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"Bushfires Unite; Floods Divide": the Cultural Context of Disasters

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Towards the end of my 1987 year of fieldwork in the Forbes district, central western New South Wales, I jokingly commented that I needed a bushfire or a flood to see how social relations really operated. In August, 1990, while experiencing the peak of the winter's flooding on the property where I now live, I was reminded of my previous comment and asked what insights the floods had given me. While I pondered, a long time resident of the district who had experienced the three major floods of the latter half of the 20th century (1952, 1974 and 1990) commented: 'Bushfires bring people together; floods divide them.' Not yet having experienced a local bushfire, I was nevertheless impressed by this aphorism and its apparent suitability to some aspects of what I had seen. When invited to contribute to this conference, I consulted my newspaper file 'natural disasters' which consisted almost entirely of clippings covering the 1983 bushfires of South Australia and Victoria, and the aptness of the saying reverberated. My decision to take the maxim as the theme for this paper was clinched when I read Poiner's (1985) paper on bushfires where again the imagery of a unified community in the face of the destructive threat of fire resounds strongly. Yet flooding can be just as awesome and costly as fire. Why is an opposing imagery evoked for floods?

In this paper I examine the metaphors of unity and division in fire and flood firstly through the print media and then, in relation to flooding,

through people's experiences of and reflections on the 1990 floods in the Lachlan Valley. I argue that the metaphors applied to fire and flood have more to do with the identification of these as quintessentially Australian rather than prompted from some kind of essence of the phenomena themselves. The oft-quoted poem, 'My Country' by Dorothea MacKellar, continually reminds us that fire, flood and drought are natural to Australia. Australian totemic identification with all things and creatures natural and national is well-known and widespread (Lattas, 1990; Morton, 1990). The metaphors of unity and division predicate identity to those experiencing these uncertain events (Fernandez, 1986) rather than referring to the disasters themselves. They are drawn from understandings of what social relatedness is all about in Australia. Fernandez argues that metaphors are more than mere descriptions of one domain of experience in terms of another. There is movement in metaphor he says. Metaphors move us emotionally through their connotative feeling content; they are persuasive. But as well, he (1986: 20) suggests that people '. . . may hold to predications which cause them irresistibly to organize their world. . .so as to facilitate or make inevitable certain scenarios.' There is much to suggest that this is so in the case of fire and flood.

The Media Imagery of Bushfires

Although beginning with an aphorism spoken in the moment of crisis, a review of media coverage discloses the generality of unity associated with bushfires. Unity is conveyed through imagining a national unity; nationalist ideology is evoked through images of and metonymic association with Anzac. Mateship, diggers and battles were referred to explicitly in reports on the 1983 South Australian and Victorian fires. These fires were truly horrific but not the only ones to be so treated. *The Herald* (Melbourne; 15th January, 1985) reports the Victorian fires of 1985 through the following image:

> Maryborough. The little digger - this town's marble sentinel to the spirit of ANZAC - has just spent the night with a few new friends. . . . Three dads . . . brought their families to safety. Then, like the mates of that little digger so long ago, they went to the front. . . .'

City newspapers make the most explicit references to Anzac in their metaphorical equation of fire with battle but the rural press is not exempt. *The Land* (29 November, 1990: 6), reporting on the November, 1990 bushfire which swept across and burnt out 126,000 hectares of 'prime Riverina grazing country' referred to the efforts to control the fire as a 'battle'. The content of Anzac and hence its engagement as a mode of

interpreting *this* battle resonated strongly in one short paragraph: 'A wind change later in the day turned it north where it was eventually brought under control by an army of volunteers and tankers from as far away as Sydney and northern Victoria.' One of the factors which makes Anzac an appropriate symbol of national unity is that the Australian contingent was made up of young men from all over Australia who voluntarily gave their lives for the country. The spirit of Anzac is known to sum up the spirit of Australians - generous in the giving of life and help to others and battling against the odds. And the Anzac spirit, for Australians is the ideal of human spirit (Kapferer, 1988). One Riverina fire victim reflected on the generosity he received during and after the fire: 'The human spirit is alive and well in the bush,' he said (*The Land*, November 29, 1990: 7).

Such selfless giving is accompanied by a particular form of cooperation, one which recognises no social differences among men. A column appearing on the Friday after the Black Wednesday (1983) South Australian fire expressed this understanding:

> Bushfire is but one of the facts of life in Australia. Mateship is another. . . . On Tuesday I heard at least two people snarling about trade unionists. I had one abusive phone call about bosses and politics. There were no trade unionists in SA on Wednesday or, if you prefer, we were all trade unionists (*The News*, Adelaide, February 18, 1983: 4).

Along with the metaphor of war and Anzac, media coverage of bushfires reports on property losses. Often such reporting is accompanied by a photograph of the owner(s) alongside the ruins. The stories are very individualised and personalised, with liberal quotes from the victims and fire-fighters of their feelings now and at the time of the loss and threat, with detailed accounts of actions they and others took. The victims are identified as ordinary Australians, capable of feeling terror, family members, property owners. It is for the protection of people like these that fires - and wars - are fought by one's fellow man. Such stories evoke much sympathy from those only imagining the disaster through the media. Perhaps Anzac associations heighten this feeling for the donations of food, clothing and household items flowing in from those unaffected are typically mountainous.

Finally, newspaper coverage of fires gives some minimal attention to blame. *The Land's* (November 29, 1990: 6) lead story on the Riverina fire headlines: '$5m damages bill from cigarette-butt bushfire'. Significantly, I think, this is the only mention of blame in this fire. Informants in the Lachlan Valley tell me no word of blame is ever levelled when district men rush to aid in controlling a fire.[1] Although some fires in the bush are started

1 I was told recently, but not by a farmer, that a group of farmers in one NSW area sued another farmer for fire damages but only after they were satisfied the accused had sufficient public liability insurance to cover damages claimed.

by lightening, more often they begin with farm machinery of one variety or another or with back-burning or fire-break burning out of control. City media coverage of suburban bushland fires provides some contrast to the passing allocation of blame by the rural press in respect to the rural fire. Adelaide's *Sunday Mail* (February 20, 1983:1) carried the headline: '*The Hills fire victims* PAY THEM TO GET OUT' with the story content, 'People and machines bring fire. You can't say the thunder of heaven opened up and started all this. It was people and they're criminals . . . ' The 1983 South Australian fires were followed up by at least a year of court battles during which Electricity Trust of South Australia and the Stirling Municipal Council were held to be responsible for fires in the south-east of the State and in the Adelaide hills respectively.

The levelling of blame in bushfires converts the 'natural' event into one of human responsibility and evokes the notion of the autonomous individual lying at the core of Australian egalitarian (Anzac) cultural logic. Blame, then, does not contradict an emphasis on unity. Police often charge individuals for deliberately starting fires especially in national parks and bushlands near cities. Adelaide Hills residents have suggested bushfire brigade members start fires so that they may engage in the masculine battle to put them out. Whether or not the metaphor motivates individuals into its performance in these instances, commonsense thought has it as a possibility.

Blame and responsibility figure far more visibly in flood discourse than with bushfires. This higher profile perhaps provides the grounds for the aphorism in the title of this paper. The question must be why are the accents of unity and blame (or division) separated out over two different forms of 'natural disaster'?

Flooding in New South Wales

Flooding in the state's central west turned out to be a persistent feature of the winter of 1990. After months of very little or no rain, the heavens poured buckets upon the north-west of the state first and then on the 19th April, upon districts further south, with some areas receiving falls over 200 mm within twenty-four hours. These incredible deluges were not repeated in such concentration on the plains for the rest of the winter although varying rainfalls occurred. But heavy rain persisted intermittently through August in the tablelands, the catchment areas for the dams heading the different river systems of NSW. Burrendong Dam feeding the Macquarie River system and Wyangala Dam feeding the Lachlan River system were particularly hard hit

resulting in high levels of discharge from the dams at times throughout the winter. However, persistent rain also meant run-off from creeks and higher level country feeding into the rivers below the dams. The flat terrain on the plains, rapid waterlogging and less than adequate drainage across the floodplains kept water standing, to be added to with each additional rain or dam discharge. Forbes and country downstream from the town experienced 6 official floods between April 24th and mid-August, the last with the highest levels - the Lachlan river peaking at 10.64 meters, officially the second highest flood on record. All roads into Forbes were cut for a week and farming areas to the west, after the Jemalong Mountain range (25 kms west of Forbes) and stretching to Condobolin (100 kms west of Forbes) were isolated for longer.

The first wave of reporting on the Central West flooding focused on the exceedingly heavy April rains. The media gave accounts of innundated farmlands, stranded and drowning stock. Some personalised accounts with accompanying photographs of suffering stock appeared before the potential and then actual crisis of the Nyngan flooding took precedence. The 'battle' to save Nyngan was the only flood story told in the imagery of Anzac. The 'army of volunteers' working to re-enforce the town's levee banks received the appellation 'heroes'. A short editorial (Western Magazine section of the *Forbes Advocate* 30/4/90), entitled 'Flood Disaster shows Community Spirit', carried these words: 'Faith in the human spirit was restored for me last week when so many people in the region rallied to help the Nyngan residents during their flood ordeal . . . It certainly takes a catastrophe to bring a community together and that has happened in Nyngan and Dubbo.' Volunteer workers and generous donations also received praise in this article.

The mythopoeic source of the sentiments expressed in this editorial received explicit disclosure in the *Forbes Advocate* (3/5/90:1) with the following statement: 'Forbes community united last week to battle flood waters in a spirit of mateship and defiance. This indomitable spirit of the early settlers, of pioneers, gold miners, bush-rangers, the dispossessed and the battlers will be celebrated this weekend during the Forbes Ben Hall Folk Festival . . . ' As the statement reveals, this comment appeared not in the context of reporting on the floods, but in a story advertising the forthcoming Festival. Although such formulation apparently seemed improper for flood reporting, the statement clearly shows that journalists at least are able to readily identify unity in battle with legends of national identity. People do reflect upon images informing experience.

The common experience of Nyngan and Forbes residents was not so much the flooding but rain. Intrusive water on the ground which people had

directly experienced as falling from the sky was distinguished from subsequent flooding, referred to as river flooding and identified as coming from the dam. '. . .The April flood was the result of the dam discharging 55,000 megalitres' said the same *Advocate* on 2nd June. This distinction was not only made in the media; all people I spoke with distinguished between rain and river flooding. But the press emphasized the factor of human management and responsibility in floods. Under the caption, 'Office-block engineers unsung flood heroes', *The Land* (9/8/90:2) informed that it was the engineers of the Parramatta office of the NSW Department of Water Resources who '. . .largely determine the volume and duration of the flood flows that course down the state's regulated rivers below the storage dams.' Floods, in the imagination of those who live through them, are caused by human agency and they are events to be managed. The Warren Shire President, expressing his bewilderment at the media invasion of the town, said, the 'Warren "crisis" to flood-hardened locals was nothing but a routine and well-planned emergency, albeit more severe than usual' (*The Land,* 9/8/90:109).

Media coverage on river flooding adopted the style of business reporting, presenting 'factual' and technical news such as river heights, road closures and quantitative information on the number of houses flooded, evacuees, business premises affected, estimated crop and stock losses. Rare were the stories of personal anguish, photographs and interviews with victim families and property names. Where individual farmers were identified, a positive story line accompanied the matter-of-fact report such as in the article captioned: 'Looking now to a "really big" spring' in which the farmer says, 'You will always make more money out of flooding than you will out of drought' (*The Land*, 9/8/90:3). I was told of one farmer, both relatively new to the Lachlan Valley and to farming and who suffered severe loss in the floods, telling his story to the media. Long-time farmers privately shook their heads in dismay at his naivety; 'He'll never be able to sell that property now', they said.

Flooding cast in terms of human agency, which in western society generally, but in Australia in particular, takes the understanding of practical reason (Sahlins, 1976), or the rationally functioning individual who is responsible for his actions (Zubrinich, 1990), evokes a complex of images of which management is but one term. Hierarchy and hence social differentiation, individual responsibility and blame are others. These too received mention in the local press during and in relation to flooding. Accounts of angry motorists in confrontation with police over road closures appeared as did the reporting of abuse thrown at police and SES workers by locals who remained at the pub whilst waters rose outside, the latter

entitled: 'Louts abuse SES staff' (*Forbes Advocate*, August 7, 1990: 3). In this reporting context, praise of volunteer workers served more to accentuate difference than to imagine community unity. Nor were the police and SES the only 'authorities' to be differentiated from farmers, business people or town residents: the Council blamed residents for illegally pumping flood water into the sewage system. The Shire Council was blamed for building structures altering the course of flood waters in town 'causing' unexpected flooding of some houses. Similarly, illegal levees directing water onto previously unflooded farmlands were photographed. At different moments and for different reasons, the Pastoral Protection Board, SES and the Department of Water Resources all came under accusing fire for partisan decisions, favouring some individuals or sectors of population at the expense of others. The cumulative picture presented was one of opposition between government bodies (the authorities) and socially differentiated sectors of the population, distinguished by occupation, residential location, legal and moral behaviour.

Natural Disasters and Natural Sociality

We have seen that fire accrues to it the metaphor of Anzac and social unity. The evocation of Anzac and hence mateship in the context of talk about bushfires defines the latter as natural in the way that mateship is natural to Australians. In his analysis of Australian nationalist ideology, Kapferer (1988:158) argues that mateship is '. . .an egalitarian principle of natural sociality and reciprocity between equals. It is the basis of natural society, the way society forms, independent of artificial mediating institutions such as those implicit in the concept of the state. The force of mateship, of natural sociality intrinsic to human beings, is most powerful between those identical in nature and acts cohesively upon them. Mateship as natural sociality bridges any unnatural or artificial difference.' That mateship or natural sociality should be seen to be appropriate to bushfires fits with Kapferer's writings of the former in social contexts predominantly male; bushfires are fought mainly, and conventionally, by men.[2]

The same metaphor extends to rain flooding and it does so I suggest through an elision of notions of the natural. Floods caused directly by rain accrue no blame whereas fires do but this blame may be accentuated or played down. Floods by rain do not entail human agency; they are of nature.

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2 Audience members at the . . . Contextualising Disasters . . . Conference noted that female volunteers and indeed female units in bushfire brigades are now common and on the increase in Victoria. The female brigade unit is in an area where the men now travel to another locality to work during the day.

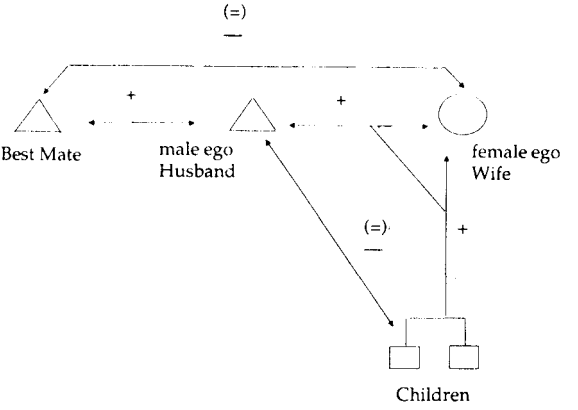
Bushfires, however, may not always be of nature but they are by virtue of the metonymic association with Anzac, natural to humans - Australian men. Thus the events of nature and of the human natural may be conceptualised and organised by the same metaphor.

Media coverage of river flooding confirms the maxim 'floods divide' through accentuating social division in terms of authority or management. Here flooding appears artificial rather than natural, evocative of the 'artificial mediating institutions' Kapferer understands as implicitly set in structural opposition to mateship. Hence he argues, 'The Anzac tradition incorporates the logical sequence: . . . hierarchy (inequality) : equality :: society (constructed and imposed) : society (natural, mateship) :: individual (artificial) : individual (authentic)' (Kapferer, 1988:198). An investigation of media text alone would tempt the adoption of Kapferer's structural model as an explanatory tool for the flood metaphor. However, paying attention to people's experiences of flooding and the ways in which they reflect upon them suggests 'division' has additional meaning to the one of structural opposition between 'natural' and 'artificial'. A comment by one woman in my area, west of Jemalong, shows this very clearly. She was interviewed by a local journalist coming through the waters with the shire supply truck during the worst of the August flood. The interview took place at a prearranged 'depot' where all persons, mostly farm women, expecting supplies from town congregated. During these supply drops, people who normally did not socialise with each other met and talked whilst awaiting the truck. The woman said: 'Floods bring people together in a sense; droughts isolate people further.' Although she spoke of unity, she did so in comparison with drought, not fire, and what she had to say strongly suggests she was not referring to just the physical marooning by water in her reference to isolation.[3] Droughts present no physical barriers to people's movements. During the floods, people on the same 'islands' were not physically cut off from one another but generally people remained at home. Floods, like droughts, isolate or divide people into families.

Ernst (1990:117) cogently argues mateship and the family as 'the minimal set of relations that must be considered as a configuration in understanding the bases of Australian notions of human relatedness' and sociality. This contrasts with Kapferer's insistence that only mateship generates notions of sociality, including its obverse, artificial sociality. Further, Ernst sees mateship and the family as one complex, rather like Lévi-Strauss (1985)

3 This comment also suggests a gender differential in the experiencing of flooding which might extend to fire and drought as well. The further implication is that . . . bushfires unite; floods divide . . . belongs to a male ideological construction as indeed do notions of national unity.

speaks of the 'atom of kinship'. This one set composed of the relations between the relationships composing mateship (male-male relationships) and those of the family (male-female relationships) generates understandings of what is natural to humans and what transcends human naturalness (Ernst, 1990:117). Essentially, what Ernst argues is that relationships within the family are conditioned by the co-existence of mateship and vice-versa. Further, his argument suggests that the conceptualisation of supra-familial relationships such as class, neighbour, or institutional relations are in some way derivative of this minimal set. In regards to the everyday engagement in social practice of notions of mateship and family, Ernst notes they are often kept separate in time and place. When they are evoked together in practice, he argues, tensions result in predictable ways - eg, when the two are mediated by a transitive party. I reproduce Ernst's diagram here for clarity.



+ = a perceived close and positive relationship

- = an ambivalent or negative relationship resulting from competitive jealousy over 'attention' from mediating (defining) person *in the first instance*

Figure 1

The Cluster of Relationships Involving A Male's Mates and Family

That 'floods divide' results from the overlay of the second factor generating basic understandings of sociality onto floods, the family. At the same time, however, floods are not as isolating as drought, according to the woman's comment. Although I have not researched drought, I suspect more emphasis might be given to that total family isolation in its metaphoric expression. If I am correct in my speculation, this would result in the three disasters 'natural' to Australia forming a continuum interpreted by Australian notions of sociality: mateship : bushfires :: family : drought with floods and a combination of mateship and family in between. According to Ernst, such a combination contains the possibility of tensions which is a dimension of 'division' revealed in press reporting on floods and in the actual situations the reports refer to.

The Family and Management in Floods

People's reflections on floods focus extensively on the family. Talk of isolation is one indication of this. Repeatedly people reminisced after the floods about families split - farm children boarding in town during the week to attend school; wives staying in town for their employment whilst husbands remained on the farm - or couples thrown together. Every farm woman I spoke with after the waters had receded completely from the roads mentioned the joy of being able to drive to town alone again. Jokes circulated about grounds for divorce due equally to separation or continual company. As well, women were noticeable by their presence in assisting in flood work, filling sandbags, monitoring levee banks and even freely voicing opinions about weak points in the levees. *Couples* came to help neighbours. Homes in town were defended as castles; I was told of one man who threatened the driver of a shire truck with a shotgun because the waves from the truck threatened to send the waters over the floorboards of his house.

This talk of family appears at odds with the media accent on management but the latter term can refer to male authority within the family. This is perhaps most clearly evident on the farm where there is no sharp delineation between business and family. On the farm, men were more concerned with the management of the entire property than with flooding of the house but it is not sheer chance that highly commercial properties take the title *family farm* in Australia. In the Lachlan Valley, properties are better known by the farmer's name. A farmer's identity rests with his land and family history associated with particular blocks of land assumes great importance, becoming testimony to the good management and the self-sufficiency of the autonomous individual, the current owner/farmer, usually male. Land is usually inherited in the male line. All this gives a patrilineal tinge to the

construction of family and in the context of the family farm, places the man as manager of the business *and* of the family. This emphasis on the authority of the eldest male, husband and father, owes in part to the definition of family in Australia as the locus of civilising control (Kapferer, 1988; Baggett Barham, 1988; Ernst, 1990). Whereas women are understood to be moral guardians and even civilizing agents for their husbands particularly from the view from within the family, male authority ultimately reigns in the domestic sphere (Zubrinich, 1990; Williams, 1981). The settlement and development of Australia by farming *families* is understood to have been part of the civilizing process of Australia. Older farmers still speak of themselves as pioneers. So although the notion of the family equated with civilizing control derives partially from understandings about women, the control aspect can also refer to the male authority. Management is about the exercise of authority. The emphasis on family farm management defines the business and the family as one self-sufficient unit.

Cooperation within this unit derives from understandings of complementary gender difference characteristic of the division of labour in most households. Absent from the Australian cultural construction of family, in contrast to American family ideology as described by Schneider (1968), is a notion of 'diffuse, enduring solidarity' which Schneider classes as a kind of love. At the most, in Australian ideology, this love is lop-sided: the wife owes unconditional love, loyalty and service to her husband as the mother owes these to her children. Husbands are meant to 'honour' their wives as I heard recently in a marriage service. The lack of a notion of reciprocity between equals within the family is reflected in Ernst's diagram. It is also lived out on the farm. Typically, wives do not participate fully or equally in farm management and they are arbitrarily called upon for farm work. The predominance of similarity and difference as the basis for cooperation and the absence of notions of sharing within the family plague attempts at cooperative efforts in Australia generally when family, or indeed women, figure in the context. Significantly I think, Australia has the lowest rate of success of any country in regards to farm marketing cooperatives.[4]

Farmers do achieve cooperation on a one-to-one basis between farm managers. They cooperate in the repair of boundary fences, borrowing and lending of machinery, the provision of access routes, adjistment and sometimes even water during drought but all take the meaning of self-interested business transactions between self-sufficient units with direct

4 Information given by Jim Manwaring, NSW Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, a cooperative marketing specialist at the Grain Legumes Seminar, 13th February, 1991, Forbes, NSW.

payment or barter. It is generally understood that such cooperation must exist for survival in the bush; restricting these efforts to pure business transactions between managers assists in keeping neighbourly relations on a cordial level through distancing the family from the male domain of business.

Floods often call for cooperation between farms but, as I have argued, the family is highly visible in these events. The resulting effect highlights management and makes the conceptualisation of cooperation in this type of crisis different from its meaning during fire. One farmer called upon neighbours at least twice during the heaviest flooding to help save levee banks. He defined himself as more self-sufficient in comparison to a farmer downstream who used the army and SES volunteers, flown in by army helicopters, to shore up levees on his property. When I reminded the farmer of the assistance he received, he claimed the help was motivated by self-interest. Had the levees burst on his property, the neighbouring properties would have been flooded. All who worked on these levees were being self-sufficient and hence, cooperation did not detract from his self-sufficiency.

This farmer was not only claiming self-sufficiency; he was additionally defining natural sociality as inapplicable in this situation. The crisis had to do with farm management. The employees neighbours brought with them were thus defined as part of the farm unit for which they worked, under orders and not volunteers. Also an offer of assistance from several workers from a near-by hamlet was declined.

In spite of defining the cooperation engaged here as different from that entailed under mateship, the situation retained some of the structural features described by Ernst in his diagram. The farmer's spouse helped in the levee work and other women also came to help. When the neighbours arrived, the farmer absented himself from the levees to attend to stock; he even handed over the management of the levee work to a male neighbour whose banks formed part of the same levee system downstream. In taking these actions, he removed himself from the mediating position in the set of relationships: manager - manager - family. I have used the terms 'manager' and 'family' rather than 'male' and 'female' because the emphasis on management during floods restricts the range of identification of 'those identical in nature'. The high visibility of the family plays a part in effecting this curtailment because family locates the male within the human transcendent, or within the social system (Baggett Barham, 1988).

That family operated here was further evinced in the selection of neighbours who came to help. Of course, those assisting were neighbours not cut by flood waters but not all mobile neighbours arrived nor were all

called upon. Nor were all those who did assist from properties threatened by the potential break in the levee. Similarly, not all farmers whose properties were at risk offered help. Common class membership and kinship constituted, in the first instance, criteria for selection, self or otherwise. Class, differentiated on the basis of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) or specifically in this region by language usage, education (private or state) and bodily control, is understood to be (re)produced in the family. Neighbouring farm families not of the same class also heard the word and came to help. Interestingly, I have been told the assistance by one of these farmers produced much tension in his family.

Provision of adjistment during the floods also followed restricted paths, offered by extended family, close mates (also often kin in this district) or family friends typically of several generations duration. Family friendships tend to be among those identified as of the same class. Similarity again. And I have been told that family members are most like each other because 'they share the same genes'. Even though accompanied by cash payments, and sometimes by application for a cartage subsidy, such arrangements evinced self-sufficiency, external assistance as a category being denied.

Through restricting cooperation, actually and conceptually, the world appears divided into independent, autonomous family units, nuclear or extended. Family receives open acknowledgement but mateship does not. Conceptually, manager-manager relationships substitute for mateship. This appears to restrict tensions or to allow for easier management of them amongst those cooperating although those tensions may be thrown back into the family. Mateship and family appear to be kept separate through this selective cooperation although flood events resemble in some of their observable features accounts of bushfires and even though in structural terms, actual interactions evince tension and tension-avoiding tactics.

Lost in this conceptualisation is a view of the far-reaching interdependencies otherwise highly visible in flood crises such as government assistance in weather forecasts, the collection and reporting of river heights, providing sandbags, arranging for supply drops and subsequently in road repair funding. But equally, few outside the family know the actual costs borne by the farmer due to flood damage. Additionally, pride in self-sufficient management, and the absence of public assistance for farmers suffering flood losses of stock, fencing, crops, pasture, provokes little compassion from farmers for those flooded out in towns.

Disputes in Floods

A world divided into families only partially accounts for the division metaphor of floods although I have argued the centrality of family linked to management and coupled with demands for cooperation to be at the base of divisions referred to in the press. I want to close this paper with a discussion of two disputes arising from flood related matters and consider the tendency to dispute in floods. Each of the disputes engaged the New South Wales Department of Water Resources (henceforth DWR), a government regulatory body which ideally treats every individual and business or family unit equally. In this ideal construction, there is an attempt to equate the self-sufficient family unit with the autonomous individual of natural sociality; the patrilineal tendency especially in the family of family farms contributes to this attraction. This conceptualisation however, does not succeed totally for families because of the relationships they embody and because of their product, class. Class differences are human-transcendent, distinguishing them from the human-natural differences of the autonomous individual of natural sociality.[5] In flood situations regulatory bodies make decisions which are seen to favour some to the cost of others; these decisions are interpreted in class terms. Whilst I am not denying the operation of class power which indeed is flagrant in this district, I am suggesting that the metaphor of social division for floods deriving from the emphasis on management and family, understood to produce class, acts to encourage such an interpretation and ultimately, to encourage conflict.

Both disputes occur west of the Jemalong Mountain Range and a brief description of this area helps clarify the problems. Just to the west of the range is Jemalong Weir, diverting water to farmlands lying in the Jemalong and Wyldes Plains Domestic and Stock Water Supply and Irrigation Districts (henceforth J&WPID) which is managed by DWR. The irrigation scheme was established in the 1940s principally to allow viability for closer settlement blocks resumed in the area. The J&WPID now contains 160 properties which use the irrigation in a variety of ways but principally for lucerne farming, stock water supply and irrigated pasture. None of the original settler families remains and what were closer settlement blocks now have been subsumed under other properties pre-existent in the area or sold to 'new-comers'. The original stated purpose of the irrigation scheme has long been forgotten by some dryland farmers who express hostility towards

5 Just as there is a tendency to attempt to convert the family to the status of the autonomous individual, so too is there a tendency to attempt to treat class as natural by reference to family . . . inherited . . . traits.

the irrigation area. The J&WPID is seen as a privileged area, largely to benefit half a dozen families I was told by just such a farmer living to the east of Forbes. The six family names he mentioned are commonly identified as forming part of the 'gentry' of Forbes Shire. In the J&WPID there are at least 12 farmers individually owning properties who bear these six names and some of the properties support two to four nuclear families. True, these properties are large but there are non-'gentry' farmers here who own equal-sized blocks and others who own smaller blocks but make more money. Similarly, some new owners of settlement blocks have been incorporated into the 'gentry'.

The Lachlan River in flood breaks from the actual river shortly past the Weir to flow south, through the eastern part of the J&WPID, leaving the latter to continue its course into Lake Cowal, before turning north again, eventually feeding back into the Lachlan around Condobolin. Lake Cowal is a natural depression, often containing fair amounts of water but only filling during floods. During the 1990 winter it doubled it's size. The lake was settled as private farming property early this century when dry (Water Resources Commission, n.d.:23). To some extent, those farming the lake area accept living at an accumulation point in the flood course as the land, post flooding, 'is a pretty good haystack' (Lake Cowal farmer). 'Non-gentry' own the lake area proper but 'gentry' dot the periphery on irrigated and dryland properties.

Long standing disputes on water-related matters exist between farmers within the J&WPID and between Lake Cowal and irrigation farmers. Threats to sue a neighbour over irrigation run-off crossing a property boundary frequently circulate. More heated, long-standing arguments surround levee banks upstream from Lake Cowal and the use of the flood course as a drainage channel. This drainage causes severe waterlogging on sizeable areas in Lake Cowal. In floods, Lake Cowal farmers claim more water reaches their properties faster than if the levees were nonexistent. They attempted to block the construction of the levee system when it was built in the 1960s and again protested when these levees were re-enforced after the 1974 floods, to contain 1974 flood magnitude. These farmers express the belief that there will never be a repeat of the highest recorded flood of 1952 (10.97m) because of the management of Wyangala Dam. Levee license applications are currently being submitted for the levee system and objections, even court action, by Lake Cowal landholders are anticipated even though the levee system conforms to the Floodplain Guidelines published by the DWR (n.d.).

The anger over the levees feeds into discussions for drainage schemes proposed by the DWR for the area. Lake Cowal residents refused, at the

time of writing, to commit themselves to discussions about district drainage. An irrigation landholder characterised the resulting line of division as 'the poor irrigation farmers against the wealthy graziers (Lake Cowal farmers)'. 'Grazier' and 'farmer' describe class categories, not farm enterprises. Those actually attending the meeting where this was said were non-'gentry' Lake Cowal farmers and a class mixture of irrigation farmers according to local categories. The inversion of categories here held the 'gentry' to blame. This seems to be generally the case. In a related dispute between a farmer, his two neighbours, and the DWR, the farmer publicly blamed the DWR for storm water ponding on his property but verbally attacked the wife of his 'gentry' neighbour in town. In accounting for the incident, she attributed motives to his behaviour grounded in perceived sleights of class discrimination.

The events giving rise to these disputes were of nature and historically contingent but they are interpreted as products of managerial actions, at government or family farm level. In our culture, someone is to blame in such cases. Blame was levelled at a government agency and the 'gentry' and divisions were understood to form along class lines. The linkage between management and class is via the family. In direct relations between neighbours, the family, represented by the woman, was targeted. Class, produced by the family in commonsense understandings, substituted for the family in the tensions resulting from the ideal transitive mediation of the regulatory body. Class divisions remain one of the primary factors of disunity in Australia and perhaps are, on occasion, symbolic of divisiveness generally (Kapferer, 1988). But I have argued here that class is not the motivator of dispute in flood crises. Rather I am suggesting that there seems to be an absence in Australia of a notion of cooperation on a broad scale other than that contained within mateship. When the family is noticeably present in the same context, such cooperation seems likely to fail. This may be particularly so for flooding, identified as it is with understandings of cultural identity. Specific disputes cannot always be said to be culturally motivated, but there remains the focus of attention during floods on divisions. People understand flooding as socially divisive and once tensions are recognised, the metaphor appears to assume an independent life, commanding actions. As we left the meeting I have referred to, the farmer I live with commented: 'It looks as if they are just looking for something to fight about.' Social division is a metaphor for floods. Metaphors are not simply words; they are schemas for action (Fernandez, 1986; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Johnson, 1987). Apt metaphors are appropriate because we are seen to embody them in practice.

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