



The gift of identity

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The terms of identity/Aboriginality/Indigeneity may have many definitions amongst Indigenous Australians. Due to diversity throughout Australia a range of definitions about identity may be possible. Identity is private and public or in other words both personal and political. Aboriginality cannot be expressed in words as it is a feeling of one’s own spirituality. At best, *personal* can be described to non-Aboriginals as a sense of deep, proud cultural identity. Aboriginals live it and express it every day through art, language, humour, beliefs and familial and community relationships. Aboriginality forms the core basis of identity.

While there have been attempts to address aspects of identity, these have been derived mainly from early Europeans, government officials, anthropologists, historians and other researchers who have attempted to define identity to suit their preconceived ideas. There are infinite numbers of examples among them. In order to provide jurisdiction over Aboriginals, a part of the Queensland 1939 Aborigines Act stated that an Aborigine was: “Any half-blood who lives as wife or husband with an Aboriginal, or who habitually associates with Aboriginals.”

Various government policies have attempted to erode Aboriginality. The Northern Territory Aboriginal Ordinance of 1911 authorised the removal of mixed race children from their parents to an institution. Separations of this nature had drastic consequences for identities of these children. Aboriginal values were replaced by European values which created alienation of Aboriginal children from the culture of their parents. The child was torn between two cultures and could neither relate to Aboriginal or European society. The Stolen Generation story is all too familiar and a part of our history.



Identity is formed by social processes. It is this identity which has built Indigenous ideology for living and survival. Once understood it is maintained, adapted and remodelled depending on challenges and circumstance. Although the colonisation and urbanisation process has attempted to impose its alien value system on Indigenous peoples in order to immobilise traditional lifestyles and values, the concept of identity or Aboriginality has enabled Aboriginals to cope with the traumatic experiences of city living.

In urban environments the ever-increasing mobility and advanced technology inevitably change people's values and culture. Urbanisation may break down many cultural ties and limit traditional practices and beliefs thus changing people's concepts of their way of life. Consequently, demands have been imposed on Indigenous people living in cities to undergo drastic cultural changes. It is in many ways a tough outside world and the maintenance of Aboriginality provides a security against this but should not be viewed as romanticism.

Whilst various social scientists have explored concepts of identity both hideous and romantic, most commentators have failed to perceive the insider's view — how black people themselves perceive and understand their conditions. In the study of urban Aboriginal cultures, this emphasis must be reversed, to concentrate on the internal social structure rather than the external social structure.

One such internal structure is the system of kinship which determines behaviour and the responsibility of every individual within the society towards every other person. This social organisation is a principal in Aboriginal traditional society and has in effect survived and carried over to urban society although not as intricately. Urbanisation endeavours to force people to become individuals rather than members of a particular family, clan or kinship group.

Fundamental to the principle of identity is land. The fight of Indigenous people today for their lands and waters is a struggle for the right to maintain their identity. In an ideal world, legally secured native title rights, a secure base, sovereignty and the rights to self-determination are enhanced. Without identity deculturation is guaranteed along with dispossession and dispersal. Without sovereignty, deprivation and dependency are legacies facing Indigenous peoples. This has been the continuing wound between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The talk of treaty has again been opened up on the political landscape. It remains to be seen what the content, consultation, and negotiation processes will offer identity issues.

An often overlooked but remarkable characteristic of identity and survival is humour. Humour is an integral and warm concept of Indigenous societies. The experiences, perspectives and needs of many Aboriginal people are so diverged from the majority of white Australians that the reality from a black perspective is not readily understood. Aboriginals draw humour from situations and definitions about them which would prove painful and offensive if told by others. A substantial amount of Aboriginal humour if revealed to outsiders would not have struck them as funny. Humour allows for the liberating of feelings that normally are contained. The liberation brings relief and pleasure, which helps to explain why humour has been notably present among people who seem to



outsiders to have little to laugh about. Humour has also allowed black people to laugh thereby gaining some perspective on their own anger.

In conclusion, the essence of identity is complex and multi-layered. Although many attempts have been made to assimilate Aboriginal people into wider Australian society they have never succeeded. This has been largely due to the resilience, kinship, family and community orientation of Indigenous society. Other factors such as land, language, humour and identity have also influenced the transmission of Aboriginality which has persisted to the present and will continue to provide future generations with strength, dignity and purpose. The greatest gift any Indigenous parent can give to their child is the gift of identity. All else follows.

