

Spring 1-1-2022

Chapter 8. Mission Without Borders, Waves of Sorrow: Aboriginal People in the Kimberly, Australia

William Christy C.S.Sp.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Christy, W. (2022). Chapter 8. Mission Without Borders, Waves of Sorrow: Aboriginal People in the Kimberly, Australia. *Spiritan Horizons*, 18 (18). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-horizons/vol18/iss18/18>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Spiritan Horizons (English, French, and Portuguese) at Duquesne Scholarship Collection. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spiritan Horizons by an authorized editor of Duquesne Scholarship Collection.

Chapter 8

Mission Without Borders, Waves of Sorrow: Aboriginal People in the Kimberley, Australia

Introduction

In 2011, at University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome Campus, I heard Ms. June Oscar of Fitzroy Crossing Women's Legal Association give a public lecture on alcohol restrictions in her home community. In her lecture she spoke about the need for a respite for the community to come to terms with alcohol and the effects alcohol was having in the community. To illustrate her point Ms. Oscar gave a unique overview of Aboriginal history in the Kimberley Region of north-western Australia, tracing what she called "the waves of sorrow" and showing the incredible resilience of the Aborigines to overcome disastrous and egregious events in their history since White settlement. Her talk was an epiphany moment for me and radically changed my view of Aboriginal history. I didn't have the presence of mind to take notes during the talk and I have never seen that talk or anything like it published. I remembered the key metaphor that she used of waves knocking a person to their knees in the rolling surf and of struggling to stand before the next wave swept them off their feet again, and I remember the historical waves that she recounted. I have since tried to do some research on the topic and have come up with my own names for the waves she described, but I wish to fully acknowledge her true authorship of this topic. In Kimberley terms, she is boss of this story and I have no claim on it myself. My hope is that on hearing that I have retold her story she may be persuaded to write the story herself and let her telling supplant mine.

I had come to the Kimberley in 2007 to minister in the Aboriginal reserves as part of our Spiritan mission to Australia. I had been assigned to the Dampier Peninsula parish, a huge swath of land north of the episcopal seat at Broome

that encompassed three reserves—the Beagle Bay Community, the Lombadina/Djarindjin Community, and the One Arm Point community. I was working with our confrere Daniel Kilala, CSSp, ministering to the people. The parish supported two Catholic schools, Sacred Heart in Beagle Bay and Christ the King in Djarindjin. In addition to my pastoral duties I was serving as the school psychologist in the Catholic schools, working mostly with students with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. Dampier Peninsula was a place where the Great Sandy Desert met the sea with the Indian Ocean to the west, Timor Sea to the north, the King Sound to the east and the desert to the south.

The incoming tide is a formidable thing to experience in the Kimberley. Eight, ten, twelve meters of water relentlessly rush into the shore swallowing, engulfing, covering, everything in its path. Standing on the beach the water quickly covers feet, ankles, shins and soon waves are breaking at your knees knocking you down under the raising water. After each wave you scramble to your feet and try to find new footing slightly higher on the beach, giving up your ground slowly, begrudgingly, before a relentless power. But up you come out of the water after each wave knocked you down, finding your feet and waiting for the next wave, and for the tide to crest and begin to recede, waiting for the assault to be over.

The Aboriginal peoples of the Kimberley have experienced these waves as the tide of White settlement has continued to roll in. Waves of sorrow have knocked the people under the water and nearly extinguished them, bringing them to the brink of total annihilation on more than one occasion. Yet, still they stood and braced themselves for the next wave. Many leaders say that the community is once again under the weight of a crushing wave and again facing another threat to their continuation as a people and as a culture. This wave is a wave called *addiction* and it has swept entire families, entire communities and churned them under the water. What more and more people are calling for is a rest, a lessening, of the grip that *addiction* has on the community through alcohol restrictions.

It is possible to stand again even after being knocked under the surface of the raising tide. The history of the Aboriginal people in the Kimberley is filled—start to finish—with examples of the people standing again after waves of sorrow had felled them and nearly drowned them. We remember the waves of sorrow that have knocked the indigenous community off their feet in the past so we can remember also how they recovered and stood again, how they re-found their balance and braced themselves for the future.

The Wave of Disease

When White settlers entered most parts of Australia they reported that the local populations of indigenous Australians were scarce and the pockets of habitation were near collapse. The people, where they could be found, were barely clinging to survival. And their reports were, for the most part, true. The first White settlers found the Aborigines decimated and in dire circumstances, but it hadn't always been so, for how could a culture that had endured 40,000 years on the land have done so if they were as weak as they were when the first White people met them. In fact, what the first White settlers were seeing was the after effects of the first contact of European disease with the native peoples.

In the Kimberley, White men's disease traveled before White settlement like a ripple in the water before the prow of a boat. Blacks who had been in contact with White settlers carried the foreign diseases they had received and passed them to other Aborigines before the White community moved north and west into the country. Traveling from native to native faster than the ox carts, horses, and camels could carry the White explorers into new lands, what the new comers often witnessed when they arrived was a native people only just having been visited by the plague of diseases for which they had no resistance.

In the Fitzroy Valley, Ms. Oscar's home country, anthropologists estimate that up to 70% of the indigenous population was decimated before the first land leases were handed out in 1883. Truly, what those first settlers found were a people ravaged by disease and a community rent asunder by the loss of so many people. Not only were tribal peoples being starved by the loss of skilled hunters and gatherers that had fed the people only years before, but more insidiously it was the loss of knowledge in an oral culture that could only with the most difficulty be regained, that had impoverished the community.

White settlers trekked into the Kimberley and found a people already knocked to their knees by a wave of disease. They found a people hungry and disorganized by the loss of leadership, skills and knowledge. And yet, in only eleven years from the journey of Alexander Forrest from the Kimberley coast to the Northern Territory, the first organized resistance to white settlement was begun.

The Wave of Massacre

In 1890, while working for the police as a tracker, charged with capturing Aboriginals accused of spearing livestock, Jandamarra of the Bunuba people turned on his police employers and began an armed rebellion against White settlement in the Kimberley. He and his band were hunted down and killed in the canyon country north of Fitzroy Crossing. His fame as a local hero stems from his resistance to the violence being meted out on the indigenous population for violation of White property laws.

There is no area of the Kimberley where local people, mostly men, were not arrested and jailed or worse, hunted down and shot, for killing livestock. With a near total disregard for the need of traditional people to hunt for food, pastoralists would purposely clear the land of kangaroo and wallabies to decrease the competition for grass in favor of the sheep and cattle being brought into the country. Also, by taking away their traditional food source, Aboriginals could be more easily persuaded to labor for rations at the stations.

Some scholars have even speculated that violence toward the male indigenous population was, in part, a way to coerce females to work on stations doing domestic labor as the White population was at that time overwhelmingly male. Mass arrests and killings of men would, it's speculated, leave the Aboriginal women more susceptible to economic and even sexual exploitation.

The Wave of Exploitation

While economic and sexual exploitation may have been a cause of violence against Aboriginal people, the exploitation clearly continued after the violence abated. The indigenous community was felled by disease and then again by violence, but in both instances the community was able to, in some way, regroup and carry on as a community. However, it was the practice of "blackbirding" that formed the next wave to dislodge the fabric of the native life.

The Kimberley interior was being settled and divvied up for cattle leases, but very soon after the Kimberley coast experienced the economic boom times based on the trade of mother of pearl. First, the near shore waters were harvested for pearl shell by divers who fished the waters without compressed air. As the easy depths were soon depleted, divers were forced into deeper and more dangerous waters.



“Blackbirding” was the practice of luring or abducting Aboriginals to work on pearling luggers. Many times they were given the most dangerous jobs on board, that of diving for pearl shells, and many times they were young women. When you are in Broome, it is good to visit the statue placed on the foreshore not far from the Conti-Mecure Hotel. The statue is of an Aboriginal woman coming up to the surface with a pearl shell in her hands. In this testament to the role Aboriginal women played in the pearling industry, it is important to note that the diver is pregnant.

Young women abducted for skin diving were both economically and sexually exploited while on the boats. In a bizarre way one form of exploitation fed into the other, because pearling lugger captains believed that because pregnant women had more blood in their bodies to support the growing fetus, they had the ability to hold their breath longer and to dive deeper searching for pearl shell. Young women were released when they were no longer able to dive or when the cyclone season shut down the fleet. They were abandoned, many times heavily pregnant or with a mixed-race infant, wherever the ship made landfall, often hundreds of kilometers from their homes and in unfamiliar territory. Cut off from family and kin, they often found themselves living on the outskirts of White settlements.

The Wave of Abduction

We have seen how the Aboriginal community suffered wave after wave of destruction in the years before and following White settlement in the Kimberley. In quick succession disease, violence and exploitation weakened the community, yet, after each wave the people were somehow able to hang on and stand again. Not all contact with Whites was detrimental. Bishop Matthew Gibney, after visiting the northern reaches of his diocese, returned to Perth in the early 1880s and petitioned the government for a parcel of land near Beagle Bay to be

used as a mission. One of the specific reasons for the mission was to be a safe haven for exploited Aborigines dumped in Broome after having been taken to sea.

But seeing the mission as a haven or as an enabler of malicious governmental policy toward Aborigines is not so easy to wrestle apart. Because the next wave of sorrow the native community endured was the abduction of their children into what has come to be known as the *Stolen Generation*. On one hand, the church clearly believed that they had come to love, serve, educate, and evangelize the Aboriginal people, and receiving mixed race “orphans” from the government was the right thing to do. Still, the church also recognizes that it played a vital role in enabling the government to remove children from their families, their country and their culture. The Saint John of God Sisters’ Heritage Centre in Broome, Western Australia, is an important resource for all who want to learn more about the relationship between the mission and the Stolen Generation, and to study the Sisters’ apology and resolution to remain active in Aboriginal ministry. This is an important issue for all teachers coming to the Catholic school system to wrestle with, because our school ministry is built upon those same mission roots and our continued engagement with the local community needs to both acknowledge the legacy of love and pain caused by the church’s involvement with the Stolen Generation, a legacy that is still being lived out in many of our schools today.

The Wave of Displacement

In 1967 the government of Prime Minister Harold Holt held a national referendum regarding granting civil rights to Aboriginal Australians; 95% of the nation voted in the affirmative. In the months and years following the referendum, radical change took place in the Kimberley as the government legislated and the courts ruled on the political rights of the native population. Among the joy of political enfranchisement, there was also a great sorrow when Aboriginal people were removed from their country.

With the granting of civil rights and equal protection under the law, Aboriginal workers were entitled to receive full wages for the work they did on cattle stations across the Kimberley and could no longer be paid in rations of tobacco, tea, flour and sugar. However, at the same time, availability of motorcycles, four-wheel drive vehicles, and especially helicopters made the need for large numbers of Aboriginal stockmen obsolete. Rather than pay them wages, the station owners removed the Aboriginal people from their stations, often leaving them at roadside settlements like Fitzroy Crossing and Halls Creek.

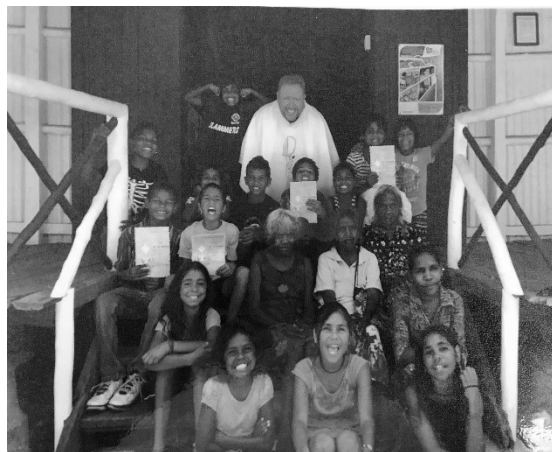
Through all the other waves of sorrow the native people always had contact with their country and drew from the life of the country for their healing after sorrows had passed by. This new sorrow gathered them up from their country and their law places and dumped them together with other people, often from rival tribes, on land that wasn't theirs. Without access to country and to its restorative properties, this wave of displacement proved very difficult to overcome. The community isn't yet fully healed from this sorrow because, while as a result of rulings stemming from the 1992 Mabo case,¹ the creation of Native Title means that indigenous people have access to their country and law places once again, the inaccessibility of government services from some of these places prevents them from being fully utilized. Many people continue to live culturally as guests in other peoples' country. This in some ways is akin to people living for generations in refugee camps in lands they can never call their own.

The Wave of Addiction

While the last of the Stolen Generation are now elders in the community, the generation that followed them and came of age in the years after equal access to alcohol and the granting of welfare payments were normalized are sometimes called the *Lost Generation*. Addiction to drugs, and especially alcohol, is the new wave that has pulled the people of the Kimberley under the surf, a wave that they are still struggling to right themselves from. It is this wave of sorrow that some elements of the community have called for a respite from by asking the government to enact alcohol restrictions on certain communities.

Addiction is hitting all sections of the community. The elderly are asked to care for grandchildren and great grandchildren because the generations below them aren't functioning well enough to care for the children themselves. Children, after being exposed to alcohol in the womb, are born with physical and mental difficulties and with brains wired for and predisposed to addiction in the future. People are suffering ill health like never before with kidney and liver disease and forms of

1. *Mabo vs Queensland (No 2)* (1992), a legal decision made by the High Court on 3 June 1992. The Mabo decision was named after Eddie Mabo, the man who challenged the Australian legal system and fought for recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional owners of their land.



cancer often associated with drug and alcohol abuse reaching record levels.

While alcohol restrictions have been shown to help reduce violence and ill health in communities where they have been enacted, these measures are not without their critics. Firstly, because the granting of drinking rights and civil rights came about through the same political movement, some see the restrictions on alcohol as an infringement on civil liberties. The real expression of equality in the Kimberley was when a black man was able to freely enter a bar and order a drink. While legal scholars see clear distinctions between civil rights and alcohol restrictions, the lived experience of many Aboriginal people link them together. Secondly, the law used to institute alcohol restrictions was never intended for its current use. The law, which was made so that the Chairman of the State department overseeing alcohol licensing could temporarily restrict alcohol in a specific area, like a park or a stadium, was never intended for communities or for extended periods of time. There are no mechanisms for a democratic vote for the beginning or the end of restrictions.

But even with its critics and the flaws in the law, there is, at this time, broad support for alcohol restrictions in certain communities. But even those who first called for alcohol restrictions, like Ms. Oscar, have never called for them to be permanent. It is the need, they assert, to get up from under this wave of addiction that has brought about this current restriction. Leaders, like Ms. Oscar, point to the resilience of the Aboriginal people and the history they have of overcoming adversity to show that given the opportunity they can stand up again after being knocked down by this wave of addiction and can insure the

continuation of the people just as they have so often in the past. My own work as a school psychologist for the Aboriginal children suffering from the effects of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome was my small contribution to this struggle with the wave of addiction.

*William Christy, CSSp
University Chaplain, Duquesne University*

Animated by the Spirit, Jesus was “submerged and lost in the bosom of his Father...in the midst of all his external labors”

Lettres Spirituelles I, 422; *Notes et Documents* I, 429
Letter to A. M. Leray, February 22, 1838; *Letters to Religious and Priests*, vol. 2, 69