Historical Suppression of Australian Indigenous Culture

Commencing at the point of colonisation, Indigenous Australians were subjected to numerous formal government policies that aimed to suppress their culture. Cultural suppression occurs when a culture is overpowered and dominated, usually coinciding with the promotion of another culture.

The arrival of British colonists saw considerable resistance from Australia’s indigenous people. For example, in 1841, indigenous groups that usually lived in separate areas united against a common enemy for the first time. Indigenous people near the Murray River on the way to Adelaide combined to resist the loss of their land. In May, a party of 68 troopers and volunteers were sent to recover sheep and wagons which had allegedly been stolen. Unfortunately, the expedition known as the Rufus River Massacre ended in the deaths of at least 35 indigenous people.

Protection and segregation

In the 1800’s, British colonists saw Australia’s indigenous people as a primitive and savage race. This may have been because the Indigenous Australian customs and lifestyles they observed were very different to their own. The British belief that Australian Indigenous people were an inferior race led to an assumption that the needed to be protected.

By 1837, the British Government had implemented new ways to solve the Aboriginal problem through policies which involved the separation of Australian indigenous people into church-run missions and government reserves.

In 1837, the South Australian Government appointed a Protector of Aborigines whose duties included to ‘diligently endeavour to instruct the natives in reading, writing, building houses, making clothes, cultivating the ground and all other ordinary acts of civilisation’.

In June 1860, the Victorian Government established a Central Board for the Aborigines. Its role was to establish reserves and appoint managers to control them, create local guardians in most areas and to administer the affairs of Aboriginal people.

In 1886, the Victorian Aborigines protection board was formed. Its aim, as described from the parliamentary report, was to civilise, Christianise and above all train Aborigines on stations established for the purpose; and to remove as many children as possible from their bad environment and parental influence to training homes and thence to situations with white families.

Between 1869 and 1911, most Australian states introduced laws to confine Australian Indigenous people to certain areas where they would be under non-indigenous supervision.

Responses to suppression

For a number of reasons, many Indigenous Australians did not accept the religious and cultural mores of the British settlers and government. Many remained outside the reserves and missions, choosing instead to work in the pastoral industry. Others lived on the edges of townships and tried to maintain their ancestral ways.
Despite being pressured into new modes of employment, dress, housing and other aspects of European culture, many Aborigines did not abandon their traditional values. Specifically, they still practised kinship ties, and obligations, feared the effects of sorcery, practised certain rituals, especially relating to personal hygiene and funerals, hunted and collected bush food and in their leisure time and maintained a deep attachment to the land and its governing stories.

The overall impact on many Australian Indigenous people during the era of protection and segregation policies could be described as one of either despair or defiance. Aboriginal resistance was rooted in five essential elements; cultural maintenance, a sense of injustice, the acting out of a sometimes negative, oppositional culture and the rebuilding of a positive Aboriginal identity. The fifth and vital part of this resistance was an active Aboriginal political movement.

**Assimilation policy**

In the period prior to the Second World War, it became clear to the government that Australian Indigenous People were not a ‘dying race’. In response to, and being aware of an increasing migrant population, the government decided to change its policy to one of assimilation.

In 1951, the policy of ‘assimilation’ was officially adopted at The Native Welfare Conference. The policy was described thusly: all persons of Aboriginal blood or mixed blood in Australia will live like white Australians do’. The policy stated that all aboriginal peoples shall maintain the same manner of living as other Australians, enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and being influenced by the same beliefs, hopes, loyalties as other Australians’.

The purpose of assimilation was for Indigenous Australians to reject their own culture and heritage. They were expected to adopt British customs and beliefs. Consequently, Aborigines were able to obtain some rights and freedoms they had previously been denied on condition that they live according to British cultural expectations. The reality however was that assimilation did not recognise Australian Indigenous culture or acknowledge that indigenous Australians had lived in Australia long before colonisation.

**Integration policy**

In 1965, assimilation was replaced by the short-lived policy of ‘integration’. The integration policy, to some extent, recognised Australian Indigenous culture. It acknowledged that Australian Indigenous people had their own culture, languages, customs and traditions which needed to be ‘Westernised’.

Some Australian Indigenous protest groups argued that integration was more suitable policy as it allowed for individuals to choose the extent to which they wished to join broader society, while at the same time being able to practise their own culture and beliefs.

Others argued however, that while integration was an improvement on assimilation it contained some elements of ‘assimilation in disguise’. This was because ultimately, it was expected that future generations would assimilate into non-indigenous society, letting go of their beliefs and customs.