

# Aboriginies Fight For Equal Rights

This account of the educational programs in Australia and New Zealand as they relate to the Aboriginies, the country's minority race, comes after a three-month stay in both places by Ms. Humphrey.

## Part II

I followed Norma Williams to the high school where teen-agers poured eagerly into their pre-fab meeting place with Ms. Williams. Interestingly, they eyed an ornately carved and painted wooden sculpture that was passed around, an art memento of yore. One of the ideas about which they talked excitedly was that of publishing a community news letter. The tall, striking daughter of a teacher's aid cornered me and confessed, "I can't wait to leave here." She just didn't like school. No particular reason other than, "the whites call us names behind our backs."

A parish priest noted that "the racial blend in classes works well until teenagehood, then the diverse groups withdraw into their own structures for courtship." Upon meeting the history teacher, I remarked, "There is the person you ought to key in on," for a more rounded perspective. "Oh, we've gone above him," Norma boasted, referring to the consultative group's hotline into the Department of Education. And he nodded approvingly. Even the Minister for Education, Mr. Paul Landa, recognizes the need for the aborigine community to be involved in the preparation of seminars, school courses, teaching materials and resources.

"The situation in relation to the education of children is grave," Mr. Landa admits. "Only 2.3% of those entering high school progress on to the higher certificate, as compared with 30% non-aborigine." Clearly neither group is very motivated. But more disturbing are the fiscal records that show a 35% decrease in commonwealth funding for minority education in the state of New South Wales.

Across the Tasman Sea, 1,300 miles away, in the same hemisphere, is New Zealand, a country where I felt the welcoming arms of mother around me. Australians and New Zealanders are intrinsically different people, except they are both English speaking who grow up singing "God Save The Queen," and the early pioneers subjugated a native brown skinned people. To one land came the unwilling, convicts and guards who met an aboriginal people and nearly destroyed them. To the other land came classes of free settlers, sealers, whalers, traders, evangelists, who met a polynesian race and (in time) linked arms with them. Hot and boisterous one, cool and quiet the other, according to the intuitive description of travel writer Beth Bryant.

It was sometime between the 10th-12th century that Maori tribesmen began migrating from a common Polynesian homeland, somewhere in the Tahiti Island group, to settle in the country now known as New Zealand. Until \_\_\_\_\_, the "strong, rawboned, well-made, active people," as described by Captain Cook who lifted the clouds of obscurity from their hideaway, enjoyed a placidly hedonistic tempo. They were masterful warriors who wallowed in intertribal warfare as if it were a fine sport. The influx of British settlers wrecked the same cultural havoc as in other parts of the then newly discovered world, claiming the land for King George. Maoris were introduced to the concept of sin and punishment after death their lack of shame and easy sensuality was supplanted with christian guilt. Worse of all, the authority of ancient gods lost its sanction and the once cohesive society began to decay.

In 1900 their numbers were down to 42,000. The loss of their land and martial power seemingly robbed them of their will to live, to reproduce. They were dying off rapidly through epidemics, alcoholism, defective diets and a strange, tragic, general melancholia. The upswing came...in different ways for different people, but generally involved facets of education. I was beginning to think this was a repeat of the Aborigine's plight in Australia, and in many ways the struggle is similar, but a rare religious imperialism, firmly rooted throughout New Zealand, provides the saving grace. In the agricultural center of Hamilton where carefully tended gardens front each private home, a farm-girl clued me in. "I've noticed," she said, "that those Maoris embracing Mormonism are a confident, more progressive lot."

The idea piqued my interest, so I telephoned the Church College of New Zealand, one cold, rainy August day. Through persistence my line was eventually connected to that of Dr. Bomi, the church's biggest, personal success story. He agreed readily to my interview suggestion, and managed to find a free hour within his jammed-packed schedule. The chunky pieces of heavy wood furniture, wall plaques commemorating his successes, his expensive suit, shirt and tie, dwarfed the actual man, who was seated behind a mammoth, ordered desk when I entered his office. Reaching deep down to draw from a commonality of oppression, we fell merrily into conversation.

"Ours is not unlike the American black's problem," he said referring to those he met at Provo University in Utah. Assertively he proclaims that New Zealand is one land with two equally valuable cultures. "The difference between the two groups is that we are not steeped in a tradition of academia. We have had to start from behind square one." Out of a population of three million, Maoris number approximately 10%, yet the public education system made their language punishable in school. The authorities claim their intent was to get one majority as fast as possible. Maoris paid a steep cultural price. Now the times are changing and the system is trying to undo the harm.

In marked contrast, the Mormons did not segregate themselves as the Europeans did. Mormon missionaries lived with those among whom they proselytized, they learned the Maori language and taught its cultured worth. Dr. Bomi, a high school drop-out in the mid 50's, was struck by the ease with which the clean-cut American sect moved in his circles. When the Church College of New Zealand was built in 1958, he was doing menial labor in Auckland. Missionaries were looking for students for the new school in Hamilton, so he gathered his belief in himself and enrolled in a seminar class. The experience gave his self image a boost and he earned a scholarship to



Brigham Young University in Hawaii, then later transferred to Provo University in Utah. Says he, "My feelings of self worth grew as my success experiences grew." He completed a BS in math, an MS and PhD in Education Administration. "I saw that I could compete with other academics without fear and trepidation," says the small man behind the wide, oak desk. From his educational odyssey he learned there are no stops, except within the Maori himself. "We are limited in our own minds as to what we can do," confessed this self-made man who is striving to develop a professional base among his people. He tells them there is no use trying to fight society, the whites are here to stay. "Some

would call me an Uncle Tom," he continued in an obvious referral to the violent outbreak at a hearing conducted by the Race Relations Board. The undercurrent against Bomi, by groups voicing opinions on Maori issues, was short of his being lynched. Like some black leaders of the American south in the 60's, he is estranged from his race by his success. But it doesn't stifle his tongue. "The reality is that learning Maori culture won't get you a job, you still have to compete." In his present assignment, administrator of Church College, he takes the word to school kids around the countryside who have no access to the caring, Mormon See Page 17

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