

Aboriginal Education and Colonialism: Our Earthlinks Under Threat

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A B S T R A C T

Three themes are set out in this paper. The first is that learning about ecologically sensitive living—and putting that living into practice—are central to Aboriginal indigenous education. Second, Australia's first peoples were and are deprived of landscapes providing the base to their spirituality; continuing processes maintain that loss of independence. The third is that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians need to address quickly courses of action which provide for a reinvigoration of that landscape connection and independence. This need has points of significance for environmental educators, several of which are presented.

Traditional Aboriginal education—some important themes

‘The lifestyles, roles and responsibilities of indigenous entities—both human and non-human—are embodiments of traditional indigenous education, just as the education occurs by living the lifestyles’

In a generalised sense traditional indigenous education is the practice of multi-interaction arrangements between human environments and natural environments. The lifestyles, roles and responsibilities of indigenous entities—both human and non-human—are embodiments of traditional indigenous education, just as the education occurs by living the lifestyles. The cores of indigenous education are the traditional knowledges which explain ecological food-chains and the protocols of respect that have existed between human and non-human entities of the Earth's eco-systems since the long periods of time indigenous peoples call the Beginning. These cores go back beyond the living memories and recorded histories of non-indigenous societies. Nevertheless, they have been carried throughout the ages by indigenous peoples through stories, myths and legends; they provide understandings of how the practices of historically traditional indigenous lifestyles logically protect and sustain a continuum of mutual respect between human and non-human entities.

For example Sefa Dei (1995) has written:

Among the interrelated principles emphasised in African indigenous knowledge systems are:

1. *Indigenous knowledge is accumulated knowledge based on observing and experiencing the social and natural worlds. There is no marketplace of ideas. Knowledge is*

not bought and sold in the Euro-centric sense.

2. *All knowledge is socially and collectively created through the interactive processes between individuals, groups, and the natural world.*
3. *The basic tenet is that humans are part of the natural world. We do not stand apart and neither are we above the natural world.*

We can see Aboriginality as a philosophical set of rules that are manifested in customary cultural practices which are set within a belief in the Great Spirit which comprises our Spiritual All. Aboriginality is the recognition by peoples that they are citizens of the worldly universe. The Earth is what nurtures us all—flora, fauna, rocks, waters and the air—and humans. The Earth is our Earth Mother and we are all citizens of our Earth Mother. That is a core within the full meaning of Aboriginality.

These principles of Aboriginality are central to traditional Aboriginal education, as it was before the British arrived, and is still practiced in isolated regions of Australia. It is a social education which nurtures spiritual-cultural beliefs and principles which involve Aboriginal people being responsible citizens of our Earth Mother. This system of educating simply works on the structure of extended family networks in which all members provide sustenance and protection for each other on a daily basis of interaction between Brother and Sister citizens of the human and natural worlds. This enables appropriate education to be taught to each member of the extended family as progress is made through levels of spiritual-cultural knowledges that underpin the customs of daily and seasonal life.

Education within Aboriginal society has for thousands of years been based on each individual being guided by customs relating to sound ecological practices. According to Reynolds (1996), “it is clear that the individual Australian [Aboriginal] is under the authority of well-understood customs and laws throughout [their] life, by

which [their] relations with [their] fellows and with [their] physical environment are effectively controlled." Indigenous education is a communal process in which people learn to respect the natural life in their physical environment as equal citizens. A Native American view is that "tribal education was a natural outcome of living in close communion with each other and the natural environment." (Cajete 1994). Similarly the non-human or Spirit world is understood by indigenous peoples as being an ensemble of spiritual manifestations of all entities of the natural world. This Spiritual philosophy simply implies that no individual entity of the natural world is superior to the other, and that each supports and nurtures the other in a sound eco-system structure.

Therefore, indigenous education is about living. It is about showing respect for all entities of the natural world as equal citizens of our Earth Mother, and as equal manifestations of the Spirit World. It is an education in doing. Indigenous education is not simply about human needs and self interests, but wholly about sharing life-giving sustenance between people and other entities of the natural world. The doing is about living together in respect, about demonstrating respect through protecting each other's interests. If, for example, we pollute our water citizen then we have failed to respect and protect it and thus the water will be impure and cause illness to the water and to other citizens who need it.

Although indigenous education may be taught in classrooms, it is not wholesome if one is taught a way of living without being able to live in that way. Indigenous education is a way of living, it is a process by which each individual learns from practicing the principles of Aboriginality. How we indigenous peoples continue to live in such a way in this modern world driven by economics is a challenge which all peoples on this planet should address. Any measures of success will develop greater interest in progressing indigenous education, and thus enable further movement towards a revitalised practice of the principles of Aboriginality. The benefits from achieving this would include development of indigenous lifestyles across cultural boundaries, black and white.

Progress in a direction towards enhancing Aboriginal education may well produce an increasingly worthwhile quality of life that will continue to develop during the human experience on this planet.

The principles of Aboriginality are then that:

- humans are merely one kind of entity on earth, all enjoying an equality of status.
- Earth as Mother sustains humans within a framework of mutual respect.
- humans enjoy a spiritual relationship with each other and the rest of the universe.
- a philosophically based set of rules underpins the experience of Aboriginality.

Fundamental to Aboriginality is the preservation of Aboriginal culture, land and identity, and the relationships Aboriginal peoples have with their environments, their families and with all things of Mother Earth. Preservation of such themes continues to operate in spite of their frequent denial by non-Aboriginal Australians.

Aboriginality has its own uniqueness, one of feeling special and of feeling a worthiness affirmed by relationships which value our connections with our peoples, our lands and our cultures. This uniqueness also exists in our possessing the privileged knowledge given to us by our families and our ancestors and experienced by us as we care for and preserve our environments. These values and themes of Aboriginality are passed on through a complex pattern of interrelationship with family, spirituality and community which comprises aboriginal education.

However, when Aboriginal peoples are deprived of these connections within the strait jacket of a colonising society which rejects our culture, much of who we are is lost to us and disharmony of our world and our environments is experienced.

Lives and landscapes stolen—still not returned

‘The practice, rather than merely the rhetoric, of Land Rights is crucial to indigenous peoples because to enable them to develop their indigenous education they must be able to live it’

In recent history colonising has severely fragmented indigenous spiritual-cultural lifestyles across the Earth, destroying the historically traditional practices of indigenous societies that were integral to the environmental balance existing between the human and natural worlds. Given the connection to land it is reasonable to argue that for contemporary indigenous societies to recover this fast-disappearing balance between themselves and the Earth, land must be returned to indigenous peoples to enable the redevelopment of historically traditional lifestyles to occur. The practice, rather than merely the rhetoric, of Land Rights is crucial to indigenous peoples because to enable them to develop their indigenous education they must be able to live it. Therefore, colonial nations must decolonise in whole or in part their illegally gained lands. That is to say that all indigenous lands colonised by foreign nations without proper and formal agreements should either be returned to the original indigenous inhabitants, or treaties negotiated between the colonisers and the respective indigenous nations.

And although decolonisation processes have begun, nation-states have been careful to decolonise only those territories

that "...applied almost exclusively to overseas possessions rather than parts of the so-called metropolitan territories of UN member states" (Barsh 1988). Indigenous political movements have at least achieved some progress in negotiations at the level of the United Nations. For example the Penner report, a 1983 parliamentary report, advocated permitting Canadian Indians to form permanent governments within the Canadian federal system, like the existing provinces. According to the report, this is necessary to recognise Canadian Indians' legitimate aspirations in accordance with Canada's obligations under international covenant and political rights (Barsh 1988).

UN member states are confronted with an additional indigenous issue that has emerged in post-World War II years, that is self-determination for indigenous peoples. For a definition of self-determination Barsh provides:

The right to self-determination appears in the first article of the United Nations Charter, and in the first articles of both International Covenants on Human Rights, where it is defined to include not only a people's right to its own cultural, economic, social and political institutions, but also its right to land.

However, the issue is mainly what self-determination means in practice, and how it applies to indigenous nations that are within the territorial boundaries of UN member nation-states. For example, the USA has applied a legislative definition under the 1975 Indian Self-Determination Act which simply devolves administrative responsibilities to Native Americans, resulting in tribal bureaucracies that tend to assimilate Native American cultural socio-political philosophies more tightly into that of Euro-America (Barsh 1988). It may be that Australia will try to do the same thing if pressure increases through the UN. The unfortunate reality at this time in history is that Australia, both its federation of governments and its dominant non-Aboriginal Australian society, would not agree to Aboriginal self-determination without some form of coercive pressure being brought to bear.

Coercion to create such radical change as decolonisation must come from the people. However, Australia has about a 97% non-Aboriginal population, only a small minority of whom would support decolonisation.

Indigenous self-determination is an issue which has not been resolved to the point of recognising the full essence of its meaning. The Australian colonial state continues to prevent Aboriginal people from exercising their sovereignty, thus hindering them from developing as dictated by their cultural aspirations. Given that this is correct, the result leaves little scope for Aboriginal leaders to guide the continuing struggle of their communities. There is little to guide Aboriginal communities towards a future that carries with it a true maintenance of cultural principles through self-determined education processes that are based on traditional themes.

‘Equally important is that Native Title has changed the ways in which the Aboriginal Land Rights movement is made to act’

Indeed, since the 1967 Referendum, which simply "...alter[ed] the Australian constitution to allow Aborigines to be counted in the national census and the commonwealth to enact, if so desired, 'special laws' for members of 'Aboriginal race'" (Atwood & Markus 1997), Australian colonisers have developed all sorts of strategies to ensure that Aboriginal peoples are directed towards accepting citizenship of the colonial nation-state of Australia. White Australia is constructing an outcome which ensures that Aboriginal sovereign rights are rejected, and that so-called Aboriginal citizens of a white-Australia have their rights firmly ensconced in the Australian constitution which has been designed by and for a Euro-Australian nation, and in the process takes away Aboriginal rights of self-determination. Government strategies have eventually evolved into a system of elitism within Aboriginal communities, creating white value systems that have effectively destroyed Aboriginal cultural values. The Hawke Government changed the national Aboriginal community network structures which made up the Aboriginal Movement of the 1960s -70s and 80s. It established a quasi-Aboriginal Government called the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) with selected heads, regionally elected members and an administration 'top-heavy' with white bureaucrats. The members of ATSIC perform only within the limitations of the Australian Government, reacting to the Government's agenda rather than to Aboriginal communities' self-determined objectives, providing all-too-real examples of Barsh's statement that "when a government chooses who to negotiate with and finances the negotiation process, the results will tend to reflect the views of the government and not the peoples attempting to assert their right of self-determination" (Barsh 1988).

Native Title, commonly known as Mabo after the man who led the Mer Island native title case in Australia's High Court in 1993, did at least celebrate important changes in Australia's common law. But according to Coombs (1994) it provided only a limited security to indigenous title to land:

Discussion amongst aborigines, politicians, academics and in the media had made clear that despite the death of terra nullius and the survival of native title:

- *the Mabo judgement was concerned more to extinguish native title than to protect or extend the lands held under it and provided the mechanism for that progressive extinguishment.*
- *some states would challenge the power of commonwealth legislation which might overrule*

existing or newly introduced state legislation and limit state power to extinguish aboriginal rights.

- *national and multinational corporations (led by mining companies) would continue to mobilise their financial and political influence on states, the media and the public, to use native title legislation to complete the dispossession of aboriginal people, not merely of their rights in land, but also in other forms of property and in civil and political matters.*

‘Any talk of a treaty, for instance, has been rejected by successive Australian national governments’

Equally important is that Native Title has changed the ways in which the Aboriginal Land Rights movement is made to act. It was seeking a political resolution to a political problem. But now Aboriginal Land Rights and therefore Aboriginal customs and laws have seemingly been accepted by ATSIC leaders as being subordinate to Australian law, changing the political issue into a legal issue to be resolved under Australian law. Moreover, Native Title is really a limited security, with both the High Court ruling and the Commonwealth Native Title legislation demonstrating expectations that Native Title will eventually be extinguished, and that there exists a process in both to actually achieve extinguishment. Therefore, it is clearly implied that the recognition of particular Native Title rights is limited to the right for an Australian government to extinguish any one of them at its whim. The recent High Court ruling on the Wik peoples’ Native Title claim which determined that Native Title on pastoral leases may co-exist, and the reaction by Australian national and state governments demanding extinguishment of native title on pastoral leases, is a case in point.

The intention clearly is to entrench Australian Aboriginal peoples in a mould of Australian citizenship, and to achieve Aboriginal-Australian clones. It clearly demonstrates that Australia intends to manufacture a culturally homogeneous Australian society based on inherited British principles. For example, the Aboriginal Council of Reconciliation has been designed to break down Aboriginal resistance to assimilation and achieve Aboriginal acceptance of Australian citizenship. The Council was established by the Hawke Government without first asking Aboriginal peoples whether reconciliation was wanted, whether conciliation might be more appropriate, or what the purpose and objectives of reconciliation should be. The Aboriginal Council of Reconciliation Act established terms of reference which are vague and limit the process to achieving a document of reconciliation. Any talk of a treaty, for instance, has been rejected by successive Australian national governments, unfortunately characterised only by a lack of discussion relating to treaty matters.

The Aboriginal Reconciliation Program has been imposed on Australian Aboriginal peoples for the purpose of finalising Australia’s ‘Aboriginal problem’ under the arrogant premise that all has been healed between Aboriginal peoples and white Australia. It is about white Australia fully subsuming Aboriginal peoples into a one-Australian nation at the first centenary of Australian Federation on 1st January 2001. It is about assimilating Aboriginal peoples into the white Australian society, its philosophies and systems.

The Hawke Government left legacies which were designed to break down Aboriginality and to prevent white-Australia from having to deal with a truly free Aboriginal society in its midst. Assimilation programs are achieving this objective and Aboriginal peoples are being influenced by false rewards to join Australia as Euro-minded citizens. ATSIC, the Aboriginal Council of Reconciliation, Native Title proponents and managers of government-funded Aboriginal community-based organisations are all being influenced by government grant-funding conditions and the rewards provided by high public profiles, high white-Australian status and money to lead Aboriginal peoples into accepting white-Australian ways of life.

‘The focus on Aboriginal education...is to maintain an interest in increasing Aboriginal achievements in white education’

ATSIC is the Australian Government’s buffer between the Aboriginal community-based spiritual, cultural and political struggle toward freedom of self-determination—or what is left of it as the ‘90’s draw to a close—and Government programs seeking to achieve a ‘one-Australia’ based on European values. The Australian Government selectively appoints the ATSIC chairperson; the other Commissioners and Regional Councillors are elected by Aboriginal people. Further, the Australian Government coerces Aboriginals to assimilate via laws which are in practice anti-Aboriginal because they insist that only those Aboriginal people who are on the national electoral register may participate in ATSIC elections. Aboriginal people are thus forced either to accept Australian citizenship or to reject it and put up with those who get voted into the Government’s power grid. This is a slow but patient assimilation. These Commissioners, Regional Councillors, Aboriginal members on the Reconciliation Council and self-interested individuals in Aboriginal community-based organisations are ‘propped-up’ by the Government in front of Australia’s public via the media as *the* Aboriginal leaders.

The real Aboriginal-community-based leaders, or spokes-people, are disregarded and ignored by white-Australia. Public political argument between blacks and whites has been focused on ATSIC budget worries, program cuts and racism. The government focus on Aboriginal education, for

example, is to maintain an interest in increasing Aboriginal achievements in white education. The political issues that emerged during the 1970's and 1980's have been relegated to the recesses of a forgotten struggle. Aboriginal community political structures have all but disappeared, subsumed into ATSIC's more immediate concerns for community development, which unfortunately leads to assimilation. It is this period in colonial history, with all of its circumstances, oppressively working away at achieving assimilation of Aboriginal peoples, that is succeeding in eroding the themes of traditional Aboriginal education.

What steps towards truly Aboriginal futures could—or should—be taken?

Instead of reacting to the white-Australia agenda, either from governments or non-Aboriginal populations, Aboriginal communities should focus more on their traditional spiritual-cultural customs. Aboriginal community leaders should be assessing their community's spiritual and cultural needs, and using Aboriginal community self-determination as a mutual learning process. In this way an appropriate education process can be redeveloped, influencing lifestyles that provide the infrastructures by which indigenous education can develop, progress and be maintained. Acknowledging that such indigenous systems must develop, or redevelop, in a capitalist-Christian environment, an environment that is oppressive to and suppressive of alien philosophies, Aboriginal peoples must stop wasting their energies reacting. Instead, they should 'kick-start' Aboriginal community discussions towards developing their local and regional communities' spiritual-cultural aspirations thus giving voice to Aboriginal education policy including the idea that education must provide community education services which enable aboriginal people to develop the skills to manage the development of their communities, values and beliefs.

a land empty of its Aboriginal

Australian Aboriginal peoples should be addressing self-determination issues. They should be focusing within Aboriginal communities, redeveloping traditional knowledges and beliefs. Such a process should develop education processes which are based on traditional spiritual-cultural learnings and themes. Aboriginal political and spiritual-cultural leaders and community activists should all be seeking to promote wide Aboriginal community discussion on these matters. Discussions need to address Aboriginality and to define it, particularly what it means in terms of spiritual-cultural determinations and visions. These discussions should be Australia-wide, involve Aboriginal people only, and seek to establish appropriate community infrastructures to overcome the problems of being represented by government selected appointees. A major objective for these Aboriginal community discussions should be an intention to determine

whether Aboriginal people prefer to develop as a part of white-Australia or to seek formal sovereign status in the international world. Alternatively, Aboriginal people might consider some agreeable mixture which acknowledges First Nation status under some form of domestic treaty. Examples of progress in historic treaty agreements include the Waitangi Treaty between Maori and the New Zealand crown, and the treaty between Inuit people and the Canadian government.

Non-Aboriginal environmentalists and educators should acknowledge Aboriginality as a rational and feasible system which embodies mutually satisfying interactions between humans and the natural world. They should reject the Euro-Australian establishment of exploitation and plundering, both of the natural world and of indigenous peoples. They should reject the interests of capitalism which justifies a system of elitism, of a rich and a poor, of exploitation for greed and materialism; they should reject notions of white patriarchal religious imperialism over women, children, indigenous peoples and the natural world. Progressive and creative people of the non-Aboriginal Australian nation who aspire to being environmentalists and educators should be addressing indigenous issues to white-Australia's governments, and United Nation member states, demanding a decolonisation of Australian Aboriginal peoples and their respective territories.

As the 21st Century draws near, Aboriginal communities must come to realise that the fundamental principles of Aboriginality are being lost, and that unless they do something to 'bring them back' very soon there will be no one left with the knowledge to resource any real maintenance of these principles. The result may well be a new people, Aboriginal Australians who recognise themselves only as citizens of a white nation. As Australians they will endorse the white-Australian view that the principles of Aboriginality are worthless. The resulting loss in Australia of Aboriginality in its true essence would leave future generations with a land empty of its Aboriginality, and give a new and even more bitter taste to the term *terra nullius*.

Conclusion

In relation to the conference theme 'Environmental Education: Connecting Humans with the Earth,' Aboriginal education offers a viable alternative to future visions of environment education that can deal with both human environments and natural environments. To achieve any progress towards environment education that is sound in its fundamental base, indigenous cultural boundaries and sovereignty must be formally acknowledged by the UN, and especially by the white-Australian nation. From such acknowledgment should flow a process of negotiation between Aboriginal peoples and white-Australia's Government, on an equal basis, as to what lands are to be allocated to white-Australia. Overarching any such agreements should be joint commitments to management

of the Australian environments based on principles including those of Aboriginality as equal partners. Australian Aboriginal society will need to address its aspirations, either as one Aboriginal nation or as smaller local nations with their respective cultural boundaries.

Of course many will say this is a utopian idea, but is it unlike the desire to prevent further erosion of the ozone layer, farmed lands, or security for animals? Is it any more unrealistic to desire alternative industry that will leave old growth forests to live naturally, or develop a plastic-free society, or to wish to see a poverty-free world? These ideas, thoroughly acceptable to environmentalists, are considered utopian by many people.

There can be only one way of looking at the question of changes to the way the world is; that is to aspire to changes that will produce a set of ideals. If not, then let us not fool ourselves, including those of us who are environmentalists or believers in the traditional principles of Aboriginality. Let us all agree that ideals, or utopias, are unachievable and downright ridiculous and get on with destroying indigenous and natural societies. Let us all agree to unlimited destruction of natural systems, to unlimited poverty and unlimited élitism. Because if ideals of better relationships between humans, and between the human and natural worlds of this planet, are considered unachievable and utopian, and lesser positions are taken than these fundamental ideals because they are easier and considered achievable, then there is no integrity in the stated objectives of environmentalism as we know it today.

We can roll along believing in governments, or that others can do it, or should do it; we can believe that the interests of industry truly desire to achieve sound environmental practices and outcomes, but we cannot hide from the truth of our individual convictions. White-Australia has never, ever demonstrated that Aboriginality, in terms of its spiritual-cultural nationalism, makes any sound contribution to the aspirations of a white-Australia. Aboriginal people are expected to be Aboriginal Australians, that is to say Australians, albeit Aboriginal. The idea is that Aboriginal people will lose their 'uncivilised' natures and become citizens of a 'civilised' Australia. But if white-Australia's environmental record were to be fairly compared with the thousands of years of Aboriginal interaction with the natural world, then it would be clear that principles of Aboriginality stand out as having been an unquestioned success, and therefore can only benefit all peoples of Australia if taken seriously by all peoples of Australia. The Aboriginal record demonstrates an ideal education process which addresses the environmental needs of people, and the natural environments that sustain us all. It is an education-lifestyle that we can all aspire to if we want to. However, getting there has a cost which dictates that Aboriginal people must embrace their spiritual-cultural integrity, and that white-Australia must decolonise the Aboriginal cultural territories defined by Australian Aboriginal peoples.

If this conference is truly to seek movement towards connecting peoples with the Earth, then the points I have raised must be taken seriously, and the conference must make a commitment to take appropriate actions to enlist Australia's broad Green Movement in seeking a decolonisation of Aboriginal peoples and their territories.

If Australian Aboriginal peoples truly desire a free Aboriginal future based on the principles of Aboriginality, discussions on questions I have raised, and others determined by Aboriginal communities, must begin yesterday; tomorrow may be too late. ☺

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