking to regain some of their lost power and prestige.

This mild aggression proved hardly effective, but perhaps only because confidence in any kind of magic on the mission was by this time at a low ebb.

For the *Yir Yoront* still in the bush, a time could be predicted when personal deprivation and frustration in a confused culture would produce an overload of anxiety. The mythical part of the totemic ancestors would disappear as a guarantee of a present of which the future was supposed to be a stable continuation.

Without the past, the present could be meaningless and the future unstructured and uncertain. Insecurities would be inevitable. Reaction to this stress might be some form of symbolic aggression, or withdrawal and apathy, or some more realistic approach. In such a situation the missionary with understanding of the processes going on about him would find his opportunity to introduce his forms of religion and to help create a new cultural universe.

3 R. Lauriston Sharp, "Tribes and totemism in Northeast Australia" *Oceania* vol. 8 [1939], pp 254–275, 439–461
[esp. 268–275]