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The first Australians: Kinship, family and identity

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ABSTRACT

This paper on Aboriginal families and kinship begins by briefly discussing what Aboriginal life was like before 'British invasion' in 1788. The author then examines current Aboriginal family life and how Aborigines have retained their Aboriginal identity. Issues addressed include: the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal mothers; the importance of the extended family in child rearing; and the centrality of Aboriginal family and kinship to the survival of Aboriginal culture.

Until 1788 Aboriginal people had developed their culture in comparative isolation for millennia. There has been much speculation about the exact population at the time of British arrival. In 1928 Radcliffe-Brown developed an estimate of about 300,000 at the arrival of the Europeans, while Professor Noel Butlin (1983), a geographer and demographer, estimated the population at about one million.

The First Australians collectively spoke some 600-700 different dialects from at least 250 language groupings. They called themselves by specific Aboriginal names and were associated with particular territories in the land. Throughout the continent there was a characteristically Aboriginal way of life conducted within a common cultural framework but with much diversity. People in one region generally stayed within their own country and identified themselves as a particular group by name, such as Walpiri, Tiwi, Gamilaroi.

Aboriginal people regard the land as a spiritual phenomenon. It is believed that the earth was formed by the world's creative powers which appeared mysteriously moving over the surface thus shaping the landscape. As Rickard (1988) says: 'Above all, Aboriginal culture was characterised by a fusion of the material and the spiritual'. Each phase in life was marked by ritual and ceremony to highlight the occasion.

Initiation ceremonies were complex, with many stages and rituals, and in some areas circumcision forming part of the ritual. Boys were taken away from the main camp (to be away from the women and girls) for initiation to be conducted by the powerful man of the group. Although less is written about women's initiation, it was part of the law to signal that girls were of a marriageable age (Brough Smyth 1878).

At Encounter Bay in South Australia it was observed that Aboriginal women due to give birth were moved away from the main camp accompanied by other women to assist the impending confinement. As soon as the child was born the father was called to see his daughter or son, bringing with him wood, water and food. Children in Aboriginal families are, in the main, well cared for and spoiled by all in the immediate group.

The association of Aboriginal people with land was disrupted as the British invasion took effect. Aboriginal groups had to struggle to adapt to new situations under extremely adverse circumstances. For example, traditional hunting grounds and sacred sites were selected for sheep and cattle grazing, and waterholes were contaminated. This alienation of Aboriginal people from the land disrupted ceremonial life and eroded Aboriginal identity.

Kinship and family

The 1986 Aboriginal Womens' Task Force found that a fear of modern Aboriginal society is that the children will lose their cultural beliefs and not identify strongly enough with Aboriginal society: 'As in other societies children are vitally important. For us they are the future and hope. We cannot afford to lose our most precious resource. It is necessary that we instil in them a sense of pride in their history and culture so that they too have the chance, like other Australians, of knowing who they are and why. (p.27)

Women in communities still following the old ways are concerned that the increasing use of English will diminish the use of Aboriginal languages. Speaking a mixture of Aboriginal and English languages is not acceptable to some.

The loss of traditional skills is another concern. Women generally are concerned that all the traditional skills and knowledge of the past be passed on as they have always been. The dispersal of Aboriginal people and families across greater distances is seen as an impediment to the older women continuing to pass on knowledge to their immediate younger generation.

Children are the responsibility of the entire family in many cases, rather than just the biological parents alone. Many Aboriginal people have been brought up by members of the family other than their immediate parents. This is still a widespread practice today.

Many grandparents carry out the responsibility of 'growing up' Aboriginal children today. Grandparents are, as they have always been, very important members of the Aboriginal family unit and are often relied upon to play a major part in child rearing. This results in children being encouraged to think family. Some have responsibility at a very early age for the care of siblings, and as a result they have a large degree of personal autonomy.

Older people pass on the traditions of their people from generation to generation and accordingly their role is strengthened and their position more respected as they get older. Their opinions are sought after, listened to and heeded.

However, often Aboriginal women rear children alone. They do so for many reasons including broken relationships, the high mortality rate of Aboriginal men, and the high proportion of men in prison.

In the past there have been many attempts to take Aboriginal children from their families, and the issue of the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their Aboriginal mothers is one of the blots on the social welfare history of Australia. More recently, concerns have been expressed about past fostering and adoption practices and the impact on Aboriginal children, their identity and cultures. As stated at the First National Conference on Adoption in 1976:

'Any Aboriginal child growing up in Australian society today will be confronted by racism. His best weapons against entrenched prejudice are a pride in his Aboriginal identity and cultural heritage and a strong support from other members of the Aboriginal community.'

Nearly all Aboriginal families know of relatives who were removed as children and put into European custody. Aboriginal people refer to them as 'taken' or 'stolen'. The effects of such policies and practices are still reverberating in the Aboriginal community. Aboriginal adults who were taken from their families as children experience difficulties adjusting. Some have a crisis of identity because they have been raised to believe that they are white, to think white and to be like white people. Later, many desire to join their own people, and to gain acceptance in Aboriginal society they have to learn new values and new rules and, in some cases, to overcome negative views of Aboriginal people and their culture.

The removal of Aboriginal children from parents has been official policy in all states of Australia since the so-called Protection era. Missionaries established the practice in the early 1800s to instil Christian virtues of obedience, punctuality and religious observance in Aboriginal people.

It was not until the 1950s that a reduction occurred in enforced separations. It was still believed that non-Aboriginal parents could more quickly assimilate a black child, so great pressure was placed on young Aboriginal mothers to have their children adopted by non-Aboriginal people.

As adults, many of these people have sought, and some are still seeking, their families. They have learned of their Aboriginal ancestry but they seek to know their families, who they really are and what it means to be Aboriginal.

ABORIGINALITY AND ABORIGINAL IDENTITY

In Australian towns and cities Aboriginal families retain, to varying degrees, the kinship system of their ancestors. Many Aboriginal people have non-Aboriginal spouses and live in situations where they are embedded in non-Aboriginal society. The family structures of urban and rural Aboriginal people is therefore different from those of some more traditionally oriented groups, although mixed marriages occur there too. In the south east of Australia, though Aboriginal people have had longer exposure to Europeans, they are an identifiable, separate cultural group. Aboriginal people, in the main, wherever they are, distinguish themselves from other Australians and are linked together by a sense of belonging to a locality and to an extended family.

Aboriginal families in urban and rural areas have developed a culture of their own through family, community and organisational structures. These structures give psychological and physical support and provide a sense of security.

Generally, anthropologists have attached no significance to kin and country in relation to the dispossessed mixed race Aboriginal people. Despite this, Aboriginal family and kinship remains central to the survival of Aboriginal culture. Schwab (1988) commented on the nature of Aboriginal identity in Adelaide:

'Identity among most Aborigines in Adelaide is clear and explicit because it is based in large part, as it was in the past, on a local ground of kinship, sense of self, as well as relation to, and identification with, other Aborigines in Adelaide' (p.79).

Aboriginal people are always interested in who a person is and where they come from. They feel more comfortable when they can relate via a common friendship or relationship. It is easy to be proud of one's heritage when one knows the history of one's ancestors.

Aboriginal people often express the view that history gives them something to identify themselves with and to know that they do have a family, their own people. When they are with fellow Aborigines they feel a certain bond, a certain magic, and part of a great family. It is a wonderful feeling: a feeling of great security, joy and pride.

Since 1973 Aboriginal people have been required by the Federal Government to meet its definition of Aboriginality if they wish to participate in programs for Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders. The three following conditions have to be met in order to participate in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander schemes:

- To be of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.
- To identify as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.
- To be identified by the community as being a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait descent.

Aboriginal people who cannot identify their genealogy do not meet the government definition and may experience some insecurity about their own identity. A knowledge of genealogy makes an Aboriginal person more secure because they know the location of their ancestral lands as well as the history of their people.

Aboriginal people feel compelled to gain acknowledgment of their prior occupation, their sovereignty and the recognition of a continuous and adapting Aboriginal identity. Europeans have based Aboriginal identity mainly on race, whereas Aboriginal people speak of 'my people' representing the notion of peoplehood. Aboriginal culture is based on a distinctive cultural heritage which incorporates special meanings given to the land and its custodians. This heritage has been modified and has adapted in response to new knowledge and experiences brought by the Europeans.

An Aboriginal social identity is no longer an aspiration: it is now a reality, relevant to virtually all people of Aboriginal descent. Even though the content varies, there is a sufficient number of elements held in common by Aboriginal people to distinguish it. As Yami Lester (in Mattingley and Hampton 1983) says:

'Aboriginal culture cannot be separated from the land. On the land are stories. Aboriginal stories that explain why people, rockholes, the trees came to be there. The land is full of stories. Every square mile is just like a book, a book with a lot of pages, and it's all a story for the children to learn.'

Djinyini Gondarra, speaking as an Aboriginal Christian, said in 1984:

'To me as a black theologian, God is black as much as white. Why? Because God speaks our language, knows our culture and made this land we now live in and enjoy. If I am to have my true identity before God, you cannot lock me into white ways. You must give me freedom to be me. God has the same concern for the Aboriginal as for the white.'

This is not to refute that Aboriginal people and their culture today are affected by all factors prevailing in Australian society. Their treatment in Australian society of legal, health, education, technology and economic factors all affect the Aboriginal population. They place pressure on Aboriginal cultures, identity and spirituality and it is hard for some to retain their Aboriginality today.

Aboriginal people have formed organisational structures to meet their needs and serve as cultural symbols and, in at least one instance, proof of Aboriginal cultural continuity in the modern sense. In 1976, Justice Lush in a Victorian Supreme Court case about whether or not Aboriginal people still existed in Victoria, said that 'Aborigine' was a word probably used much more widely in Australia than in other English-speaking countries. He said that 'Aborigines' was used to describe 'persons in groups or societies irrespective of mixture of blood'. In the case of *Bryning, Re*, he found that Aboriginal people and their descendants continued to exist in Victoria and cited the existence of the Australian Aborigines' League from the 1920s as evidence.

However, Aboriginal culture and identity continue to be under increasing pressure. Aborigines are flooded with mass media and are themselves used to participating in western media forms. Aboriginal languages provide just one indicator of how Aboriginal culture can be diminished. Aboriginal arts and crafts are popular commercially but this commercialism may pose a threat to their traditional purposes and meanings.

The way in which Aboriginal Australians will choose to deal with these aspects of Aboriginal culture will serve to further shape modern Aboriginal identity.

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