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Land is Life:
Continuity through change
for the Yanyuwa from the
Northern Territory of Australia

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Abstract

Geographers and historians in Australia have created and perpetuated the misconception that Aboriginal people “withered away” when they came into contact with Europeans. This thesis illustrates how a cultural geographic study using as a framework Sauer’s concept of the cultural landscape can highlight the inaccuracy of conventional views of the contact process.

The interactive nature of contact is stressed and examples of how both Europeans and Aboriginal people influenced each other are drawn out. The issue of how Aboriginal people made the move from bush life to town based life is examined in detail. By moving beyond the usual approach of asking why Aboriginal people moved in, to examining how they moved in, a fuller understanding of this process is established.

In so doing, I highlight the important point that in many cases, initially at least, Aboriginal people did not move into European settlements, but in fact the reverse process occurred. I illustrate how many Europeans moved to the very same locations that had previously been foci for Aboriginal people. Subsequently, and to varying degrees, these Europeans were incorporated into Aboriginal social systems.

The gradual process whereby Aboriginal people came to spend longer periods of each year at these locations is examined. At such places Aboriginal people supplied labour for a variety of European economic activities and in exchange received various European goods. Aboriginal reliance on these goods and the related decline in traditional economic activity led to a growing Aboriginal dependency on European society. The concept of dependency is examined and its role in preventing Aboriginal people from leaving European settlements is highlighted.

The value of considering indigenous notions of history and geography is demonstrated. An understanding of how Aboriginal people classify periods of their past and perceive their environment are fundamental issues in the study of culture contact. To study Aboriginal views of the past and their land it is essential to use oral sources. The methodological issues that arise from using such sources are examined and this study itself provides an example of how such sources can be successfully incorporated into geography. A major issue that is addressed is how different individuals see the environment and history differently. The process by which different group views are

formed is examined.

By focusing very specifically on the contact experience of one Aboriginal group it is illustrated how specific local features shaped the contact experience of each separate area. However, at the same time general processes of wider relevance are also revealed.

The empirical contribution of the work should not be overlooked. In documenting a view of past processes that was in danger of being lost forever, a major contribution to knowledge has been made.

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