

A Historiography of Australian Aboriginal Studies in Nijmegen

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Introduction

Nijmegen, the oldest town of The Netherlands, has known a sustained anthropological interest in Aboriginal Australia for over half a century. In their review of the discipline in The Netherlands, Blok and Boissevain (1984: 338) write that “it is fair to say that regional orientation predominates over thematic interests. Dutch anthropologists therefore tend to organize on a regional basis.” The anthropology of Aboriginal Australia happened to be mainly concentrated in Nijmegen, notably Radboud University and the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics. The key focus throughout the history of Australian Aboriginal Studies in Nijmegen has been on emancipation and social engagement, thus aligning well with the inaugural mission of the Radboud University, which was established a century ago. In this chapter, we examine how Nijmegen became the center for such sustained and engaged scholarship on Indigenous Australia, taking note of the scientific contributions that have been made to this field of study, the dissemination of knowledge to the wider public and the societal impact that flowed from that steady academic output. This historiography will thus show, furthermore, that in all the facets of Aboriginal studies in Nijmegen a staunch tradition of engaged scholarship developed, and in so doing was primed to counteract the often damaging administration and stereotypical representation of Aboriginal people in Australian society.

In what follows, we start by discussing the origin of Western interest in Aboriginal people. They have, from early on, figured prominently in Western academic work, beginning with the theory of evolution in which Aboriginal people were seen as the primitive pendant of civilization (Borsboom 1988). From there we move on to the start and development of Aboriginal studies in Nijmegen, which took off in earnest when Australian policy towards its Indigenous population changed from so-called assimilation to self-determination. The cultural renaissance and (re-)

appreciation of Aboriginal cultures this policy change further facilitated, inspired several generations of Nijmegen-based scholars to focus on Indigenous Australia, which became visible in both research output and the educational curriculum.

Indeed, in the late 90s and early 2000s the Pacific Studies curriculum formed a strong regional core in the design of many courses. Staff members such as Ad Borsboom, who was appointed full professor of Pacific Studies in 1997 (to be succeeded by Thomas Widlok in 2009, see Widlok, 2009), Ton Otto, Toon van Meijl and Eric Venbrux introduced students to Pacific societies and cultures. Their teachings were on Aboriginal art and religion, on debates about the (re)invention of tradition and the supposed tensions between tradition and modernity, on the history and legacies of colonization, as well as on the economic and political position of Pacific peoples and Indigenous Australians. We show that rather than seeing Aboriginal people as ‘remnants’ of a distant past, the scholarly emphasis came to lie on the interrelations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, going beyond the imagined dichotomy between tradition and modernity, thus inspiring several generations of students.¹

Moreover, the thriving academic community that Aboriginal studies in Nijmegen generated from the 1970s onwards spilled over beyond the walls of the university in the exchange of material culture and the strengthening of museal ties, culminating in the close involvement of Nijmegen scholars in the activities of the Aboriginal Art Museum in Utrecht. Finally, we demonstrate how Australian Aboriginal studies in Nijmegen became an important node in multiple research networks in Europe and beyond.

The Onset of Australian Aboriginal Studies in Nijmegen: From Armchair Anthropology to Modern Fieldwork

In the 19th and early 20th century the theory of evolutionism led to a worldwide interest in Australian Aborigines. They had the dubious honor of posing as the central characters in some of the most influential origin myths. L.H. Morgan used

1 This inspiration materialized in at least 30 MA theses, 10 PhD theses and numerous publications following from these studies. To name but a few master's projects: Jolien Harmsen (1993), Simone Keuken (1995), Carolien Karman (1999), Martine Geelen (2000), Maarten Delwel (2003), Mayke Kranenbarg (2004) and Lotte Ghielen (2006); they all did a stint of fieldwork in Australia. Other ones, including Miranda van Holland (2000) and Marijn de Vries (2003), worked on museum collections in The Netherlands or as Lara Hogeland (2006) did on Aboriginal literature.

Fison and Howitt's work on the Kamilaroi and Kurnai to illustrate the 'lowest level of kinship'; James Frazer used Baldwin Spencer's work for his theory on the most primitive form of religion and magic; Sigmund Freud took the primal horde exemplified in Australia as evidence for his theory in *Totem and Tabu*; and Durkheim discovered elementary forms of religion in the works of Spencer and Gillen and of Strehlow (cf. Hiatt 1996). Aborigines had become everything which the Europeans were not, the 'Primitive Other' against whom Europeans measured themselves (Borsboom 1988).

This persisted until well in the twentieth century when anthropologists like Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown (who both were involved in Australian Aboriginal Studies) laid the groundwork for modern ethnographic fieldwork and with it abandoned Victorian evolutionary constructs and 'armchair' anthropology. A period of intensive fieldwork followed. In the early 1930s, Lloyd Warner and Donald Thomson carried out long-term fieldwork in Arnhem Land and published groundbreaking studies on the social, economic, and religious fabric of still-functioning Indigenous societies. After World War II, Australian anthropologists followed in their footsteps. Profound studies of kinship and religious systems dominated Aboriginal anthropology in the sixties.

It was this approach that inspired a Dutch anthropologist from Leiden University, Lex van der Leeden, to also start fieldwork in Australia. He spent a year among the Nunggubuyu in Numbulwar (then Rose River Mission, Northern Territory) in 1964–1965 (Van der Leeden 1973). In 1969 he moved to Nijmegen, where he successfully motivated students and generated interest in Aboriginal Australia and the necessity of fieldwork. One may safely say that Aboriginal studies at Nijmegen University took off through his commitment and enthusiasm.

As the interest in studying Indigenous Australian societies and cultures took off in Nijmegen, some students, like Jean Kommers (1972) and Rumuold van Geffen (1974), wrote their master's theses based on literature. Others, however, such as Ad Borsboom and Hans Dagmar, prepared for fieldwork in Aboriginal Australia. Borsboom was to conduct fieldwork in Arnhem Land, northern Australia, from 1972–1974 on the transformation and cosmological context of the intricate Maradjiri ritual. Dagmar carried out research in the West Australian town of Carnarvon from 1972–1973 and again in 1975. He investigated how Aborigines organized in their struggle to improve their deplorable socio-economic position. Both defended their theses successfully in 1978 (Borsboom 1978; Dagmar 1978).

The growing focus of researchers in Nijmegen on Australian Aboriginal studies coincided with the emergence of an ever-stronger Aboriginal emancipatory movement. In 1966, Aboriginal stockmen and their families at a Northern Territory

cattle station went on strike, not only for a better socio-economic position but also to claim the land as their own. The next year, a nationwide referendum bestowed de facto civil rights on Australia's Indigenous population. Meanwhile, Aboriginal people in major urban centers marched in the streets to protest discrimination, and to demand socio-economic improvements and land rights. This culminated in the establishment of the (still existing) Tent Embassy in front of the Federal Parliament in Canberra, a successful rallying point to reinforce these demands (Borsboom 2011). As the Aboriginal emancipatory movement gained strength, and relationships between the Australian nation-state and its Indigenous peoples began to change, the interests of Nijmegen-based researchers also further developed, engaging with the impact that these changes had on the Aboriginal life worlds.

From Assimilation to Self-Determination

When Borsboom and Dagmar first departed to conduct fieldwork in Australia, the official government policy was one of assimilation, meaning that Indigenous peoples had to abolish their traditional way of living and worldview. During the 1970s, assimilation was replaced by self-determination. Research by Borsboom and Dagmar documented how Aboriginal people induced major changes in their (legal) position and lived their lives during an era of transformation.

When Borsboom commenced fieldwork in 1972, Aboriginal people had been living at mission stations and government-controlled townships since the 1930s. Notwithstanding the government's focus on assimilation, Borsboom witnessed how much time and effort people spent on religious activities. Out of sight of the non-Aboriginal staff, Djinang people continued to connect with country and maintain relationships with Arnhem Land communities through song, dance, and mythology. In his PhD on the Maradjiri ritual, Borsboom (1978) showed how people lay the groundwork for a renaissance of Aboriginal self-determination. This happened right under the eyes of the non-Aboriginal population of mission and government settlements who were, at that time, still convinced of the benefits of assimilation (Borsboom 2005).

In 1976, the passing of land rights legislation for the Northern Territory gave rise to the outstation movement in Central and Northern Australia and marked the end of the assimilation policy. Ownership of the land of so-called Aboriginal reserves was immediately regained and people started to reoccupy their traditional lands to establish 'outstations' or 'homeland centers' as they are called today. During this time, Nijmegen-based researchers made important contributions to

the topics of self-determination and land rights. In 1980, Borsboom returned to the Djinang in Arnhem Land to gain insight into their life during a time of remarkable change. Borsboom's former supervisor Kenneth Maddock (Macquarie University, Sydney) spent a year in Nijmegen. During that same year he worked on an important book on Aboriginal land rights at the Institute for Folk Law (Maddock 1980, 1983). In Western Australia, Hans Dagmar supported an Aboriginal land claim with his research (Dagmar 1984).

The first land rights act turned out to be a prelude to an even bigger success of the Aboriginal land rights movement. In 1992, following years of legal proceedings by Torres Strait Islander man Eddie Mabo, the Australian High Court recognized that Australia was not 'empty' (*terra nullius*) at the time of colonization by the British. Instead, Indigenous Australians had lived in the country for thousands of years and, according to the Court, enjoyed rights to their land according to their own laws and customs. The so-called Mabo case paved the way for the Native Title Act 1993, which in turn led Aboriginal people to file land claims to Native Title Courts – often with success.

Beyond the Dichotomy Between Tradition and Modernity

As Australia moved from assimilation to self-determination, its Aboriginal peoples continued to give shape to their traditions, beliefs, practices and identities in contact with settler society. The interrelations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, and the question of what it means to be Aboriginal in today's world, long preoccupied researchers in Nijmegen (e.g., Dagmar 1978, 1984; Borsboom 1986; Riphagen 2008; Tonnaer 2008; Venbrux 2006). Their work also refuted claims that contact with settler society would lead to the end of so-called traditional Aboriginal life (Borsboom 1986), or that modernity would result in 'watered down' forms of Aboriginal identity (Riphagen 2011). During the 1980s and 1990s, Ad Borsboom and Eric Venbrux both conducted ethnographic fieldwork in remote Aboriginal communities, although their foci differed. Borsboom witnessed how the arrival of satellite disks and the internet rapidly brought the so-called modern world into the furthest corner of Arnhem Land. People often perceived as 'traditional' Aborigines became citizens of the modern, global world. Rather than witnessing the end of traditional life, Borsboom encountered and documented the resilience of Aboriginal language, social fabric, life cycle rituals, mixed economy, and above all attachment to country – both cognitive, religious, and emotional. This led him to argue that whilst tradition changes as it always does – faster today than

in pre-colonial times – the persistent dichotomy between tradition and modernity in Western social thought is a false one. Instead, Djinang attitudes towards and perceptions of modernity kept being shaped by their cultural institutions, which in turn remained the building blocks of contemporary, fluid Aboriginal identity (Borsboom 1986). In her PhD research Elizabeth den Boer focused on the dreams of Aboriginal women in comparison to those of Indigenous women in Suriname (Mohkamsing-den Boer 2005).

In the Tiwi Islands, off the Australian north coast, Venbrux conducted field-work during several periods between 1988 and 2006. His monograph, *A Death in the Tiwi Islands* (Venbrux 1995), formed an extended case study of the social and legal ramifications of a homicide in a Tiwi community. The study also provided an elaborate ethnography of Tiwi social relations, funeral and post-funeral rituals, seasonal rituals, and the political and social aspects of ceremony. It represented a main example of creativity in Aboriginal culture (Layton 1998: 57–59). Besides providing an analysis of Tiwi culture, *A Death in the Tiwi Islands* (Venbrux 1995) also focused on its interaction with the state's criminal justice system. Interaction between Tiwi and the world surrounding them also marked Venbrux's subsequent work. In 1991, he introduced the Tiwi Land Council to descriptions of their ancestors by an expedition of the Dutch East India Company, dating from 1705. These first descriptions of a single Aboriginal tribe and interactions with the European crew for several months were important for the land council to obtain political leverage and secure a place for the Tiwi, engaging with Europeans long before Captain Cook, in national history. The Tiwi subsequently staged re-enactments of the 1705 coming of the Dutch, in 1995 and 2005, and created an award-winning documentary, entitled *The Tiwi and the Dutch* (Venbrux 2003, 2015).

The interest in how Aboriginal people engaged in intercultural exchanges and shaped their contemporary lifeworld by interacting with non-Aboriginal practices, beliefs, identities, and cultural forms continued to flourish in Nijmegen after the turn of the 21st century. However, this interest materialized through a choice of new research topics. In 2002, encouraged by Borsboom and Venbrux, Anke Tonnaer travelled as a master's student to Borroloola in the Northern Territory. Tonnaer turned her attention to the impact of Indigenous cultural tourism on the economic position of Indigenous Australians, as well as on their socio-cultural empowerment in contemporary Australia. At the time, tourism was only beginning to receive recognition as a topic worthy of anthropological interest and, aside from outstanding work by Jon Altman (e.g. 1988, 1989), few substantial studies into tourism on Indigenous lands had been conducted.

Tonnaer (2002), who stayed in the remote Gulf of Carpentaria for two months, studied interactions between tourists and Aboriginal people during a festival. This festival also enabled her to examine the performative politics surrounding the revival of the so-called 'Aeroplane Dance'. The dance narrated a local event of the Second World War, as seen and experienced by Aboriginal people, but had gained a strongly gendered innovation during the festival (Tonnaer 2011). After her ethnographic study in Borroloola, Tonnaer returned to Australia in 2004 to delve deeper in the intercultural dealings that Indigenous tourism increasingly generated. Based at Aarhus University, but in a cotutelle-arrangement with the CAOS department, in particular with her co-promotor Eric Venbrux, she wrote a dissertation on the performative encounter culture that the touristic meeting between Aborigines and tourists shaped (Tonnaer 2008).

As Tonnaer studied intercultural exchange within the domain of tourism, other Nijmegen-based students and researchers moved their attention to Australia's urban areas (e.g. Hulsker 2002; Riphagen 2008, 2013). This new approach to researching the dynamics of Indigenous livelihoods in postcolonial settler Australia was informed by debates about representation and Aboriginality that had taken place in Australia from especially the 1970s onwards. Aboriginal people living in the (outskirts of) metropolitan areas increasingly vocally criticized a variety of stereotypes about what supposedly real Aborigines looked like, how they lived, and where they lived. In the cities, Aboriginal people's calls against discrimination, for social justice, and for recognition of their unique identities grew more prominent. A new moment emerged that merged politics, art, activism and culture to create positive changes for people who had long been made invisible.

This increased visibility and recognition of Aboriginal people in the country's urban areas gave a new impetus to research in Nijmegen. For example, in 2002, Janneke Hulsker completed her doctoral research on the creation of a corporate Aboriginal identity by Aboriginal organizations in Redfern, a neighborhood in Sydney. In 2012, student Mascha Friderichs chose the city of Darwin to carry out research for her research master's in Social and Cultural Science on the use of sexual health services by Aboriginal adolescents in Darwin. Riphagen (2008, 2011, 2013), in turn, researched the photo-based art practices of four contemporary, urban-based Aboriginal artists. Her doctoral dissertation followed these artists as they traversed both Australian and international art worlds and examined how they engaged with subjects like identity, representation, discrimination, and art world politics. Riphagen's focus on Indigenous art was inspired not just by the aforementioned interest of Nijmegen-based researchers in interrelations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, ideas, practices, and beliefs, but also by her

supervisors' passion for art. Indeed, in Nijmegen, Indigenous material culture had long been a central research theme.

Aboriginal Material Culture Exchange and Museal Connections

Aboriginal material culture and, more specifically, art, form an important thread in the long history of colonial and postcolonial contact between the Netherlands and Australia. In the so-called museum period, from 1880 till 1920, cultural objects (such as spears, shields, and boomerangs) and photographs of Indigenous Australians were employed to demonstrate their status as the primitive 'Other' in the evolutionary schemes of the day. Photographs, emphasizing this by picturing the Aboriginal subjects undressed (Venbrux and Jones 2002), and clubs, spears, and similar type of objects (Venbrux 2003), formed valued acquisitions of the National Ethnographic Museum in Leiden at the time. During the twentieth century, however, the stunning visual art related to Indigenous cosmology and ritual would become an important vehicle for increasing the visibility of Australian Aborigines. It was an important means for Indigenous Australians to express and maintain their identity, to get others interested in their worldview, and for their emancipation in wider society. When major art institutions began to show Aboriginal art too, first in 1958 but even more so from 1988 onwards, their emancipation in this respect was undeniable. In the public eye they had made the leap from 'primitive' to 'civilized'. Aboriginal artists from remote and urban areas, including ones with art-school training, rose to prominence, nationally and occasionally on the global stage. In line with the Nijmegen tradition of engaged scholarship, these emancipatory aspects of Aboriginal art production captured the interest of several researchers in Nijmegen.

In the 1950s, Van der Leeden became a curator in Leiden. During the 1960s, he collected cultural objects in Arnhem Land and made a collection of photographs of contemporary cultural life. Moreover, he put together a collection of bark paintings produced by artists such as Yirawala, who later became known as the 'Picasso' of Arnhem Land. This important early collection of Aboriginal art (see Van Holland 2000) is also testament to a change in the appreciation of Aboriginal cultural objects. From 1969 onwards, Van der Leeden instilled an interest in the cultural dimension of Aboriginal life in his students.

In Nijmegen, the Ethnological Museum, linked to the anthropology department, staged several exhibitions on Aboriginal Australia – made possible by curator Fer

Hoekstra. In 1982, an exhibition entitled *Tradition with a Future* displayed photographs and texts from Ad Borsboom's fieldwork. On the eve of the bicentennial of the European invasion in Australia, the museum hosted the exhibition *The First Australians* (1987–1988). It showed a collection from the Australian Aboriginal Arts Board (that subsequently would be the core of the blockbuster exhibition *Aratjara* in Düsseldorf, Germany). The Tiwi were at the heart of not one but two exhibitions in Nijmegen. In 1993, Venbrux and master's student Dorothé Broeren helped create an exhibit with photographs and findings from fieldwork in the Tiwi Islands. A decade later, the Ethnological Museum hosted the touring exhibition *Kiripuranji: Contemporary Art from the Tiwi Islands*.

The Ethnological Museum in Nijmegen was not the only institution in the Netherlands that focused on Indigenous art. Indeed, one of the key locations for the display of such art was the Museum for Contemporary Aboriginal Art (AAMU) in Utrecht. This privately funded museum was established in 2000 (Venbrux was on the foundational board) and existed until 2017. For almost two decades, the AAMU exhibited different forms of Indigenous art to a mostly European audience and attracted Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australian artists, curators, art writers, and collectors to its openings and events. The AAMU formed a hub for exchange between the Dutch and Australian art worlds and facilitated relations between several CAOS researchers – most notably Borsboom, Venbrux, and Riphagen – and Aboriginal artists and art professionals. Venbrux (2001, 2002, 2006, 2017), who had turned his attention to the history of Tiwi art as it developed in interaction with the wider world, saw his efforts in the field of the globalization of Indigenous art intersect with the AAMU's work. Riphagen, who saw the artists central to her research travel to the Netherlands to exhibit in the AAMU, made this museum and its framing of Indigenous art central to her dissertation (Riphagen 2011). These connections between Nijmegen-based researchers and a Dutch cultural institution exemplify both a broader interest in Aboriginal Australia (on the part of the general public) and a commitment to build networks with partners outside of the department.

Exchanging Knowledge, Building Networks

As a hub for scholarship on Aboriginal Australia, Nijmegen hosted different initiatives and events to facilitate exchange between scholars. In the early 1970s, Van der Leeden already established the *Australian Aboriginal Studies Working Group* for anthropology students (Meurkens 1998: 97, 166). The Working Group reported on

its activities to the *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies* (AIATSIS) (Van der Leeden 1971). During the 1980s, Nijmegen became home to the *Centre for Studies of Oceania and Australia*, which coordinated the regional interest and published a newsletter. The appointment of Ton Otto and Toon van Meijl in Nijmegen – who had both obtained their PhD at the Australian National University, Canberra – further strengthened the international academic quality of the Centre. After a landmark Nijmegen conference of *European Oceanists* (ESfO), in 1992, this transformed into the *Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies* (CPAS). Since 2007, CPAS has published the Oceania newsletter, edited by René van der Haar.

The *Centre for Pacific and Asian Studies* engaged not just researchers based in the anthropology department but also scholars from departments across the University in Nijmegen and at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, located on campus. At the Max Planck Institute, Stephen Levinson and John Haviland conducted anthropolinguistic research and demonstrated the absolute orientation in spatial description in the Australian Aboriginal language Guugu Yimithirr (Queensland) versus the relative orientation in the Dutch language (Levinson 1997; Haviland 1992, 1998). In addition, anthropologists David Wilkins (1993) and Thomas Widlok (1997) conducted research among the Arrernte in Central Australia and at Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia respectively.

As researchers across different departments and institutes in Nijmegen stimulated each other through a shared interest in Australian Aboriginal studies, long-standing relations between Nijmegen and Australian institutes also provided a source of motivation and dialogue. A special bond developed particularly between several generations of Nijmegen-based anthropologists and Prof. Jon Altman, who founded the *Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research* (CAEPR) at the Australian National University and spent most of his career conducting research with Aboriginal Australians in Arnhem Land. It was Altman who welcomed students from Nijmegen who travelled to Australia to work on their theses and provided them with advice and connections. At CAEPR, several PhD researchers from Nijmegen became embedded as visiting scholars and received the opportunity to engage in academic conversations with Australia's leading scholars in Aboriginal studies. Altman, in turn, also visited the Netherlands where he presented seminars about his latest research (on the intersection of anthropology and economics), took part in PhD defenses, and provided constructive feedback on research findings by CAOS scholars.

The links between Nijmegen and Australian universities also led some Dutch students to pursue careers in Australia. Kim de Rijke, who completed a graduate degree in anthropology in Nijmegen, became a lecturer at the University

of Queensland. With Australian colleagues, De Rijke (e.g. De Rijke et al. 2016) currently pursues topics in Australian Aboriginal studies that have also been of concern in the Nijmegen tradition. Former student Mascha Friderichs is now a lecturer in public health at Charles Darwin University. The cross-fertilization between researchers in both countries with a dedication to understanding and explicating Indigenous traditions, identities, beliefs, and practices has thus been a productive one.

Conclusion

The University of Nijmegen has prided itself as an emancipatory university. It was established a century ago for the suppressed Catholic population in the Netherlands. Even today the majority of students are first-generation students. But the urge to be not only scientifically relevant but also socially relevant has become its mission. When we look back at some fifty years of Australian Aboriginal Studies in Nijmegen, we see that this twofold mission of emancipation and engaged scholarship was embraced right from the beginning and has been remarkably consistent over the years.

Since the first observations by the Dutch East India Company of what came to be known as Arnhem Land up until now, there has been a strong interest in and sustained connection between the Netherlands and Australia. Over the course of the past fifty years these ties were particularly developed academically in Nijmegen, regarding the life worlds of Australian Aborigines. Much committed work has been done to help change the image of Indigenous Australians from being as (Ig)Noble Savages, sitting lowest on the social-evolutionary ladder, to being socio-culturally resilient and globally recognized First Nations peoples. In the past decade, the strong regional focus on Australia has been let go in Nijmegen in both teaching and research. However, against the background of the mounting ecological crises there is a growing re-appreciation of Indigenous epistemologies on how to live with the more-than-human world. Furthermore, Aboriginal long-term relations and nourishing of the ancestral realm, honoring connections to both past and future, may once more attest to the impact of Australian Aboriginal life-ways on how we in the West think and act. A new chapter to this historiography might perhaps be waiting to be written.

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