



Families and cultural diversity in Australia

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by Eleanor Bourke and Colin Bourke

'When we are together we are happy.'
Geraldine Briggs in *The Wailing* (Rintoul 1993)

All aspects of Aboriginal society have been directly affected by British colonisation. Land use, law, spiritual beliefs and ways of life have been traumatised. Aboriginal society has felt the full force of the invasion and it is arguable that traditional Aboriginal family life and the supporting kinship structures have taken the maximum disruptive impact, especially in areas of greatest non-Aboriginal population density. This is particularly evident in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania, where some groups have disappeared completely and others have been dislocated and no longer use their languages.

We argue strongly that contemporary Aboriginal family values can be understood only by reference to the social organisation of and the beliefs which guided pre-colonial Aboriginal communities, and to the traumatic impact of European invasion and subsequent government policies.

Aboriginal family life has been irreversibly changed in most of Australia. Many of the changes have come about merely by the presence of Europeans; others are attributable directly to the colonisers' actions, which were aimed at taking control of the land, thus destroying family life as it existed in pre-colonial Aboriginal society.

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Despite this history, Aboriginal kinship and family structures remain cohesive forces which bind Aboriginal people together in all parts of Australia. They provide psychological and emotional support to Aboriginal people, even though they cause concern among some non-Aboriginal people who would prefer Aborigines to follow European social preferences for nuclear families with few kinship responsibilities. Aboriginal family obligations are often seen as nepotism by other Australians. The reality is that they are based on cultural values and issues involving kinship responsibilities which have to be met.

Many writers discuss the family but do not define it, and it is hard to find a definition to cover all groupings in Australia referred to as families. It is perhaps easier to say what a family ought to be, rather than what it is. Families by any definition are not static. As Greer (1984) notes:

... almost all discussions of the family founder because of the difficulty in deciding what the family is, as distinct from what it was or will be, because families are always building up and breaking down, acquiring new members by marriage and procreation and losing them by estrangement and death. (p. 222)

The definition of family for the national census is 'two or more persons, at least one of whom should be a person aged 15 years and over, who are related by blood, marriage, adoption or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household'. Such a definition does not fit the much more extensive Aboriginal concept of family. Lantz and Snyder's (1969) definition is more appropriate:

The family is a group of people who are related through marriage, blood or adoption; [are] involved with one another in their designated roles of husband, wife, father, mother, son, daughter, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, cousin, grandparent, and create and maintain a common sub-culture. (pp. 21-2)

This definition includes the nuclear family, which is invariably part of the broader extended family, and around which Aboriginal society, pre-European contact, was organised via the kinship system. Many Aboriginal families include non-Aboriginal spouses; this requires an accommodation

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by other family members. Such unions must have an effect on Aboriginal family values; however, in most cases, the non-Aboriginal spouse appears to accept Aboriginal family structures, while the strength of family ties enables such a spouse to be accommodated within the family.

Reid and Trompf (1991) note that 'the most outstanding aspect of Aboriginal kinship systems was, and in many places still is, the existence of whole classes of people identified by an Aboriginal person as his or her "brothers", "fathers", "sisters", "others", "husbands", "wives", or the various other classes of affines' (p. 82). These classificatory relationships, or variations of them, continue to govern Aboriginal social interactions. In addition, the authors noted that marriage in many Aboriginal societies permitted polygyny (multiple wives) and encouraged the levirate (remarriage of a widow to her husband's natural brother).

The report of the Aboriginal Women's Task Force entitled Women's Business (Daylight and Johnstone 1986) notes that:

Aboriginal values, beliefs, identity and language are developed and nurtured within the family. Keeping the family strong and healthy, both physically and spiritually, is vitally important to the continuance of Aboriginal society. Children learn early that to refer to their 'family' is to refer to the extended family. A typical Aboriginal family might include mother, father, several children, numerous aunts, uncles and cousins, a number of grandparents and several grandchildren. These family members are both real and classificatory. Kinship ties dictate a person's behaviour, rights and obligations. (p. 45)

Gray (1984), in a discussion of Aboriginal family formation and fertility, concluded that 'it can be readily agreed . . . that disorder in contemporary Aboriginal families is indeed a myth'. In addition he suggested that Aboriginal family formation was in itself an institutional prop for Aboriginal youth, particularly young Aboriginal women.

All members of a family undoubtedly have a different view of the family, depending on their age, their relationships with other families and their place in the family hierarchy. Despite this, each person can usually define the parameters of his or her family group (the size of which may vary) and this ability may directly reflect that individual's strength of identity as a

Statistical profile of Aboriginal families

Figures from the 1991 census indicate that Aboriginal families are readily distinguishable from other Australian families on some census measures:

- nearly one-quarter of Aboriginal families are one-parent families compared with 9 per cent of non-Aboriginal families
- almost 12 per cent of indigenous people live in a multi-family household compared with 1 per cent of non-Aboriginal families
- indigenous people (those of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent) are less likely to live alone (3 per cent compared with some 7 per cent of the rest of the population)
- less than 77 per cent of Aboriginal people live in private dwellings or flats compared with 97 per cent of all Australians
- nearly 20 per cent of indigenous people live in caravans or improvised homes, or camp out, compared with 2 per cent of all Australians
- while 28 per cent of Aboriginal people living in private dwellings are home owners or purchasers, this is less than half the national average of 67 per cent
- over 30 per cent of Aboriginal private dwellings are rented from public or community housing authorities, compared with around 2.5 per cent for Australia as a whole
- indigenous households average 4.6 persons, almost twice the Australian average of 2.5 persons

Some of the differences between Aboriginal families and other Australian families are clearly attributable to poverty, for example the type and standard of housing. However, other indicators may reflect a different set of values rather than a lack of financial resources. The definite tendencies of Aboriginal people towards multi-family households and more persons per household may well be based on more positive factors than poverty. For example, extended families living together increase numbers per household. The significant differences in the percentages of people from both groups-Aboriginal and other Australian-who live alone may also have a cultural foundation. Those indigenous Australians (nearly 20 per cent) living in caravans or impoverished homes or camping out may reflect a

desire to be more closely allied to family and place, as much as lack of money.

Aboriginal families show a distinct contrast with mainstream Australia on other indices also. The 1991 census figures showed that the Aboriginal population, since the previous census, had increased at double the rate of the overall Australian population, was more youthful than the overall Australian population (the median age being 20 years) and had higher birth rates and lower life expectancy than the overall population (ATSIC 1994).

Again, socio-economic factors and the contact history which Aboriginal people have experienced are partly responsible. However, it is likely that many of the differences have their origins in different cultural backgrounds, beliefs, philosophy, kinship, social organisation and childhood experiences which are still relevant today. The population increase reflects both higher birth rates and an increased willingness to identify as Aboriginal.

Philosophy and family

It is now well recorded (Berndt and Berndt 1988) that prior to the arrival of Europeans Aboriginal people lived in large extended families based on kinship, which provided for all aspects of social being and defined a network of interpersonal relationships with a behavioural code which enabled people to live in relative harmony with one another. Underlying the kinship system was a philosophy which sought balance between all things.

Every person's clan membership and place in the kinship system was determined at birth. This set obligations and codes of behaviour which were expected to be followed. Cultural, linguistic and physical boundaries linked the people into groups and it was kinship that allowed them to live in harmony. For Aboriginal people the whole of Australia was, and is, a vibrant spiritual landscape, albeit the responsibility of and belonging to various groups. This landscape was peopled in spirit form by the ancestors who had originated in the Dreaming. The Dreaming is not only a cosmology, an account of creation; it is also a cosmography, a description of how what was created became an ordered system or, more accurately, a moral system.

The stories of the Dreaming are, in a symbolic and somewhat poetic way, a philosophy in the guise of oral literature—a philosophy with unique morals and values. The stories set out rules of traditional kinship. The principles of

reciprocity and responsibility are central and are the bases of interlocking life spaces. Each person is connected to everyone else in the group by a range of responsibilities and obligations which lock them together as a social unit.

Aboriginal kinship systems are varied and complex. The values that regulate the systems relate to ancestry, marriage, generations, personal relationships and other categories which continue to place the individual in society. In all aspects of life, kinship determines rights and obligations and much of a person's behaviour in a variety of circumstances. Kinship is a social grid that defines people's identity in relation to one another, and to outsiders. Social groupings and divisions provide the framework for action in almost any circumstance.

Aboriginal values reflect all that has happened in the past. They evolved over thousands of years of traditional life. After two centuries of colonisation, many Aboriginal people continue to discuss their lives in terms of Aboriginal values, past shared experiences and obligations to the land.

Aboriginal history is based on the group and its continuity rather than on individuals. This was clearly demonstrated in traditional Aboriginal life where society had no hierarchy based on office, resulting in a lack of conflict over power. The great European contests for office and power had no parallels in Aboriginal life. This single fact resulted in a lifestyle in which stability was not rent by the thrust for power. The concept of a formal chief or authority figure ruling over others did not and does not fit with Aboriginal social organisation. There were no offices with power to stimulate ambition; no material rewards to generate greed. Among the rules of life laid down by the Dreaming were the ceremonies and rituals to be observed in order to maintain life on the land to which a person was born.

There was, however, respect for age. This was noted by white commentators: "Respect for old age", says Sir Thomas Mitchell, "is universal amongst the Aborigines"; 'The Aborigines everywhere, and on all occasions, pay great respect to old persons ... Amongst the Murray blacks it is considered a very great fault to say anything disrespectful to an old person. It is deemed a serious thing to say, Kur-o-pither-a-ka-wirto (you gray haired old man)' (Brough Smyth 1876, p. 137).

The first principle of Aboriginal societies was the preservation of balance, and arching over it all was the Dreaming. Aboriginal societies were based on the primary virtues of generosity and fair dealing. Nearly all social occasions involving goods-food, marriage, payments, intergroup trade-were based on reciprocity as a moral obligation and policies of equivalence and egalitarianism. There were times when food was scarce but Aborigines rarely went hungry. What food was available was always shared.

Aboriginal life stressed harmony and balance with the natural world. The antithetical approach of 'man versus nature' which has characterised European notions of progress has caused cultural discontinuities for Aboriginal people. Meaningful discussion has been difficult because of the philosophical and cultural differences between the two groups. Aboriginal communication and terms of reference lose much of their meaning when translated into English; nevertheless, they are very different, and include values and attitudes regarding the conduct of life.

Aboriginal philosophy appears to have had remarkable consistency with life as it was lived. The ideal and the real were practically identical in Aboriginal society. Conflicts between liberty and freedom, wealth and poverty, morality and amorality, class disputations and discontent with life were not part of traditional Aboriginal life. In common with other societies, traditional Aboriginal societies were based on a set of values which were not always articulated. Values, however, can be recognised by consistent actions or behaviours. Human behaviour is not mechanical; it incorporates a range of behaviours which reflects the society's base values. These styles of behaviour are manifested in many ways but they are shown in child rearing, economic activities and the methods of achieving social roles.

Strehlow (1956, p. 11) supported earlier observations of Aboriginal groups when he wrote that 'among the strangest ideals which sustained [them] were the principles of cooperation, not subordination; of differentiation, without inequality; of tolerance for the customs of other people in their country'.

Traditional values

Aboriginal spirituality is the pervading force in all Aboriginal life; it is everywhere oriented towards the basic issue of survival-spiritual and physical-as an Aboriginal Australian (Berndt 1974). Survival is a driving force in all societies and shapes most human activity; it is an implicit value.

Non-Aboriginals rarely see the spiritual and physical survival that Aboriginal Australians seek as different from what they seek themselves, but it is different. For Aboriginal people, survival is inextricably linked with Aboriginal-ity and Aboriginal identity. Family affiliations are an important feature of such identity.

Another Aboriginal value which is slowly becoming more appreciated by other Australians concerns the land. Aborigines throughout Australia have taken their relationships to the land very seriously. Their feelings and responsibilities toward it are highlighted through ceremony, the protection of sacred sites or their demonstrating for land rights.

Many anthropologists have reported that central to Aboriginal life is a respect for the dignity of people as human beings (see, for example, Strehlow 1956, pp. 6-11). In traditional Aboriginal society, people who show respect for others are considered to be mature adults. Behaviour is defined by kinship roles but in general the people who are quietly confident and sensitive are highly respected. Uncontrolled behaviour is not welcomed nor are critical comments of a personal nature.

Such societies are open societies, all conversations being carried out with visual contact. Where verbal behaviour is restricted, body language is used to give non-verbal cues as part of communication. Being based on kinship, these societies have a range of social mechanisms which involve rights and obligations for all. People's behaviour is defined in the group and the expectation is that people will behave towards one another in the prescribed manner.

Maintaining relationships within the kinship system depends to a large extent on reciprocity. Berndt and Berndt (1988, p. 121) discuss reciprocity from an economic perspective and note that it has often been referred to as 'primitive communism'. Some non-Aboriginal people claim that Aboriginal people have no sense of ownership. The comment 'Give them something, and you'll see someone else with it next day' reflects a lack of knowledge of social obligations and responsibilities within Aboriginal community life.

Aboriginal people do know quite well what ownership by an individual means. There are many items which are personally owned and treated as such by the owner and others in the community. At Aurukun in 1978, Francis Yunkaporta was showing one of the authors, an urban Aboriginal person, around the community when they came upon a sugar-bag lying on the ground; on it were some paints and brushes. Francis explained that

these objects were owned by his brother who had been painting there recently but had left to visit another community for a few days. The bag, brushes and paints would stay in this position until the painter returned; they were his and no one else would dare touch them.

It is true, however, that Aboriginal people do not value material possessions as much as do non-Aboriginal Australians. In all communities there is an arrangement of obligations, duties, debits and credits which results in all adults having commitments of one kind or another. Most of these are based on kinship. All gifts and actions are linked by reciprocity. Everything must be repaid in kind or equivalent.

Traditional society and family

The strength and associated obligations of kinship ties were central to Aboriginal life. In western societies the structures of social interaction and obligations change as individuals move out from the family into the wider society. Traditional Aboriginal society's family structures and the rights and obligations underlying them extended to the whole society. The relationship terms which applied in the individual's immediate family were used to identify all other members of the local group and even the total linguistic group.

Family and kinship

The kinship system was based on the equivalence of same-sex siblings. Using this principle, people who were siblings of the same sex were regarded as being basically the same. Two sisters were considered to be equal, so a child of one would have two mothers; and, similarly, with males, a child would regard both his biological father and each of his father's brothers as his father (Bourke, Bourke and Edwards 1994). Consequently, the children of either brother were identified as brothers and sisters rather than cousins. As all the members of the group were classified under the relationship terms, anthropologists have called the system the classificatory system of kinship.

In many Aboriginal societies personal names were rarely used. People were addressed by kinship terms. Some were referred to as being someone else's son or daughter. In such societies personal names were seen as being part of that person and were used with discretion. This was often manifested by a deceased person's personal name being removed from that language for some considerable time. Most languages had a word meaning 'no name' which was used to refer to those persons who

had the same name as a recently deceased person. This practice is still prevalent in many Aboriginal societies today.

As indicated earlier, traditional societies did not have a system of powerful positions of office: There were powerful people but they did not hold office in the western sense with the wide powers afforded by that office. Instead, kinship was the factor which maintained harmony and resolved conflict. When an individual erred, his or her actions were considered by the group. Certain members, because of their kinship relationship, would then be responsible for administering the punishment agreed on.

The importance of the kinship system was probably most visible in the manner in which it prescribed for people their choice of marriage partners. In some groups the most favoured wife for a man was a cross-cousin, namely a daughter of his mother's brother or father's sister. In other groups the cross-cousin's daughter was the most desired partner.

Each individual in traditional societies knew his or her kinship relationships. The teaching of these and the associated behaviour was a fundamental element of the education of Aboriginal children. The kinship system not only set out rights and obligations but provided individuals with a guide to their own behaviour. It also gave them confidence because the likely behaviour of others whom they might meet was also predictable.

Social organisation

In addition to the kinship system, Aboriginal societies also had a system of sections or sub-sections which compartmentalised the society further. These sections and sub-sections did not make social life more difficult as might be expected. They actually eased problems of social interaction by establishing rules which set down quite formally what was expected from one set of kin to another.

The basic division in Aboriginal societies was between two halves or moieties (Berndt and Berndt 1978). This division was significant in ritual, marriage and social interaction. Marriage partners had to be chosen from the opposite moiety. In some regions people divided the whole of life (themselves and the plants and animals of the area) into two categories. In addition, some Aboriginal groups were further divided into another four or even eight categories. All members belonged to one of these categories depending on their generation and descent. The categories or sub-sections had specific names and were widely known as subsection systems. Such systems enabled people to identify each other's place in

society. Maddock (1974) saw the systems as Aboriginal attempts to give order to the world: 'The classifications made by Aborigines appear rather to manifest a passion for order that has driven them to apply to the whole world a single system' (p.5).

Aboriginal kinship and social systems were complex, and they varied in different parts of Australia. They provided the base setting, the larger context, in which the self could achieve an existential reality. They accommodated the Dreaming and were seen as a legacy of the ancestral beings. They provided a code of conduct which was taught to the children as part of everyday living.

Childhood

The rules of behaviour for the Aboriginal child were largely the rules of kinship. Kinship recognition was introduced at an early age but in a deceptively casual teaching process. A baby was always in the company of other people, namely parents, grandparents, older siblings or other close relatives. Even before they could sit up, children were handled and talked to, using kin terms, so that they could learn to identify themselves and others nearby.

Other features of the child's environment were treated in the same way, with those around children pointing to specific objects and repeating the appropriate words. By the time children could walk they were expected to have a vocabulary of basic everyday words and be able to apply the main kin terms to the people they saw regularly. Mistakes were not directly corrected nor was the child punished for making them. The adult simply repeated words, phrases and the kin terms in the proper way, confident that they would be imitated. Both biological parents contributed to the child's growth from the very beginning of life but in different ways, with the mother dominant in the early years.

Aboriginal children were highly valued by their parents and the group. They were indulged and petted; Aboriginal parents usually found it impossible to deny children anything they wanted even if they should not have it. They adopted the easy approach, as people still do today, of keeping things they did not want touched away from their children. In return, the children were expected to respect, help and support parents in old age. In a non-materialistic society the acquisitiveness that complicates relationships between the old and the young in a wealth-oriented society do not appear.

Aboriginal children's education was predicated on their learning, by close attentive observation and continuous practice, the activities and rites of conduct which they would later follow as adults. In early childhood children also learned about their 'country', the land to which they belonged-their relationship with it, how to nurture and seek sustenance from it and, most importantly, how to interpret it. However, they did not learn everything about the land. Part of that knowledge was sacred and was learned as people moved through the rites of passage decided by those who controlled the knowledge.

As the family group moved about the land, its features, names and the people's role in the mythology of their country were told to the children and they learned those places which were safe. In this way they came to know the limits of their country and their right of access to land owned by others.

The core of the child's social existence was the family. It was the nucleus around which the larger kinship was built. The family gave children their early education. This stressed the need to know oneself, one's country and all aspects of the environment, who were kin, and the rights and obligations which arose from this knowledge. Human relationships were of the utmost importance, and orientation with people was more important than information.

Colonisation

On 26 January 1788 the Aboriginal world, which had successfully developed a way of life based on the family, both nuclear and extended, was invaded. Most of Australia was colonised and the indigenous inhabitants dispossessed before Federation in 1901. However, it was not until the 1930s that the last Aboriginal groups were finally enmeshed with non-Aboriginal society. The effects on Aboriginal family life cannot be overemphasised.

Since the beginnings of alien settlement in the country, Aborigines have been subjected to experiences that have overwhelmed them or left them stranded as isolated persons and groups within the wider society. Only a minority were able to remain in their own home territories, more or less intact traditionally. (Berndt and Berndt 1988, p. viii)

Colonisation took away the land and changed the roles of Aboriginal men and women. New laws, values and beliefs were introduced and enforced. An education program tried to instil Christianity. Self-reliance and self-esteem were destroyed as Aboriginal society disintegrated and traditional family life was no longer viable. The introduced diseases, alcohol, the abuse of women and the debasement of men left family life in tatters. The birth of mixed-race children was evidence of the breakdown of Aboriginal families. The imposition of Christian values and the deliberate removal of children from their parents ensured that Aboriginal families would never again be what they were.

In the 1850s and 1860s it was generally considered that Aborigines were dying out. However, by the 1880s it was apparent that the numbers of Aborigines of mixed descent were increasing and were regarded as a nuisance by non-Aboriginal people. So began nearly a century of persecution of Aboriginal people in the name of the state. State Protection Boards set about removing children from their parents so that they could be resocialised. The policy of protection also removed Aboriginal people from their land.

As described earlier, Aboriginal families saw their lands as a rich and symbolic spiritual world. Its loss was shattering to Aboriginal societies.

These were not simply rocks, trees and waterholes, but places which the great ancestors had created and where they still lived. The ancestors were the rocks, trees and waterholes, into which they had formed themselves after the creative period. (Broome 1982, p. 14)

The Aboriginal view of the world was that of a hunter-gatherer people deeply interested in the forces of fertility, which ensured their food supply and thus their survival. Each adult (men especially) after initiation had to perform 'increase' ceremonies each year at the sacred site of his or her totem to enable the life force to be released to ensure the perpetuation of the particular species of which he or she was part (Broome 1982). (The sacred place was determined by where a person's mother was impregnated by a spirit child of the particular ancestor of that place.)

After colonisation Aboriginal families lost their economic base but, even more importantly, their spiritual life was tragically broken and disconnected. No longer could people be comforted by the knowledge

that their relatives assisted the great spirits in maintaining the creation of life.

The introduction of diseases and alcohol ravaged Aboriginal families. Broome (1982, p. 55) noted: 'Generally alcohol had disastrous effects on tribal family life, and led to ill health and death. One-third of the Port Phillip Native Police were reported to have died from the effects of drunkenness. All European observers rated it high on the list of things leading to the destruction of the Aborigines'. However, in recording 120 deaths among the Bangerong people on the Murray, Curr (1883) attributed the destruction of Aborigines to disease. No deaths were attributed to alcohol.

It is uncertain how many people died from introduced diseases, but smallpox, venereal disease, respiratory and other infectious diseases combined with low birth rates to drastically reduce the indigenous population. The so-called childhood diseases of Europeans (whooping cough, measles and mumps) and influenza proved to be potent killers of Aboriginal people of all ages. Butlin (1993, p. 128) has developed projections of the effects of smallpox and venereal disease which indicate that by 1850 the indigenous population had decreased by between two-thirds and five-sixths of what it had been in 1788.

The loss of one or both parents was a great trauma for children. Butlin's projections indicate that possibly only a few members of an extended family would survive, to find themselves suddenly bereft and, through the actions of colonisers, without land. Aboriginal family life in such circumstances was reduced to a desperate struggle for survival. The feeling of security was gone. Stories could no longer be told around the campfire at night after a day's hunting, which itself had become a dangerous occupation. Instead, many of the adults who survived were destitute and their cultural traditions threatened with extinction. Blaskett (1979) reported that, such was the impact of colonisation on Aboriginal groups in Victoria, the Aboriginal population may have declined by 80 per cent in merely 18 years. Such decimation wiped out entire families and left others in disarray with their land gone, their customs and ways of life attacked, their beliefs ridiculed and their self-esteem shattered.

The ultimate attack on the family in Aboriginal society was the removal of children by Church and state. The separation of Aboriginal children from their families occurred in the nineteenth century but it was in the twentieth century that it became so destructive of family life. All the Protection Acts gave a 'Protector' the power to remove Aboriginal children from their

parents, and took away parents' responsibility for their own lives.

The Acts of Parliament in three different States give an indication of the assault on Aboriginal family life under so-called 'protection':

- The Aborigines Protection Act 1869, Victoria, gave protectors or guardians the power to govern over residence, contracts of employment and care, custody and education of the children of Aboriginals.
- The Aborigines Act 1905, Western Australia, gave the Chief Protector the power to be the 'legal guardian of every Aboriginal and half-caste child until that child attain[ed] 16 years'. The Chief Protector could manage the property of Aboriginals with their consent or without it 'to provide for the due preservation of such property', and no weddings of female Aboriginals to non-Aboriginals were permitted without written permission of the Chief Protector.
- In New South Wales the Aborigines Protection Act 1909 made the Board for the Protection of Aboriginals responsible for, inter alia, custody, maintenance and education of children of Aboriginals.

The 1911 report of the New South Wales Aborigines Protection Board clearly enunciated the intention of the state:

The Board recognises that the only chance these children have is to be taken away from their present environment and properly trained by earnest workers being apprenticed out, and having once left the Aborigines reserves they should never be allowed to return to them permanently.
(Edwards and Read 1989, p. xiv)

The officers of the Protection Boards had almost unlimited powers. Aboriginal parents had no redress against a bureaucracy which could remove children in the interests of their moral or physical welfare. Negative attitudes towards Aboriginals were so entrenched that by the 1940s children who were light-skinned enough to pass as white were sent to the ordinary child welfare homes and orphanages. Young Aboriginal unmarried mothers were usually pressured into having their babies adopted.

So successful was the policy to remove Aboriginal children from their families that Coral Edwards and Peter Read, in their research for *The Lost Children*, estimated that 'if Europeans one hundred years ago had accepted the right of Aboriginal parents to raise their children as they wished another one hundred thousand people would be identifying as Aboriginal citizens of Australia' (Edwards and Read 1989, p. xvii). They believe that between one-third and one-quarter of Aboriginal people had their identity destroyed by the state. At the 'Coming Home' Conference, held in Darwin in 1994, a brother and sister were identified who had been separated as children and reunited in old age. One was raised as Aboriginal, the other as a white Australian.

The Aboriginal families of Australia are(still trying to recover from this policy. The severance of the link between grandparents, parents and children broke the Aboriginal education chain and destroyed Aboriginal cultural continuity. Being unable to keep their children broke the hearts of many Aboriginal mothers, further lowered their self-esteem and left whole families bereft, helpless and inadequate in the new society. Families were left empty and emotionally shattered. The changes that have occurred since European settlement have affected 'the size and structure of the Aboriginal population, the places and ways in which they live, their economy, their health and their relationships within the family' (Daylight and Johnstone 1986, p. 1).

Eversley (1990) observed that 'with the inclusion of the "halfcaste" in the definition of the Aborigine, the status of Aboriginal families began to decline' and that this situation continued for almost a century (p. 35). Eversley noted also the negative responses to the change in the definition of 'Aborigine', such as ineligibility for family services and welfare provisions which were available to the rest of the community.

Aboriginal families today

Aboriginal family life today is considerably diverse. However, this diversity is often simply a starting point, as more Aboriginal people now tend to end up in similar places-that is, in urban Australia.

Ruby Hunter was taken from her parents at four years of age. Ruby was born on the banks of a billabong in the spring of 1955. Her father was a Ngarrindjeri man from the South Australian Riverland and her mother a Pitjantjatjara woman. Ruby spent her childhood in a succession of foster homes

and institutions. 'From the first day I was registered I became Government property.' She did not know she was Aboriginal until it was raised in a history class when she was 10 or 12. She ended up on the streets of Adelaide hiding out on the banks of the Torrens. She took up drinking, moved to Melbourne and remembers spending her twenty-first birthday in the Fitzroy lock-up with her partner Archie Roach. Ruby regards herself as 'one of the last great survivors'. She uses music and song to tell of her life experiences. Ruby's priority is family. She and Archie have four sons, a daughter and two grandchildren. Some are biological kin, some are not. 'We don't look at ourselves as fosters and halves, we look at ourselves as a family ... just husband and wife. When Archie's sons were born, I said: "Archie, these are your sons, the Roach boys." I said: "We may never get married but at least they've got your name. That's good enough!"'

Ruby has released an album called *Thoughts from Within*, which includes a song called *Modern Day Girl* which goes like this: What she remembers as a child, she kept hidden deep inside, for she's spiritual and she'll always be, she'll never lose her identity. She's a modern day girl in a modern day world, and all she can do is dream about her Dreamtime World. (Cossar 1994)

After 200 years of colonisation it is reasonable to question whether traditional Aboriginal values have survived: The question is particularly pertinent given that many Aborigines are married to non-Aborigines and that increasing numbers of people in 'settled' Australia who identify as Aboriginal speak varieties of English as their first language. The fact that such people speak little or none of their Aboriginal language is often used by non-Aboriginal people as evidence that they are not 'really Aborigines' (Eades 1988, p. 23). Similarly, the fact that some people have relatively light-coloured skin and are similar to nonAboriginal Australians in dress, housing and employment is used to challenge Aboriginal identity and deny any existence of a distinctive Aboriginality and spirituality.

Aboriginal families today are strongly influenced by their precolonial traditions and by Aboriginal people's experiences over the last 200 years. Despite the tremendous pressures to assimilate they have in many ways resisted and are still unique. Census figures quoted earlier indicate

differences from other Australian families. More importantly, however, Aboriginal families assert that they are different because of their values and beliefs. Despite coming from disparate backgrounds there is a common feeling of panAboriginality within which Aborigines in Australia identify with each other.

Barwick (1988, p. 27) believes that 'for Aborigines the basic sub-cultural ties are those of locality and family'. Aborigines identify or place one another not by asking 'What work do you do?' but rather 'Which place do you come from?', 'Who is your family?'. This sub-culture emphasises allegiance and its members share a strong attachment to a particular place, to the 'home place' or region surrounding the Aboriginal reserves where their forebears lived, worked and are buried. Refusal 'to be ashamed of our blood and our people' is an explicit demonstration of allegiance to a small community bonded by shared experience, common memories and inherited legends of oppression as a despised indigenous minority.

Schwab (1988, p. 77) observed that 'the majority of Aboriginal people today reside in "settled" Australia, descendants of the people who experienced the most severe cultural disruption. While some might consider it remarkable that Aborigines survive at all in settled Australia, what is truly extraordinary is that among these people there remains a culture which is distinctly Aboriginal'.

Aboriginal culture in 'settled' Australia exists and is manifested in sometimes subtle and localised symbolic forms. Eades (1988, p. 93) found that in southeast Queensland almost all Aboriginal people are of mixed descent and 'non-Aboriginal people frequently fail to see beyond the skin colour and superficial aspects of lifestyle (including those of language), and hence mistakenly assume that Aboriginal identity in areas like southeast Queensland is largely tokenistic'. Although a few people have found it necessary to deny their Aboriginal identity and origins publicly in order to escape anti-Aboriginal discrimination, it is rare for Aboriginal people to renounce their responsibilities and rights in Aboriginal society.

Barwick (1974, p. 154) summarised this desire to identify as Aboriginal: 'To be Aboriginal is to be born to, belong to, to be loyal to a family'. When discussing Aboriginality, family relationships are invariably raised. Kin includes a wide network of people, many of whom are only distant relatives in non-Aboriginal terms. Both Barwick and Eades describe the Aboriginal family as the nucleus around which travel, social and economic

activities and personal loyalties revolve.

In present-day urban Australia, Aboriginal families vary widely in the degree to which they retain the kinship of their ancestors. Many Aboriginal people have non-Aboriginal spouses and appear to be economically and socially embedded in non-Aboriginal society. The family situations and structures of rural and urban Aborigines differ from more traditionally oriented groups living in the more remote Aboriginal settlements or homeland centres.

Most urban Aborigines are mixed race people and have had long experience in non-Aboriginal society. Nevertheless, they are an identifiable and separate cultural group. Aboriginal families in urban and rural areas have a developed network of family, community and organisational structures which provide psychological and physical support and a sense of security. Much of this security arises from the knowledge that urban Aboriginal people can rely on their own group support and do not have to rely on nonAborigines.

In all parts of Australia, Aboriginal people identify as a cultural group and exhibit growing pride in their Aboriginality. This increasing pride is being recognised by other Australians. At the 1994 University of South Australia graduation ceremony Associate Professor Eve Fesl, a Gabi Gabi woman from Queensland, was applauded by the 1000 people present when she acknowledged in her address that the ceremony was taking place on the land of the Kurna people. This incident signified Eve's pride in being Aboriginal and was a recognition and acceptance of Aboriginality by the gathering of mainly non-Aboriginal students and their families and friends. Today it is common throughout Australia to hear of Kooris, Nungas, Nyoongahs, Anangu and Yolngu, among many other Aboriginal localised names, depending on location.

The Aboriginal family is central to the survival of Aboriginal culture. The values, structures and practices can be based on traditional kinship systems or the extended family, kin ties and locality allegiances of rural and urban Aboriginal people. The family is the best environment for the development of Aboriginal beliefs, values and identity. Yet most of Australia's institutions and programs are still as destructive of Aboriginal families as they have been in the past.

Aboriginal family values under threat

'People say that our language is lost, our culture is lost, but our culture is not lost, it is we who are lost.'

Douglas Abbot in *The Wailing* (Rintoul 1993)

Aboriginal Child Care Agencies were established in the 1970s to prevent the continuing removal of Aboriginal children from their families. They have attracted Federal Government funding and have the following aims:

- the preservation of Aboriginal families and the prevention of institutionalisation
- the relocation of siblings in institutions and the reuniting of families
- the development of self-help programs and the provision of resources which are supportive of Aboriginal families, within both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities
- the development of culturally relevant policies for Aboriginal child and family welfare services

These agencies try to place Aboriginal children within their extended family. If this is not possible, attempts are made to ensure that children stay near their own community.

In *Women's Business* (Daylight and Johnstone 1986, p. 7) it was reported that 'the care of children is of major importance to Aboriginal women' and that Aboriginal women's roles include those of 'mother, grandmother, sister and aunt'. Further, to be brought up by a member of the extended family is a common occurrence among Aboriginal families. Aboriginal women also identified some major concerns in relation to the raising of children. Those Aboriginal women who still speak their own language and continue traditional practices are concerned that their children are losing traditional skills and language. There was a belief that Aboriginal values and ways of doing things should continue despite changes to the family unit, and that convenient, inexpensive and culturally appropriate child care centres are needed.

Women's Business noted the need for Aboriginal women to be better informed about sex education and venereal diseases. The report also indicated that the rape of Aboriginal women in their own communities, incest and alcohol abuse were issues that needed to be dealt with by Aboriginal society and its organisations. It is certainly true that domestic

violence against Aboriginal women has recently become more public. The way in which these problems are dealt with is in itself a major issue for Aboriginal communities. If each of these concerns is treated as separate, it will erode Aboriginal family life. Aboriginal women must be informed and represented throughout all echelons of the new structures to ensure that a more holistic family approach is taken. Such an approach would be more in keeping with sustaining Aboriginal families.

Large families have been a part of Aboriginal life for a long time but as families become smaller there is less support available to them. Families are under stress. The pattern of obligations and responsibilities can no longer be met. The situation is similar for Aboriginal families moving from a camp situation to a country town or city, and for urban families trying to become part of modern Australian society. However, there is one place in our largest city where this may not be the case. Shane Phillips is a district officer for young offenders with the Redfern Aboriginal Corporation and this is how he recalls his growing up (in Rintoul 1993, p. 326):

I count myself as a Redfern boy. My father is a Bundjalung man from the North Coast. There is Kitabal and Minjenbal, which is part of the Bundjalung nation. But through my mother I believe I am around the seventh generation of people from this area here. My mother is a Redfern lady, she's been born and bred in Redfern. I've lived in every street around here. I have never lived in a posh house, I've never lived in a house with nice furniture. We have always had to struggle ... but I have a rich family background in the way of love and understanding, compassion and growing up together. They call it 'the black heart of Australia'. Two hundred years down the track all we've got is one little community. We're stuck in our own little area and there are no extravagant houses down there. People see it as a ghetto, but I love the place. There might be some derelict houses around the place, but in those old houses we've got some great people around here that care for each other. If someone dies, people will take a collection up to try and help pay for the funeral and they will support the family. I feel proud of the people here because they care for each other, and that's the main thing in life: people have got to care.

It is this great sense of 'peoplehood', expressed with pride and dignity by Aboriginal people, that will survive in the Aboriginal family. Some Aboriginal people can draw strength from their traditional culture; they can still practise their ceremonies, songs and dances and speak the language of the group to which they belong. Others do not have such ready access to, and may not know, their language group, cultural traditions or family history.

Generally, the more urbanised Aboriginal people have not lost their sense of Aboriginality, as demonstrated by Shane Phillips of Redfern-or by Buster Turner, an Aboriginal community worker, who has lived in her Adelaide suburb for over 30 years:

It was barren but for a few houses . . . I live in my own house that is being bought through ATSIC. I am married with three children, two boys and one girl. In my childhood I lived with another Aboriginal girl. We were fostered out together. We were the first in the area, but several other people have also lived around here for about 30 years.

It took four or five years before our neighbours said hullo. Only two families acknowledged us but we've never been in their homes-that's as close as we've come. Racism now seems stronger in my neighbourhood-I won't let my youngest go down to the skate-board ramp unattended by older kids. Someone is usually there waiting to put them down, 'boong-bashing'. Sometimes there's even a black car without number plates that deliberately sets out to intimidate and to be violent-same as in Riverton. I've lived in Darwin, Canberra, Alice, most of South Australia, and I still like this place the best.

I've been fostered since nine months old-I maintain my relationship with my grandmother and sister. I know my heritage and yet I also know how to relate in the white world as well. (Turner 1994)

In a study of Aboriginal people in southwest Western Australia, Palmer and Collard (1993) found that young Nyungar people resented the fact that they were seen to have 'lost their culture'. They observed that the literature indicates contemporary Nyungar language, knowledge and culture are alive and are a significant influence in the shaping of the lives of Nyungar

youth.

While Nyungar young people and non-Aboriginal youth had considerable contact and shared interests (and perhaps faced similar obstacles), some Nyungar young people talked about fundamental differences between the two groups and the importance of a distinctly Nyungar 'life'.

When asked by the Nyungar researcher about her Wetjella (non-Aboriginal) friends, a Nyungar young woman replied: 'Oh, they're pretty good you know, but they're still a bit, I dunno, just don't feel right hanging around Wetjella kids. Because they have just different lifestyles, you know'. She went on to explain:

Ah, just like they're completely different people even though they get pissed and get chased by the cops. Nyungar, I can relate to them. Like I'm half white and half Nyungar so I can relate to both sides but still when I relate to Nyungar kids they can sort of talk to me and sort of communicate with me but the Wetjella kids, it's oh ... I dunno they haven't got the Nyungar family tradition. (Palmer and Collard 1993, p. 17)

Conclusion

From these different Aboriginal perspectives come some observations about modern Aboriginal family life.

The number of Aboriginal families is increasing. Aboriginal identity has been sustained through family life; family affiliations are of fundamental importance to Aboriginal people and to their Aboriginal identity. Aboriginal people continue to marry other Aboriginal people, using newly developed networks, for example through various State and national gatherings. Most families are extended and include many cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents.

Child rearing is at the core of Aboriginal social structure and families have continued traditional ways of child care. Aboriginal people want knowledge of their culture, beliefs, understandings and practices to be passed on to the younger generation. However, child care is a major concern as more Aboriginal women enter the workforce and/or seek an education in the cities and larger towns. Some children's upbringing can be shared with, or largely be the responsibility of, the maternal grandmother as it was traditionally.

Aboriginal people's mobility, often for reasons of health, education, employment or housing, sometimes has adverse effects on family life, for example when families or individuals leave the security of kinship networks. However, despite this mobility, many do maintain links with their place of origin and go 'home' to see their family. The attachment to 'home' is illustrated by the frequent trips which people make to their own country.

Some young Aboriginal people with a non-Aboriginal parent may feel torn between their loyalty to Aboriginal family ideals and their love for a non-Aboriginal parent. Young Aboriginal people are inevitably influenced by elements of non-Aboriginal society, such as television. However, there are indications that the converse is also true and that young non-Aboriginal people are influenced by Aboriginal youth (Palmer and Collard 1993).

Many Aboriginal ceremonial practices have ceased but many cultural practices have changed very little. Aboriginal women have become crucial to the survival of Aboriginal society. They are concerned that Aboriginal culture and identity be maintained.

A constant for Aboriginal people is that non-Aboriginal systems and institutions do not recognise Aboriginal structures and ways of doing things. There is much rhetoric from non-Aboriginal Australians about being culturally aware. Such awareness on its own is no longer acceptable. Aboriginal social structures and codes of behaviour need to be formally acknowledged. For example Aboriginal marriage negotiations are not very different from what they were before the Europeans came; however, European laws have changed considerably in how they deal with Aboriginal people and how they interpret Aboriginal behaviour. Aboriginal marriage practices are seen as 'traditional' in remote Aboriginal communities and 'de facto' in urban settings.

Aboriginal people express and identify themselves as Aboriginal Australians. Their identification does not necessarily depend on skin colour or physical features; rather it has to do with shared experiences, a large kin system sometimes spanning the continent, stories passed on through an oral tradition and a common family background.

Such a heritage provides most Aboriginal people with a sense of belonging and comfort and a pride in the knowledge of being part of an ancient heritage, whether they live in major urban centres, country towns, town camps, cattle stations, Aboriginal townships or on homeland centres. Most Aboriginal families want to continue their traditions and beliefs in the context of modern Australian life. Aboriginality depends on their existence.

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