Open Letter concerning the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies

To the Institute Members, Associate Members and other interested people.

You are no doubt aware of the conference the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies is holding in Canberra in May, and you may be intending to attend or even give a paper.

Why is this conference being held? What significance will it have in the understanding of human societies? What significance will it have to Aborigines and our position in the world, and what will be its significance in terms of events in Australian society today?

We believe that this conference will make no positive contribution to Australian society and in particular to the position of Aborigines in relation to the total Australian society.

For the participants, the conference will, at best, provide an opportunity for academics to come together, socialize, exchange esoteric facts and abstract theories about their 'fascinating subject matter', and perhaps even arrive at some new abstractions about human societies in general. It will give them a new sense of 'relevance' and assumed importance. At worst, it will provide some of the participants with the opportunity to climb the academic ladder, to obtain recognition from the government for their ideas on how to deal with the 'Aboriginal problem', and secure them more funds for more research. The conference is unlikely to help any of the participants come to any terms of human relationship with the people from whom they learn (usually called 'informants') and their groups. It is unlikely to help them understand the facts of Aboriginal life, and death, in Australia today.

For the Institute, and especially its Principal, Peter Ucko, the conference is a major weapon for gaining international prestige and a modern relevant image. This, we know, is to impress the government enough to make it think the Institute, as it is now constituted and under the guise of its current 'relevant' programs, is worth more money and worth listening to for advice on Aboriginal matters. This will have the effect of extending the power academics exercise over the lives of the people they study.

The origin of this power results from the partial breakdown of the Aboriginal oral intellectual tradition, and the weakened influence of that tradition over Aborigines, and ignorance of such a tradition by white society, including government and anthropologists.

Therefore, the anthropologists' written intellectual tradition, with its assumed knowledge and insight, has power because of the importance placed on the written medium in this society. Assumed knowledge in books, then, becomes 'the reference' to Aboriginality. Anthropologists therefore exert power both on Aboriginal thinking and government policy as regards needs and feelings of Aborigines.

This conference may cost $100,000 or more. Is this price, or anything like it, too much to pay to allow the Institute this huge indulgence, and the participants a lesser one? Money and other resources are in short supply for Aboriginal control of their livelihood, but not, it seems, for discussing it. Should you participate in this conference which so blatantly ignores the interests of its 'subject matter'??
If you agree with any or all of the above views on this conference, you may consider the best thing to do is not participate.

What has been the philosophy of the Institute to date, and what has been its position as an institution in Australian society? Our view is that it has largely functioned as a fellowship of academics who supported each other to further their careers, mostly by 'salvaging' knowledge from Aborigines and their cultural property. Considerations about the lives and interests of the people they studied, or sincerely promoting any form of enlightenment in Australia have been, at best, secondary.

For example, what public stand has the Institute taken on Land Rights? The Institute must surely know the importance of land to Aborigines. And what efforts has the Institute, with all its collected data, put into correcting the implicit and explicit cultural superiority/indianism evident in today's school textbooks, let alone the minds of the majority of Australians? The enlightenment we mean, then, is for Australians to understand that Aboriginal cultural practices can continue and flourish within economic security and relative freedom from (white) cultural persecution and prejudice.

All this previous philosophy has been burdened with the addition of the 'modern, relevant, dynamic' image of the Institute which came with its new principal. The Institute is now concerned with becoming modern, important and above all, influential with those in power. In the Jan. 1974 Institute newsletter Peter Ucko indicates the importance with which he regards this influence. The Institute obviously hopes to influence the government, especially on policy in Aboriginal affairs. That is, the Institute, and by implication its members, wants to extend its influence over decisions which control the lives of Aborigines in Australia.

We are questioning not only the implied relationship the Institute was to have with Aborigines when it was formed in 1961, but also the implied change in the relationship between Institute, Aborigines and Australian society generally since then. Peter Ucko's remarks trouble us but, moreover, the malpractices supported by the Institute which have affected Aborigines in recent times have angered us greatly. So too, has its face-saving, double-dealing over the same malpractices to justify itself to the government. We believe the Institute has dealt with Aborigines with disrespect because we are a powerless group in Australian society.

In 1971 when anthropologist Richard Gould was banned by Western Desert people for blatant disregard of obligations regarding secrecy, there was a possibility of all anthropologists being banned from parts of the Western Desert. This was a blow close to the heart of anthropology, and was immediately named the 'problem of field access'. Aborigines were conveniently sandwiched in the middle of a power struggle between the Institute — representing anthropologists — and government authorities trying to extend their control over entry permits to reserves. None of the plaintiffs were represented at the Institute-sponsored meeting, which arrived at a 'solution' in which the identity of the plaintiffs was lost. Richard Gould was proclaimed the exception and hence became the scapegoat and things returned to normal. That is, 'field access' to the 'objects of research' was restored. When one anthropologist at this meeting suggested Land Rights was the answer so Aboriginal groups could then welcome or exclude people on their own terms, this was rejected as unfeasible.
There are other indications of the relationship of the Institute to Aborigines.

Two of us in 1972 and again in 1973 approached the Institute - the former and present principals - about making available to NSW North Coast Aboriginal communities Institute-documented material on the Bandjalang dialects. No reply was received from either principal.

One of us, when returning the questionnaire circulated by the Institute about the Kay conference, suggested three of us to be approached about giving papers at the seminar on 'Social and Cultural Change'. The Institute apparently thinks Aborigines in the thick of causing and understanding change are not especially competent to speak on the subject and did not invite them to speak, but merely sent them questionnaires.

In 1970, an Institute sub-committee on aspects of membership made recommendations about Aborigines becoming Associate members and Aboriginal committees being set up to recommend lines of research. Even these mild reforms, completely and totally inadequate today, have never been accepted by the Institute.

In the January 1974 Institute newsletter, the new principal remarked that relations with tribal Aborigines are good, and in connection with the planned publication of a brochure explaining the Institute and its purpose, he said that publication of this brochure in various Aboriginal languages would enhance these already good relations.

Things may not be as good as Peter Ucko states and the tactic of appearing to communicate and understand by using the language may not be sufficient. Peter Ucko's own doubts are indicated by his very next sentence: "Hopefully the brochure will also help to explain the institute's aims and functions to non-tribal Aborigines".

Does he think that English literate Aborigines are harder to convince of his assumptions than those who don't read or don't speak much English? His boss, Senator Cavanagh, has made similar insulting comments about the ease of manipulating those they choose to call 'tribal'.

We ask both cultural elitists - one cagey and the other ignorant - and all whom they represent, do they know the requirements of attitude, etiquette, honesty and sincerity, which are necessary to render cross-cultural communication meaningful? Does Peter Ucko know that mere words in the vernacular about the big helpful institute does not automatically translate into tribal understanding and acceptance. If not, why not? Has the Institute ever worked on translation-literacy programmes with the emphasis on intellectual concepts of both cultures?

The Institute then is primarily on a course of increasing its influence, and importance, hence its budget, and hence its influence, on and on in an academic empire building spiral. The most effective way to do this is to serve the desires and interests of the government by initiating and financing studies in more 'relevant' fields such as social change and adjustments; and research designed to influence government policy. We are witnessing these trends at the Institute at the present time.

The answers to the problems that Aborigines face are in broad terms, not complex, but they are hard for the government and white Australians to accept, because they require basic changes in the value system of white Australian society. In this atmosphere, one of the main government priorities is to find
alternatives to the real solutions which will not challenge that value system. Hence research on 'economic viability' becomes an apologist's alternative to LAND RIGHTS and other research may provide excuses for not giving Aborigines independence and justice, or 'reasons' why independence would not work.

So the subject matter of research appears to be getting more 'relevant' (attracts government money) but the relationship between the studied and the studier is not becoming a more human one. What anthropologists do is generally not positively assisting Aborigines to understand, grasp and control our situation and destiny. Nor is it helping all Australians understand the nature of Australian society and hence the changes necessary before any degree of justice and security could be won by Aborigines and greater non-exploitative fulfillment gained for all.

All except one of us signatories are Aborigines and we cannot accept Aborigines being in the role of passive subject matter for doubtfully relevant studies and pronouncements, made at great expense while the needs of the people remain so great. One of us was involved professionally in Aboriginal studies until the conflict between the academic view of Aboriginal life and shared experiences with Aborigines in living became too great to accept the former role.

What hope do we see for the future? It is not one involving tokenism. Phillip Roberts has suffered from that. The person(s) who will be the 'at least one fully initiated Aborigine' on the institute's Sites of Significance Committee may well suffer too. Academics should cease collecting more and more esoteric information and interpreting it for the consumption of fewer and fewer people. They should consider acting to help all people, especially those amongst whom they live, understand the general and complex features of Australia's situation (unresolved colonialism, capitalism and privilege, and authority/power) and so work to change it in a more humanising, liberating direction.

Those involved in Aboriginal studies are in a particularly sensitive situation. They should not pretend that their studies are objective when the overwhelming factor in the lives of Aborigines is our oppression by the society of which the anthropologist is, to a greater or lesser extent, a part of. Cross-cultural human relationships tend to be scarred by this social fact.

This oppression parallels the colonisation of this country and embraces the planning of the policy makers and industry, the implementation of those plans, and finally the subjugation of the Aboriginal people. It is a continuum which affects all Aborigines and present examples include tourism, forestry and mining plans for Arnhem Land, mining activities at Gove and Weipa, alienation of land in NSW and Victoria, and the Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders Acts in Queensland.

It is this situation that makes the possibilities for humanising anthropology in Australia seem drastic and difficult. Anthropologists should we feel, see their primary obligations as being to those from whom they gain knowledge and whose existence they are dependent on in what might be called (to borrow a phrase) 'intelligent parasitism'. They should also be helping promote the changes in attitudes and social institutions that are necessary so that Aboriginal people and all others may lead a fulfilling life.
If Aboriginal groups had a satisfactory land base with full land rights they could take control of their affairs, and control visits by outsiders, including anthropologists. They could protect their own sacred sites and other religious and cultural freedoms. Aboriginal communities having commissioning rights and control of funding over studies made on them and their cultural property is, we believe, the only way of ultimately altering the present unsatisfactory relationship between anthropologists and Aborigines. This relationship is basically that a privileged member of the oppressor society studies the oppressed and gives information to other members of the oppressor society, often to the principal villians (government, mining, industrial, pastoral, real-estate and tourists interests) themselves. This must change.

We invite discussion and communication with us on these issues and believe these matters must be thoroughly discussed at the Institute's business meeting of 25th May, 1974.

EAGLEHAWK AND CROW

Terry Widders
Peter Thompson
Gary Williams
Lyn Thompson
Bob Bellear
Len Watson

29th March, 1974