Aboriginal culture before European settlement

**Misconception 1: Australian Indigenous people were simple and uncivilised.**

The notion that the Indigenous people of Australia were ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilised’ prior to European settlement is fully discredited. Indigenous peoples’ limited technology prior to the arrival of white people has been confused with a lack of social sophistication. Yet, although they lacked the technology possessed by Europeans, Australia’s Indigenous people had a rich system of kinship, far-flung trading networks and well developed systems of governance with complex interlocking rights, responsibilities, privileges and entitlements to the land.

For tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal people maintained a system of spiritual beliefs and rituals concerning life after death. This is demonstrated in ancient burial practices, such as those uncovered by archaeological excavation in the Willandra Lakes Region. In the dunes of Lake Mungo excavation has uncovered the remains of a cremated female over 25,000 years old, and of a buried male, about 40,000 years old, whose remains were covered in red ochre.

The famous French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss described the Indigenous people of Australia as the “intellectual aristocrats” among early peoples, based on such features of traditional Aboriginal society as spirituality, art, social organisation, justice and decision-making.

**Misconception 2: The absence of agricultural practices is evidence of a primitive society.**

Indigenous Australians were predominantly hunter-gatherers and their cultural and hunting practices varied greatly depending on the natural coastal, riverine and desert environments. Archaeologists have established that most Indigenous communities were semi-nomadic, following food sources according to season, successfully adapting to the changing physical environment, and returning to the same place at the same time each year. Some Indigenous practices had resemblances to agriculture, for instance eel traps, yam replanting, fish farms, firestick farming and grain growing. Stone and bone tools discovered in parts of Australia are among the oldest in the world. Some were used to grind seeds at least 30,000 years ago. In some parts of Australia, the storage of seeds was practised on a large scale. Indigenous peoples’ patterns of subsistence were very well adapted to the Australian environment, its relatively abundant food resources and its climate variability.

**Misconception 3: Australia was an empty unoccupied land available for colonisation.**

At the time of European settlement, Indigenous habitation spanned the Australian continent. Archaeologists estimate that the population level was between 250,000 and 1 million people, and that it had been relatively stable for thousands of years. Indigenous people did not mark out land ownership according to traditional European methods but rather used geographic boundaries, such as rivers, lakes and mountains. This led to the incorrect claim of terra nullius (‘land belonging to no one’) which was used to justify the seizure of land and to claim sovereignty of Australia. As Justice Brennan declared in the famous Mabo case, the theory that the Indigenous peoples had no property interests in the land was “a discriminatory denigration of indigenous inhabitants, their social organisation and customs”.

Response to and impact of European settlement

**Misconception 4: There was little resistance to European settlement.**

Although there was peaceful exchange between Indigenous people and European settlers in many areas, there was fierce resistance in others. Yagan, leader of the Nyungar people of Western Australia, for example,
participated in a number of food raids and killings in retaliation for the deaths of his people at the hands of settlers. He is considered to be one of the first Indigenous resistance fighters. There were many other instances between 1790 and 1810: clans of people in the Eora group in the Sydney area also undertook a campaign of resistance against European settlement. The historian Henry Reynolds has argued that Aboriginal resistance was “challenging, prolonged... spirited and determined”.

**Misconception 5: There was little direct loss of life from European settlement; therefore the impact of settlement was not great.**

The deaths of Indigenous people from armed conflict during the period of European settlement has been estimated to be between 18,000 and 20,000, and those of Europeans between 1,000 and 3,000. These were far from being the only fatal impacts. In many other ways European settlement in Australia had disastrous consequences for Indigenous people. It brought chickenpox, smallpox, influenza, measles, as well as venereal and other diseases to which Indigenous people had no immunity. These impacts were heightened by the dispossession of traditional lands, while many Indigenous people were removed to camps and collectives. There was an estimated 90 per cent reduction in the Indigenous population between 1788 and 1900.

The introduction of European farming methods and animals such as sheep, rabbits and cattle had other impacts: many out-competed endemic fauna. Indigenous people gradually became dependent on the support from colonists for their livelihood, and this in turn affected their diet, health and well-being.

Indigenous people also suffered the loss of their languages and culture. It is estimated that there were 250 distinct languages spoken by Indigenous people at the time of European settlement, with about 600 different dialects. Today, of the 145 languages that have survived, 110 are critically endangered, which means that they are spoken infrequently and partially, and only by the elderly.

**Indigenous Australians today**

**Misconception 6: People who speak for Indigenous people can only be those of full Aboriginal parentage.**

An Indigenous person is classified by the High Court as “a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives”.

It is offensive to Indigenous people to use terms such as ‘full-blood’, ‘half-caste’ and ‘quarter-caste’, as these terms derive from assimilationist government policies of the past.

**Misconception 7: Despite huge government handouts, Indigenous people still can’t look after themselves.**

Indigenous people do not receive additional personal income on account of being Indigenous. There are, however, special programs designed to help overcome disadvantage. These include Aboriginal medical and legal services, and programs such as the recently announced Remote Jobs and Communities Program (to commence on July 1, 2013). Research conducted by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University has shown that, far from being over-generous, such programs and services have traditionally been greatly under-funded and have done little to deal with the disadvantages faced by Indigenous Australians.

The Australian Human Rights Commission has argued that self-determination is fundamental to the capacity of Indigenous people to support themselves. In its discussion of self-determination, it states that:

- Self-determination is an ‘ongoing process of choice’ which aims to ensure that Indigenous communities are able to meet their social, cultural and economic needs.
- The right to self-determination is based on the simple acknowledgment that Indigenous peoples are Australia’s first people, recognised by law in the historic Mabo judgement.
The loss of this right to live according to a set of common values and beliefs, and to have that right respected by others, is at the heart of the current disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians. Without self-determination it is not possible for Indigenous Australians to fully overcome the legacy of colonisation and dispossession.

**Misconception 8: Sovereignty, land rights and apologies for past behaviour are irrelevant to the practical problems faced by Indigenous people.**

Indigenous people have suffered great individual, family and community damage from colonisation. A formal acknowledgement of these wrongs, such as was made by the Australian Government on 13 February 2008, was seen by many Indigenous people as a necessary first step to creating a better future. Indigenous Australians believe that self-determination, sovereignty, economic independence and cultural sustainability are inextricably linked to the practical problems of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Furthermore, the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007 and supported by the Australian Government in 2009, recognises – among other Indigenous rights – rights to self-determination, rights to country, and rights to culture.

**Misconception 9: The policy of removing part-Aboriginal children from their families between the 1860s and the 1960s was a policy based on good intentions, and one for which contemporary Australians should not feel compelled to apologise.**

The policy of child removal which resulted in the ‘Stolen Generations’ is not equivalent to contemporary welfare-based practice of removing children from negligent or abusive households. Aboriginal children were removed not because they were in danger (although in some instances that may have been the case), but rather because they had Aboriginal ancestry. The 1997 report, *Bringing them home*, estimated that between one in three and one in ten Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families between 1910 and 1970.

While governments of the day considered Aboriginal people collectively as a race with no future, so-called ‘half-castes’ (people of mixed descent) were seen to be a social problem that might be solved by removing them from their families and progressively absorbing them into the white population. Although many white Australians regarded this as a good thing to do despite the anguish that it caused the families concerned, others spoke out against it.

Following the National Inquiry into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, measures were taken to facilitate family reunions and to improve counselling and family support services for the victims of the child removal policy. The apology offered by the Australian Government on 13 February 2008 specifically reflected on the mistreatment of the Stolen Generations and on the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments which inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on Indigenous communities.

For Australians to apologise now does not mean that they are personally responsible for the harm that was done, but rather that they acknowledge and oppose the policy of child removal which left an indelible mark on Australian history.

**Misconception 10: There is little racism in Australia.**

Racism is illegal in Australia. It is unlawful to discriminate on the basis of race, colour, nationality, descent, ethnic or ethno-religious background, and it is illegal for people to engage in racist activity. Racism nonetheless exists, in both conscious and unconscious personal attitudes, behaviours, values, and assumptions. Furthermore, subtler institutional forms of racism are inherent in the structure and processes of our social, economic, cultural and political institutions.

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its observations on Australia in 2000, indicated that some processes, laws and administrative practices in Australia continue to operate to the systematic disadvantage of Indigenous people. The Committee expressed serious concern about the extent of continuing discrimination, dramatic inequality and socio-economic marginalisation faced by Indigenous Australians in the enjoyment of their economic, social and cultural rights. The Committee also expressed grave concern about the discriminatory approach to law enforcement which contributes to the disproportionate rate of imprisonment of Indigenous people, and made reference to the minimum mandatory sentencing schemes in
Western Australia and the Northern Territory which target offences committed disproportionately by Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal deaths in custody have also been regarded as the product of institutional discrimination.

Indigenous people continue to experience racial discrimination in many facets of their life. A 2003 study conducted by Kevin Dunn, a professor of human geography, found that about one third of Indigenous respondents reported that they had experienced discrimination in institutional settings due to being Indigenous. Even greater proportions of Indigenous respondents reported that they had experienced discrimination in the form of disrespectful treatment, mistrust and name-calling in everyday situations.

Misconception 11: All stories about Indigenous people are about their failures.

There are very many success stories; many Indigenous Australians are celebrated for their outstanding achievements. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with illustrious records in their fields include well-known identities such as Cathy Freeman, Evonne Goolagong Cawley and Anthony Mundine (sport); Jimmy Pike, Rover Thomas and Emily Kngwarreye (art); Yothu Yindi, Christine Anu and Jimmy Little (music); Deborah Mailman and Warwick Thornton (theatre/film); Neville Bonner and Aden Ridgeway (politics); Marcia Langton, Mick Dodson and Larissa Behrendt (academia); and Eddie Mabo, Noel Pearson, Faith Bandler and Warren Mundine (political activism). There are also many successful Indigenous organisations and communities.

Reconciliation Australia in association with BHP Billiton runs an annual award program for achievements in Indigenous organisations. It has been a very successful initiative with many outstanding prize winning bodies. The Australian Collaboration in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies carried out a study of success in Aboriginal organisations with many similar findings.

Misconception 12: Violence against women and child abuse are characteristic of Indigenous culture.

It is true that shocking levels of violence are prevalent in contemporary Indigenous communities. An April 2010 research report by the Australian Institute of Criminology, Indigenous perpetrators of violence: Prevalence and risk factors for offending, for example, found that Indigenous people were 15 to 20 times more likely than non-Indigenous people to commit violent offences. The report, however, observes that most most Indigenous people are not violent even though many experience a constellation of risk factors such as living in communities where violence is endemic. Furthermore, these levels of violence do not mean that that a high level of violence was always a feature of Indigenous culture prior to European colonisation.

According to Dr Tomlinson, Director of the Australian Institute of Criminology, current risk factors include “alcohol misuse, illicit drug use, sex, age, childhood experience of violence, abuse and neglect, exposure to pornography, education, income, employment, housing, physical and mental health, geographic location and access to services.” To that list might be added poverty, welfare dependency and racism. But Dr Tomlinson observes that “alcohol, based on existing evidence, stands out as a problem over and above structural factors, such as socio-economic disadvantage.”

There is widespread agreement about the need to prevent substance misuse. Preventative measures include ensuring that the type of petrol available cannot be used for petrol sniffing; limiting supply of alcohol and creating dry communities; and providing community development programs. Such programs aim to divert young Indigenous people from risky behaviours and promote pathways to better health and well-being.

There is widespread condemnation of violence directed at women and children and agreement that perpetrators of such crimes should be brought to justice among Indigenous people, although there are differing views about the place of Aboriginal customary law within the formal legal system.

There are numerous examples of Indigenous people working within their communities to combat violence and abuse. For instance, the Yarrenyty-Arltere (Larapinta) Learning Centre in Alice Springs has drastically reduced substance abuse and violence in the community, although its efforts are severely hampered by lack of adequate funding. Some communities have taken the initiative to establish night patrols with very encouraging results. Indigenous communities need to work in partnership with non-Indigenous communities (including government,
police and judicial bodies) to stamp out violence. While strengthening the criminal justice system is important, so too are education, community programs, support and refuge shelters, behavioural workshops, dispute resolution mechanisms and night patrols.

Useful sources

This website reports the findings of a two year research project that explored examples of successes in Indigenous organisations across the nation, to focus attention on those successes and to draw out the lessons that can be learnt from them.

This website offers comprehensive information for students exploring the history of human rights, the UN, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and children’s rights.

The teaching materials on this website aim to help students develop a critical understanding of human rights and responsibilities, as well as developing the attitudes, behaviours and skills to apply them in everyday life.


This report summarises findings from research and consultations on family violence and abuse in Indigenous communities between 2001 and 2006. It considers, among other things, the relationship between violence and substance abuse and Aboriginal customary law, violence and human rights.

Racism. No way! is an anti-racism education project for Australian schools which aims to assist school communities and education systems to recognise and address racism in the learning environment.

Authors

Dr Nicola Henry, La Trobe University.

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