

## **Aboriginal Australia: the history and culture of Aboriginal Australians**

### **Part One: Culture and Social Organisation**

Extract from speech given by P Dodson, 'After 200 years of colonisation', AICC State Conference, 1998.

"Our Societies were rich in Spirituality, social organisation and there was order and meaning in all things, Law, ritual and custom were integrally and intrinsically related to the land. Life had meaning, sense and offered fulfilment and harmony. A balance of contemplation and action produced food both for our spirits and bodies. The sea, hills, grass, wind, clouds, trees, birds, insects and rivers all spoke a meaning that helped unravel the mystery of creation, presence and existence. As human beings we stood in the middle of all this and were essential to all things. Families were extended, dependent and life giving to each other. All things were communal and no one person was more important than the other all were parts of the whole. A clear understanding prevailed such that one could not be fulfilled if the other was not enabled to be enriched. Growth and stature were measured by contribution, participation, responsibility and accountability. Law governed and regulated behaviour between individuals, groups and the country. Disputes, arguments and disagreements were subject to the application of the law? Consensus and counselling applied and when that failed punishment could be swift and effective."

As you can read from the above text Aborigines has a very strong and effective Social Organisation.

Kinship is very important to the aboriginal culture. Family units are large and extended. The entire community looks after children and education is responsibility for everyone. Strength of kinship is more important than individuality.

Dreamtime – the creation of the landscape, the rivers, mountains, hills etc all by Ancestral spirits. They made the sun, moon, planet and stars. End of dreamtime, changed from human and other forms in to the landscape blending in as part of the landscape and giving the landscape powers.

Elders can be of either sex male or female of any age who are consulted upon and responsible for passing down the stories. Teach the children about their stories of Dreamtime. Everything was encompassed in “the Dreaming” idea.

In conclusion their social organisation consisted of four main points.

Spirituality

Law

Survival through cooperation

Social Order

### **The Land**

Aborigines lived off the land and saw it as a spiritual basis to all their beliefs. Their religion was based on the natural environment around them. Aborigines used the land to provide them with food, remedies, objects (hunting and music), art and household items such as baskets etc.

Spirituality was directly connected with the land and their surroundings. They lived off the land and yet took no more than needed as well as moving camp to another area give the land time to replenish the natural resources.

### **History of Aboriginal Settlement in Australia**

Estimated to be between 50,000 to 150,000 years old. Aborigine culture is said to be the longest surviving on this earth. Pieces of land in Australia were owned and governed by many groups of Aboriginal tribes. Aborigines throughout Australia spoke over 200 dialects. Many tribesmen spoke more than one dialect to communicate with neighbouring tribes. Aborigines were numbered at over 750,000 in population before White settlement.

Aborigines first arrived on the Sahul continent (landmass containing Australia and New Guinea) during the Pleistocene period. It is believed they made their way by using land bridges. It is not known how many populated the Sahul continent at that time. The environment in Australia promoted good living, there was an abundance in water and food and only a small number of carnivorous predators to pose any threat on the population.

Around 15,000-10,000 years ago, the Holocene Period, the last ice age ended and the shape of the environment and of Australia changed dramatically. Sea levels rose meaning the coastal tribes were forced to relocate and adapt to more harsh surroundings. Large desert areas were formed inland and the large central lakes dried up. Aborigines survived such drastic transformations of the landscape due to their respect and bond they had with their environment. The land, being part of their own spirit, enabled them to develop new ways of lifestyle which prevented them from becoming extinct. Their culture in itself saved them and they were able to prosper up until the Europeans arrived.

### **Impact of White Settlement**

#### Australia

The year that would change the lives of Aboriginal Australians forever was 1788. The year of the 'invasion'. White settlers arrived from Britain to colonise a country they considered to be 'Terra Nullus' land belonging to no one. What impact did this have on the Aboriginal Settlement? An impact of astonishing measure.

Within the first few months of the arrival of the first fleet, war was declared between the aborigines and the new settlers. The introduction of diseases such as smallpox, leprosy and

even the common cold saw much mortality within a very short period of time. The introduction of grazing animals saw the annihilation of forests and bushland that the aboriginals depended on for basic survival. Their environment disappeared before their very eyes. Resistance was only met with more white settlers retaliating with more advanced weaponry which caused on more than one occasion, in fact several, bloody 'massacres'.

#### **Population Table\***

<b>Year</b>	<b>Population</b>
1911	30,758
1933	45,066
1947 <sup>^</sup>	51,048
1966 <sup>^^</sup>	85,610
1976	160,916
1986	227,645
1991	265,458

<sup>^</sup> - Excludes Torres Strait Islanders

<sup>^^</sup> - Includes Part Aboriginals

#### Queensland

Queensland's early white settlers indulged in one of the greatest land grabs of all time and encountered fierce Aboriginal opposition. At the time of white settlement, Queensland was the most densely populated area of Australia, supporting over 100,000 Aboriginal people in around 200 tribal groups.

By the turn of the century, the Aboriginal people of Queensland had been comprehensively run off their lands and the white authorities had set up reserves for the survivors. In the 1980s

control of the reserves was handed over to the residents, subject to rights of access for prospecting, exploration or mining.

### **Land Rights**

Mabo Decision, the high court held that the common law of Australia recognises a form of native title to land. The court rejected the doctrine that Australia was Terra nullius (land belonging to no one) at the time of European settlement.

(Mabo v State of QLD (No. 2) 1992)

### **Health**

Life expectancy is 15-20 years less than general population. Between the ages of 25-44 the risk of death is 5 times greater than the national average.

Diabetes affects 30% of some aboriginal communities which is 4 times the non-indigenous rate.

Infant mortality is 3 to 5 times higher than Aust. average. Infections diseases are 12 times higher than the Aust Average. Hospital admissions are 71% higher than for non-aboriginal males and 57% than non-aboriginal females.

So what is letting the health system of Aboriginals down in Australia to cause such drastic figures?

### **Education**

Only 33% of Aboriginal children complete schooling compared with 77% of white Australians and nearly 10% of Aboriginal children do not attend school or will leave before the age of 14.

This then reflects on the employment figures with uneducated Aboriginals in rural areas finding it very hard to gain employment. In remote communities access to secondary education is sometimes non-existent. There are many factors resulting in the poor level of attendees in schools and the low achievement. A lot of the attending Aboriginal students do not chose maths or science for their senior year thus lowering their chances of tertiary admission in these areas.

Cultural and language differences play a major role in secondary schools which teach a majority white culture without taking into account the many differences in society such as life, history of culture, language, family values, parenting roles of Aboriginal society.

Aboriginal poet Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) was born on North Stradbroke Island and is buried there - her 1964 *We Are Going* was the first published work by an Aboriginal woman.

## **Politics**

'It is often said that, if you are born black, you are born political'. Dr Anita Heiss \*\*

Centennial Protest - 1888

Australia Day Protest – 1938 – A day of mourning. A blackboard

Australia Day Protest - 1988

## **Summary**

The word Aborigine means "the people who were here from the beginning". Thousands of years of Aboriginal culture and heritage existed before the undoing of their traditions by white settlement less than three hundred years ago. In fact, only 216 years have passed since white settlement and in that time the white settlers have dissimilated, humiliated and broken the aboriginal people.

Aboriginal people today are a vast minority. Jurisdiction and laws governing the Aboriginal people

Australia as a nation can not undo it's wrongs. There is no time machine to take us back to try and 'fix' what was done. There can be no blame thrown around to try and make white Australians feel more 'at ease' with what the past shows us.

It has only been in the last 30 years that the law, policies and way of everyday white Australians thinking is starting to improve. Ignorance plays a major role in the lack of understanding the history and future of the Aboriginal people. One of the most landmark legal proceedings which drew attention from the world regarding Aboriginal land rights was the Mabo decision. This decision put the spotlight back on the Aboriginal lifestyle and changed the law giving for the first time in post white settlement a glimmer of possibilities. Terra Nullius was declared no more. This opened the way for land to be reclaimed by Aborigines. Right now there is a case involving land rights up at The Glasshouse Mountains which has halted the development of a million dollar estate that was planned.

In conclusion, the Aboriginals today in the Australian society are still not heard. Their presence not felt and their lives a distant blur on the horizon. Only in the last week has our Prime Minister seen it fit to shut down a large part of the Aboriginal voice by closing ATSIC. are seen to be more 'looked after' within our system, are not cov

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