

Visiting Aboriginal shares concerns of Indians

by Cynthia Stowell

His words are those of the American Indian. He speaks of the exploitation of resources on sacred lands, threats to self-determination, the ravages of alcohol, the struggle to retain cultural traditions, poor housing, high unemployment.

But the words are spoken with an Australian accent. The speaker's face is darker, his hair curlier. He calls himself "black", his people are collectively called Aboriginals, and his sacred lands are the "outback" of Australia.

Frank Chulung, an Australian Aborigine, was a visitor to the Warm Springs Reservation last week as part of a ten-week study trip to the United States and Canada. One of ten chosen by the Australian Department of Education for an Aboriginal Overseas Study Award, Chulung is studying indigenous legal aid systems, tribal courts, civil action programs, and treaties and land rights.

Back home in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia, Chulung, 40, gave up a life of heavy equipment operating to become a field officer for the Aboriginal Legal Service. Even without formal training, Chulung is entitled to advise and represent Aboriginals in court and assist them with problems of a legal or semi-legal nature.

While in Warm Springs, Chulung participated in the American Indian Lawyer Training Program sessions at Kah-Nee-Ta and observed the Tribal Court. In Australia a new system of courts is currently being introduced employing Aboriginals as Justices of the Peace, but tribal courts as Indians know them do not exist.

Chulung's next stop is Window Rock, followed by Albuquerque. He hopes to visit the Seminoles in Florida and plans to do it all by bus—to see as much as he can in his first trip abroad.

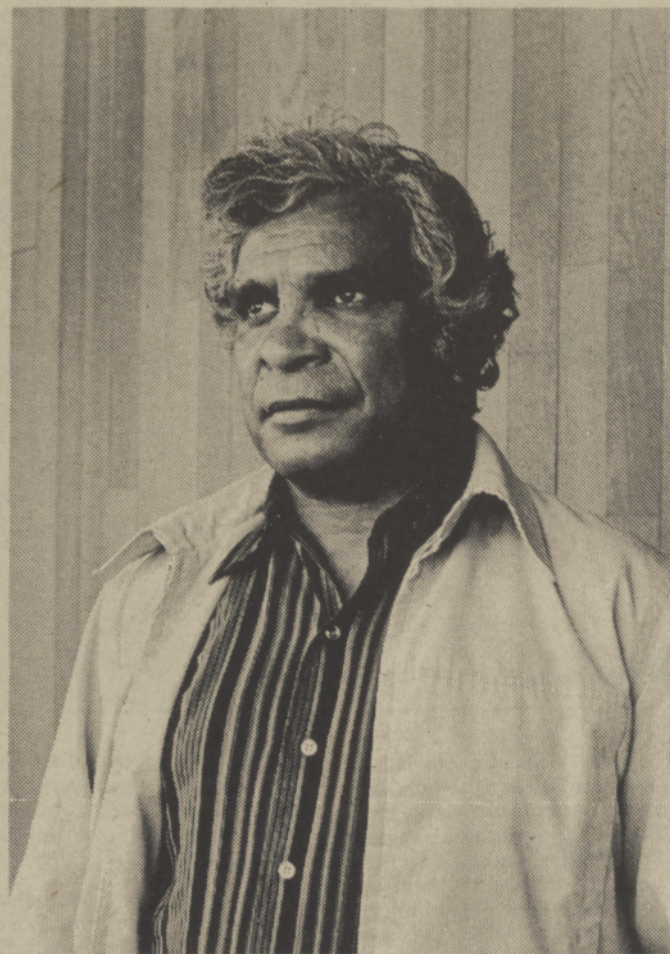
"Very distasteful" attitude

Driving through the open, arid country on the reservation, Chulung commented several times how much at home he felt. But he was also acutely aware of the differences between the Warm Springs Reservation and the Aboriginal reserves and communities in the Kimberley. The visitor

Krulitz won't help in land fight

Interior Solicitor Leo M. Krulitz announced he will not ask the Justice Department to go to court on behalf of the Shinnecock Indians who are seeking restoration of 3,150 acres in the town of Southampton, New York, which they claim is their aboriginal territory lost in violation of federal law.

The Shinnecocks asked the Interior Department to help them recover the land, occupied by them since the early 17th century and secured to them for a period of 1,000 years in a 1703 lease from the town of Southampton. In 1859 the New York legislature authorized the Town to negotiate with the Shinnecocks for the relinquishment of the



was particularly impressed with the degree to which Warm Springs administers its own economic and governmental affairs.

In Australia, self-government is unknown to the Aboriginals, whose sovereignty has never been acknowledged with treaties during 200 years of European settlement and expansion. Nor do they have a substantial land base, a cornerstone for Indians' political and economic identity. While a 1977 act proclaimed Aboriginal ownership of 18% of the Northern Territory, Aboriginals in the rest of the country reside on the "fringes" of communities or on state-owned and controlled reserves.

Progress has come only recently to the Aboriginals. Chulung explained that his people did not have the right to vote until 1967, at which time they were also counted in the national census for the first time. Soon after, an Office of Aboriginal Affairs was created in the Department of Environment, Aborigines and

land. The Shinnecocks gave up the land in return for a small reservation.

The Shinnecocks argue that since the federal government was neither involved in nor consented to the transactions in which the land was lost, the transactions are void under the Non-Intercourse Act of 1790.

In a letter to the Native American Rights Fund, which is representing the Shinnecocks, Krulitz explained that there has been no formal determination by the federal government that the Shinnecocks constitute an Indian tribe. Until there is, he said, the Interior Department cannot acknowledge a trust relationship with them under the Non-Intercourse Act.

Art, and not until 1972 was the separate Department of Aboriginal Affairs formed.

According to Chulung, the Labor government made some sweeping changes in the early 70's, including the transfer of responsibility for Aboriginals from the states to the federal government, establishment of an Aboriginal Land Fund, the prohibition of discrimination against Aboriginals, and encouragement of self-determination. But the present Liberal government's attitude toward Aboriginals is "very distasteful," said Chulung.

At the end of a gun barrel

When Chulung recounts injustices suffered by his people, his words fly rapidly and easily. At the tip of his tongue are some interesting statistics: Australia was once inhabited by a half million aborigines but only 160,000 remain. Aborigines now comprise 1.2% of the population but account for 13% of the prison inmates; in Western Australia, they are 2% of the population and 30% of the prison inmates. The Kimberley region is 55% Aborigine but the legislative seat has always been filled by a non-Aboriginal.

As Chulung tells it, the history of "white man's" contact bears an eerie resemblance to North American history. "We have lived off the land like the American Indians," said Chulung, describing the harmonious relationship Aborigines enjoyed with their environment. "Our land was taken away at the end of a (gun) barrel," he continued. Missionaries forced their Christian and "civilized" ways on the natives, causing the traditional culture to go underground. And the greatest destruction was wrought by white man's alcohol.

"Alcohol has definitely taken its toll," remarked Chulung,

who quit drinking and smoking almost four years ago. Much of the crime among Aboriginals is alcohol-related, and health problems accompany the abuse of alcohol.

In the unbalanced and unfamiliar environment created by rapid modernization, Aborigines face many social and physical problems. The average life expectancy of an Aborigine is only 38 years, and those short years are not easy ones. Infant mortality is five times more frequent than in the rest of the population and malnutrition is widespread, noted Chulung. Families are plagued with crisis while unemployment soars. Many Aborigines are homeless or poorly housed. Few finish school and a large percentage are illiterate.

Government policies that have vascillated among, extermination, separation and assimilation, as in the United States, have rested temporarily on efforts to assist Aboriginals with these problems, while preserving cultural integrity. Housing is a government priority, loans are available to Aboriginals who want to start business, and education is free. Pastoral stations (cattle ranches) have been purchased for tribes to operate, an occupation popular among Aboriginals.

Sacred land

But the struggle for land is consuming the energies of many Aboriginals, including Chulung. "Every bit of the land is sacred," he believes, and therein lies the "key to cultural pride, self-respect and dignity." Chulung was the first chairman of the Kimberley Land Council, formed during a traditional dance gathering in May of 1978 for the purpose of regaining lost lands and protecting existing reserves.

The scenario is familiar. A resource-hungry nation is looking to traditional Aboriginal lands for new developments, and ironically many of the developers are American. But without treaty rights, the Aboriginals are nearly powerless to resist. Chulung bitterly describes a setback experienced a year ago in the Kimberley. Fighting proposed diamond mining and oil drilling in the sacred "mythological" lands of the Noonkanbah pastoral station, Aboriginals were told by the state that they did not have the final say on entry into their homelands.

"I didn't get politically-minded until three years ago," said Chulung, but now he hopes to increase the political awareness and involvement of all Aboriginals. "Through the ballot box we have a lot of power," he said. Putting an Aboriginal in the Kimberley legislative seat is one of his goals.

Along with political sophistication, however, comes the threat of lost cultural traditions, noted Chulung. Already the Aboriginal population is divided between the "tribal traditionalists" with their time-honored rural lifestyles and the non-traditionalists who have migrated to the cities and forgotten their tribal affiliations. If there is a way to continue dancing, speaking the native tongues and living off the land while participating in the mainstream, Chulung and others want to encourage it.

Chulung's presence in Warm Springs was a reminder that American Indians are not alone in their struggle to shape a future. Their faces are different, their culture distinct. But on the opposite side of the world Australia's Aboriginals are dreaming the same dream.

This poem, which was among the literature Chulung brought with him, resembles sentiments expressed by American Indians.

*The land is my mother culture
It is my spirit world
The land gives us our life.*

Our tribal law was there from the beginning. The land, the emu, the Kangaroo, snake, fish and turkey have all been put there.

*This land is the womb—to us it is everything. For us, the rivers, the land all has meaning. We have our tribal law. We call it *daragu*. This is our tribal land, our tribal story. This law stays in the ground.*

We can't change it. We've got it in our flesh today—in these marks on our bodies. We own this land, and we follow the dreamtime story.

When the whiteman first came to this land, they saw the Aborigine painted up in his dreamtime story, and they shot him in his dreamtime.

The whiteman says he owns this land. But he can't read that land, those sacred areas, that tribal law ground.

The whiteman has taken our land away. Now we are fighting to get back our land. We will put our heads together, and speak with one voice, to ask the government for land rights. For, without our land we are nothing. When the whiteman tries to destroy our land, we cry.

We cry in our hearts for our country. You mine our land. You break our bodies. Whiteman took the land away from the Aboriginal people before.

What more do they want?