

The future of the Australian

DR COOMBS, in yesterday's "Financial Review", looked at two Aboriginal communities, Everard Park in South Australia and Yirrkala in Arnhem Land, which, together with two others, the "fringe dwelling" community at Bourke in NSW and the Aboriginal population of the inner Sydney suburb of Redfern, cover a wide range of Aboriginal circumstances.

Today, Dr Coombs speaks about the Bourke and Redfern communities, groups which have "apparently lost almost all contact with Aboriginal tradition and culture and are nearly 'assimilated' into the general Australian community."

BOURKE

Bourke is a town of some 3,500 people at the end of a railway line in the semi-arid lands of western New South Wales through which flows the Darling River. It has an Aboriginal population of some 800, of whom some 300 normally live in shanty conditions in the depressing reserve downstream from the town.

About the same number live in grossly overcrowded "transitional" houses in one area of the town, with the remainder perhaps equally crowded in more scattered privately owned houses and Housing Commission-style homes erected mainly within the past few years.

The Aboriginal population is almost wholly of mixed Aboriginal and white descent although most families trace their ancestry through a number of generations of dark people. These are the characteristic "fringe dwellers" who provide for most white Australians the stereotype of the Aboriginal.

Like most Aboriginal communities they are increasing fast — indeed research workers from the University of New South Wales recorded birthrates in excess of 6 per cent — one of the highest ever recorded.

Superficially there is little evidence of survival of Aboriginal tradition. Indeed, as Rowley points out in his "Destruction of Aboriginal Society," their way of life is a kind of parody of that of the itinerant rural worker of the last century.

The shacks they build, the games they play, their addiction to bursts of drunkenness, even the songs they sing, reflect this poor white influence.

Theirs is a culture of poverty as described by Oscar Lewis, an American anthropologist, in his writings on Mexican and Puerto Rican families.

Nevertheless, the influence of Aboriginality is still significant. Knowledge of at least some words of the old language, of where one's traditional country was, of the complex ramifications of relations and of the mutual obligations which relationship implies continue even in the young, sometimes subconsciously.

There is a high level of unemployment and dependence on social service payments and a relatively high frequency of drunkenness and minor delinquencies.

There has until recently been little evidence of social organisation, cohesion or leadership. The reserve alone — despite its unprepossessing character — serves as a unifying influence.

Even those who have left it to live in the town return to it, often daily, for gossip, for bingo, and for card games, for barbecues and other social gatherings.

It is a symbol of security and unquestioning acceptance which this Aboriginal culture of

Second and final part of a slightly abridged address, the University of Sydney George Judah Cohen Memorial Lecture, delivered by Dr H. C. COOMBS, chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Affairs.

Identity — the echoes sound on ghetto walls

poverty holds out to all the dark people, whatever their failures or inadequacies.

Economically the Aborigines depend upon irregular employment or on social service payments. There is a meat works in the town which, though subject to periodic closures, employs between 70 and 100 Aborigines when operating at capacity.

The shire council employs a number as labourers — more when drought relief funds are available. Seasonal employment in cotton fields on the Namoi River and more distant fruit orchards supplement local employment.

Bourke has in recent years become the centre for a variety of research and action research pro-

I wait
for the
rising of
a star

— Judith Wright

grams concerned with Aborigines and their welfare.

The University of New South Wales, with support from the Freedom from Hunger campaign, has been conducting a research and community development program concerned with health, mental health and family planning and has stimulated the development of an Aboriginal Advancement Association formed by the Aborigines themselves.

Interesting work has been conducted at a special pre-school to assess the reasons for the poor response to educational opportunity among Aboriginal and poor white children and the effect of special conceptual and experience enrichment programs on that performance.

The State Government has built a number of houses in the town and more recently an Aboriginal housing society has been formed with financial support from the Commonwealth under the leadership of the Advancement Association.

This society is carrying out an interesting design and construction experiment. An interested architect has designed a house — unfamiliar in style but essentially orthodox — which is capable of being constructed by unskilled labour with minimum guidance and supervision.

Perhaps the most important development has been the establishment of the association. Active discussion of their problems, of their hopes and plans for the future occur regularly.

With the financial support of the Freedom from Hunger organisation, full-time paid Aboriginal officers of the association have been elected and this gives vitality and significance to its work and stimu-

lates more widely spread participation.

There is a danger that lack of day to day functions and the failure of effective outcome from their discussion and planning will cause the association to wither away — particularly if the financial support of the Freedom from Hunger group were to come to an end and the stimulus and sympathy of a guiding medico were to be lost.

However, for the present it is active and the leaders seem confident of the future. Out of all this emerges an impression of the changes Bourke Aborigines would seek in the life-style available to them.

This life-style is probably closer to the kind of outcome from assimilationist policies envisaged by white Australians than in any of the other communities reviewed in this paper.

REDFERN

* There has, since the end of the war, been a significant drift of Aborigines to the cities and the development of characteristically Aboriginal communities within them.

The Aboriginal population recorded in Sydney in the 1966 census was more than twice the figure shown in 1961 and it has been variously estimated that there may be between 10,000 and 20,000 persons of Aboriginal descent in the Sydney metropolitan area — many of them resident in Redfern and nearby inner suburbs.

The pattern has been for them to drift to such areas because they are cheaper and because relatives are already there and will offer help and companionship. They frequently occupy sub-standard accommodation and because of poverty and difficulty of finding accommodation, grossly overcrowd it.

Faced with growing hostility from surrounding white residents and unsympathetic police attitudes, they generally withdraw even more into association largely among themselves. These are the characteristic ghetto conditions found in American cities where enclaves of ethnic minorities exist.

Although unemployment is high, over the years a growing absorption into the workforce has occurred, generally at the lowest levels of skill, and this has led to some dispersal through other suburbs but a solid core remains in the South Sydney area, reinforced by those being staged as they continue to drift into the city and as their own numbers grow.

These urban Aborigines have become an important and interesting component in the total population, exercising a political influence beyond expectations based on their numbers.

Firstly, many are, despite their substantial and increasing isolation from tribal affiliations, self-consciously and aggressively

Aboriginal — asserting their identity as such vigorously and demonstratively.

From their numbers are drawn the bulk of the Aboriginal protesters, the members and supporters of the group which established and manned the Canberra Embassy.

Similar groups are emerging in Brisbane, in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. They have espoused all Aboriginal causes, including land rights for Aboriginal communities because they link land rights with the assertion of an Aboriginal identity and therefore with their survival as an independent and distinctive component in Australian society.

An Aboriginal woman involved in pre-school work among

Let me be
most clear
and most
tender

— Judith Wright

Redfern Aboriginal mothers and children commented: "We get exasperated by white people telling us we should be proud of being Aborigines. Here we are all Aborigines. Our kids now don't have to be told — they recognise each other and themselves for Aborigines. I am a Koori — I know I am."

For them Aboriginality is primarily a fact of being racially different from the white community — a view which reflects the attitudes of that community rather than deriving from cultural and historical tradition.

By contrast, a tribal Aboriginal sees the essence of his Aboriginal identity in his initiation and participation in the religious and ceremonial life of his people and in its identification with its territory. Some of these tribal Aborigines, many of them of purely Aboriginal descent, question the right of urban Aborigines to call themselves Aboriginal — not because they are often part white but because they are not initiated men and do not share either the identification with clan territory or the ceremonial and other knowledge that goes with it.

There is however, among urban Aborigines, an intense longing and curiosity for knowledge about the traditional life and culture of tribal Aborigines and they know it to be of inestimable value. There is correspondingly a bitterness that the white man, in his greed and ignorance, has stolen from them this heritage along with that of the land itself, leaving them in a cultural void.

Activity is not confined to political protest. The same people are frequently involved in social welfare and cultural activi-